

John Birch

SHDC Member for Totnes

Report to the meeting to be held on

Monday 6 October 2025

I report on the following.

Skakepark now opened and in full use

The Borough Park skatepark was successfully completed on time by SHDC's contractors and was open for use by the end of August. A big thanks goes to the town council for its financial contribution which along with that from SHDC made it possible for work to start this year.

Local Government Reorganisation

I proposed the following motion that came before the SHDC Full Council meeting on 25 September

"South Hams District Council officers continue to work with colleagues from across Devon in shaping its proposals for local government re-organisation.

The sharing of data across the Devon councils is of critical importance in ensuring that all councils have the necessary information to develop informed proposals for consideration by Members ahead of the November deadline for submission to government.

Devon County Council continues to ignore requests to disclose key financial information contained within a document known as the Newton Report. This is an important report containing financial information required by South Hams District Council for preparing its submission to the government.

In view of the above, the following is proposed:

Authority be given to officers to take whatever steps are necessary to ensure Devon County Council discloses the Newton report, and any associated data and communications, as mentioned in the preamble above."

The reason I brought this motion was to seek full disclosure by Devon County Council of all the documents in its possession relating to local government reorganisation. It is my view that Devon County Council has key documents relating to Local Government Reform proposals that should be shared with all the other Devon local authorities including SHDC.

Upon DCC becoming aware of this motion it sent an email to the Devon district councils attaching a document that purported to be the report the district councils had previously requested on several occasions.

This document is **not** the report that has been sought by the district councils.

So what is the Newton report mentioned in the motion that is not being shared by DCC and is sought by the district councils.

It is my understanding that the County Councils Network, which represents all county councils, instructed a company known as Newton to produce a report with the title "*Local Government Reform: Impact on people services*" for all those county councils being the subject to reorganisation. DCC would have received such a report in or about April 2025. In other parts of the country these reports have been shared with district councils in the area to inform the development of proposals for Local Government Reform..

This is an important document as it contains key financial information required by SHDC for preparing its Local Government Reform submission to the government in November.

The report has been paid for out of public funds and there is, in my opinion, no valid or legal reason why it should not be shared with the Devon district councils as has happened elsewhere. It is effectively a public document and there is no valid reason why it should not be disclosed.

Local Government Reform in Devon will affect all those that we represent and therefore it is important that all those involved in the process are open and frank with each other when it comes to sharing key documents such as in this case the Newton report. All relevant Local Government Reform documents, irrespective of their conclusion, being in the possession of any the Devon local authorities, should be disclosed as is the case in legal proceedings.

In the Devon Local Government Reform case the judge is the government and I am sure it will want to be satisfied that all parties have cooperated and shared relevant data when it comes to reports and key documents.

As matters stand at the moment DCC will be unable to fulfill its obligations in respect of full disclosure and this motion effectively calls on it to comply by sharing the initial Newton report with the Devon district councils including SHDC.

The motion was carried with unanimous support and SHDC officers are now pursuing DCC for the disclosure of the documents.

Question on SHDC Catbike project

I answered the following question from a member of the public at a recent SHDC Executive meeting

“By whom and how frequently will the e-bikes be serviced, what systems are in place to ensure user competence and finally what data is being collected in order to determine the success or otherwise of the experiment”

I responded as follows.

“Totnes Bike Hub, which is a local Community Interest Company bike repair business in Totnes are contracted to maintain the electric Catbikes. The bikes all have weekly checks for basic operation and monthly in-depth checks, Totnes Bike Hub will also carry out full servicing once a year on the full fleet. We require the regular submission of a maintenance and issues log and we conducted a risk assessment from the outset which ensures appropriate controls are in place to manage risk.

In terms of user competence, all users must sign the terms and conditions of the scheme and are advised in the app to wear a helmet and bright clothing and be considerate of other road users. We have also set out the rules of use on our webpage which provide further detail of being a considerate and safe cyclist www.southhams.gov.uk/catbikes. We have also provided adult cycle training by working with Active Devon, and have so far run two days offering free sessions on the Catbikes with Active Devon. At the end of the day users must decide for themselves if they feel capable of riding the Catbikes and seek training or support if they feel they need it.

In terms of measuring the success of the scheme this will be looked at in a number of ways. We will be reviewing the number and duration of rentals and comparing to schemes in other similar sized towns. We will also survey users of the scheme at the end to determine the qualitative benefits, such as for those without access to a car and whether it has encouraged users to cycle more.”

Vandalism at Weston Lane Catbike Hub

Following a further act of vandalism at the Weston Lane Catbike Hub I issued the following statement on behalf of SHDC.

"I am very sorry that South Hams District Council has been left with no alternative but to close the Weston Lane hub for the Catbikes in Bridgetown due to continued damage to the bikes from mindless vandalism. This is a great shame as it is the council's most well used location, particularly for regular users of the electric bike scheme.

We have experienced multiple acts of vandalism at this location – this latest vandalism must have been undertaken by someone who set out to do damage as they were able to remove tamperproof bolts. Four bikes are now out of action, but can be repaired when spare parts are obtained.

Unfortunately it does appear that this particular part of Weston Lane is not a good location as it lacks natural surveillance and lighting and so we are looking for other locations in Bridgetown through the public consultation that is being carried out throughout Totnes.

The police have been notified and hopefully with the community's help the culprit will be apprehended for this mindless act."

Opening of South Hams Way

The new South Hams Way will be officially opened on Saturday 11 October at 10.30am at its starting point in Borough Park. Following the opening there will be a walk of the first stage of the Way for all those attending the opening. Please do come along with friends and family.

The new South Hams Way is a 100 mile hiking trail that circumnavigates the South Hams area of South Devon. The route is divided into ten sections of roughly 10 miles each following existing footpaths, lanes and byways. The sections are deliberately centred on community hubs where there is public transport access, shops, refreshments and accommodation.

Created for walkers by South Hams Ramblers, it travels through four very different types of landscape and terrain including moorland, coast paths, estuaries, river valleys and countryside. Its highest point is 1,281ft, just above the Avon Dam reservoir on Dartmoor, and its lowest is sea level.

Along the way discover:

- Fifty miles of the South West Coast Path. From Noss Mayo in the west, along to Salcombe and onwards to Dartmouth in the east.
- The wilds of Dartmoor National Park to the north, so different it is like stepping into another country.
- The South Devon National Landscape comprising deep green valleys between soft rounded hills, native hardwood forests and rivