



Jill Shortland awarding the prize for the most 'combative' rider in the Somerset leg of the Tour of Britain. Sept. '07

Somerset County Council

Submission for Liberal Democrat
Council Group of the Year 2007



Local children thank Henry Hobhouse for their new school sign (from his Community Budget)

2007 has been a great year for Somerset County Council, under a Liberal Democrat administration.

The icing on the cake has been the Local Government Chronicle's opinion that we are among the top six authorities in the country deserving of their 'most improved council' award. They say:

"Somerset CC has had an outstanding year. The authority was rated as a four-star 'excellent' authority by the Audit Commission in March, 2007. This assessment captured improvement and success across the board for all services...Somerset strives continuously to improve on service delivery. Not content with being a four-star authority, *it seeks to place itself in a category of one.*"

The Audit Commission's report praises the County Council for its 'innovative' partnership working and 'strong corporate & community leadership'. Staff are praised for their enthusiastic approach to work and elected members are described as 'capable and energetic'.

This submission will illustrate some strategic /countywide successes, but also some more local successes, achieved by our frontline councillors, using their Community Budgets (please see appendix). The quotes from members are in answer to the question, originally asked of the Chief Executive by the SW Regional Director of the IDeA;

"How **do** they do it at Somerset?"

"Somerset is not just a listening council, we are an acting council. Others listen, we act, that's what makes the difference."
Cllr. Alan Gloak

The group had a change of Leader in 2007, as Cathy Bakewell stood down and handed over the reins to Jill Shortland. The council is now measured as 'excellent' and 'improving strongly'. Jill's vision is to aim for 'outstanding! Jill also has a good strategic overview in her role as Chair of the South West Regional Assembly. When the results of the unitary bids were known, Jill organised a Conference for the five SW counties' cabinet members to meet and discuss how they could work together and make savings. This was a highly successful day, when we were especially pleased to welcome back our Lib Dem colleagues from Devon and Cornwall!

The Environment Portfolio - Hazel Prior-Sankey & Alvin Horsfall

The Somerset Lib Dem group were the first to win the party's 'Green' award and their commitment to sustainability and combating climate change has never wavered. A highlight of 2007 has been the Climate Change Café experience, which has so far visited 11 communities across Somerset. The Café has received a very positive response from the public as they learn about the impacts of climate change and calculate their own carbon footprint.

SCC became the UK local authority for the BEST (Bio-ethanol for sustainable transport) which attracted EU funding, and took delivery of 10 new pool cars, whilst installing a network of E85 fuel pumps. As a result SCC has won many environmental accolades, including a national award for 'Sustainability' from Public Finance magazine, backed by the Cabinet Office. Even more exciting is that Wessex Grain will soon be producing bio-fuels from Somerset-grown wheat, which will help dispel fears about where the biofuels are grown. (*N.B.* Look out for the car at Conference.)

Our nationally applauded Somerset Waste Action Partnership (SWAP) moved to another level in the autumn, when all six local authorities (county + 5 districts) formed a Joint Waste Board and signed a new contract with ECT recycling. Already envied by other local authorities around the country, for recycling 47% of our household waste, the team are now aiming for 50% and beyond. (*N.B.* Somerset led the way in food waste recycling by using a ground-breaking system of composting and also successfully introduced collection of food & recyclables on a weekly basis and residual waste fortnightly.)

The partnership also picked up a Green Apple 'Silver' Award for its waste education work. Since 2002, SWAP has visited over 95% of schools in the county, the equivalent of over 1,100 visits.

A mobile library service with a difference was launched at the beginning of November. As well as carrying 2,500 books and DVDs, it has eight solar panels on its roof to help charge its batteries.

This green energy means the library doesn't need to carry a generator to power the two public computer terminals and other electric facilities on board.

"We have an accurate assessment of where we are, we have a clear vision of where we are going and we have strong, focused teams who have realistic plans of how to get us there."

Cllr. Cathy Bakewell

Adult & Community Services Portfolio – Justin Robinson

We were absolutely delighted to be awarded the top **three-star rating** by CSCI for the **fourth year in succession**, (which puts us in the top two for the whole country!) but we're never complacent and always strive to do better. For example, when GPs in Somerset wanted to offer their patients a greater range of treatment options, the Council and the Primary Care Trust set up a new service called 'Books on Prescription'. Patients then take the prescription to the local library and collect the recommended self-help book. The selected books offer straightforward and practical techniques to help conditions such as depression, stress, anxiety and panic attacks. The service has been well received by patients and health professionals alike. In the first six months, over 2,000 copies of these books were issued, benefiting the health of the whole community.

The council's vision to restore Taunton Castle and build a new state-of-the-art museum, to house all the wonderful artefacts Somerset has to display, will come to fruition thanks to confirmation of a successful Heritage Lottery bid from Justin's team in October. This £6.5m project also includes a café, extended opening times and a large temporary gallery for holding touring exhibitions. Visitor numbers will hopefully double to over 60,000 annually.

Always aware of the increasing costs of Adult Care, we wanted to enable to over 50s to keep active and healthy, preventing illness and dependency in old age. So, in partnership with the health, voluntary and community sectors, we gained funding to set up 50 Active Living Centres (ALCs) across Somerset, based in

existing community venues such as church or village halls. The ALCs allow over 50s to come together, socialise and try out different activities which promote well-being. Many older people attending are using their skills to support active living through volunteering.

Children & Young People & Education Portfolios – Pauline Clarke & Gloria Cawood

The Lib Dems made good progress during 2007 towards their ambitious commitment to provide 33 new Children's Centres in the county by Spring '08. The Centres aim to provide a single point of access to services for families. They will be able to get information on matters such as child development, parenting and advice on how to stay safe and healthy. They will also offer support to parents who are considering training and employment, as well as high-quality childcare and pre-school education, from 8 am to 6 pm Monday to Friday.

The opportunities and life chances afforded the county's children have always been a priority of the group. Our secondary schools made all-round improvements in their GCSE results during the year, with a number of schools achieving their best results ever. The year's results show that a higher proportion of Somerset's pupils have achieved five or more grades A* - C in GCSEs, including Maths and English, than the national average. Not to be beaten, our 11 year-olds also exceeded expectations at Key Stage 2 and improved their Maths & English results.

We're delighted to have secured funding of approximately £450m from the 'Building Schools for the Future' scheme, which will allow us to substantially refurbish, remodel or in some cases rebuild, every Secondary School within the County over the next 15 years. This is an ideal opportunity for Somerset to design and build the best possible learning environments for our students and the wider community.

A new website for young people in Somerset (created by us, but designed by young people), aims to put 11-19 year-olds in touch with local activities by drawing information from thousands of sources. The AWSOM (Activities Within Somerset for Young People) website gives them dates, times, costs and transport details to participate in things as diverse as sky diving and

submarine excursions! A Youth Full Council event gave all the members an opportunity to enjoy a 'place-shaping' exercise with many young people, as did a similar event, based on 'speed dating' all the councillors in turn!

Community Safety Portfolio – Jim Mochnacz

The arrival of Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs), has been hugely popular in Somerset and so everyone was delighted when in June 2006, the government pledged to increase the funding for new recruits. However, the Home Office later did a u-turn and reduced this funding by a third. The Avon & Somerset Police Authority and the Liberal Democrats at County Hall were bitterly disappointed with this, so much so that whilst the Police continued to bid for funding, the councillors committed to underwrite the shortfall up to an estimated half a million pounds.

When the figures were looked at in detail, a proposal was passed for an additional fifteen PCSOs to be funded by the County Council, bringing the total to 150. One of the major outcomes hoped for, is to tackle alcohol-related crime and anti-social behaviour, particularly sales of alcohol to minors through test purchasing and it would be possible for a PCSO to be used for this. Therefore, in addition to the core service provision of 150 posts, it was agreed that Somerset County Council should totally fund two additional specialist PCSO posts (one in each Policing District) to be 'seconded' to the county's Trading Standards department. They will work specifically with Trading Standards officers checking for under age sales of alcohol in pubs, clubs and off-licenses.

Economic Development Portfolio – Alvin Horsfall

Work has started on a highly anticipated project to deliver a much-needed £6m boost to employment and tourism in West Somerset. The development will deliver modern workspaces for businesses, a large car park and will provide the popular West Somerset Railway with a turntable on which to manoeuvre its famous trains. There will be a public viewing area so people can watch the steam trains turn, along with a café and retail opportunities. The project is jointly funded.

Figures released by BT revealed that 47% of homes and businesses are now connected to

Broadband high-speed technology. Somerset's result represents more than 115,000 customers. The best part is that through our Connecting Somerset Partnership, in only three years, we've risen from 'worst connected in the South West', to best in the country!

Highways Portfolio – Tony Shire & Hazel-Prior-Sanke

*"We try not to waste our time on pandering to the nonsense of the opposition, but just get on with our priority of improving the life of the people of Somerset in the best way we all can, everyone doing their best."
Cllr. Christine Hunt*

Somerset Highways, a partnership between SCC and Atkins has won a prestigious national Green Apple Award for environmental excellence, for its use of satellite navigation systems to protect environmentally sensitive sites on and around the highway. The new system has all known sites registered, so that when they are approached by a verge-trimming vehicle, satellite location technology triggers an audible sound in the cab to warn workers that the protected plants are nearby.

The new Rights of Way ICT system has gone live, both within SCC and on the Internet. This allows sharing of info with district councils and other partners, the use of handhelds by field officers to retrieve and log information, public access on-line to maps of the network, including logging obstructions or problems. The system is seen as cutting-edge and has been well received.

Somerset Direct record all highways enquiries on a computer system called 'confirm'. Calls are logged with the caller's details, the issue they are calling about and the map location. Enquiries are then assigned automatically to the appropriate officer. Once the enquiry has been dealt with, the information is updated on the system, so the customer can be informed. A bonus of the system is that it can also provide us with valuable info about budget allocation, performance and risk issues but of more use to the 'man in the street' and members, is the facility to produce reports for

an individual Parish Council area, covering a particular period of time.

"We have really high calibre staff at every level and we keep them which means staff and members interact in a completely different way."

Cllr. Claire Gordon

Finance & Resources – Portfolio Holders, Sam Crabb & Dave Greene

In early November, the Council's finance team won the coveted LGC award for best pension fund of the year about £750m. The award not only recognised the overall performance of the pension fund investments for the previous year, but also the quality of our annual report and our continued member development.

Aware of the rising cost of running the council against a tide of diminishing government funding, the Liberal Democrats in Somerset made the decision to take forward the **ISiS project** (Improving Services in Somerset). IBM was chosen in the Spring 2007 as our partner to go forward to a joint venture partnership, after an intensely rigorous process overseen by members. Dave Greene signed the contract at 4 am on 30th September 2007.

Referred to as; 'One of the most ambitious public/private partnerships developing in the UK' it will bring together many back office functions, and a greater investment in state-of-the-art technology than the council alone could ever hope to find. We are already seeing savings of £3.2m on our Medium Term Financial Plan for 2008-2009, plus a stream of procurement savings. The new company, called "Southwest One" offers benefits in terms of customer service & guaranteed employment for those members of staff seconded to it.

One of the Year's Highlights – The People of Somerset

It's not often that a political group can point to a specific time and place when they met a manifesto promise, but Tuesday 11th September was just such a day, when people lined the streets to welcome the Tour of Britain to Somerset!

The county Liberal Democrats first discussed the possibility of hosting the first South West stage of the Tour of Britain several years ago. We were enthusiastic not only about the prestige it would bring to the county and the benefit to communities and tourism, but also about the importance of promoting an environmentally and sustainable form of transport.

The council leader, Jill Shortland presented the award to the most 'combative' rider after the closing stage of the tour in Taunton. She was delighted with the crowds who turned out all over Somerset, enjoying something of a 'carnival' atmosphere, with events going on before and after the cyclists passed through. French hosts in Taunton paid tribute to everyone's involvement and likened the atmosphere to the Tour de France.

Even better, is the fact that Somerset County Council has secured the South West stage of the race for five years, leading up to the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games, so we will be encouraging communities to organise more events on next year's route.

"When the Audit commission came to announce the 4 star performance the boss made the comment that we are a very 'well rounded' bunch of councillors. We joked at the sight of a bunch of fat, jolly councillors but the truth is that we are very professional group with a great deal of appropriate experience in education, social care, technical matters, rural and farming, business and innovation. This shows particularly in Scrutiny."

Cllr. John Sharpe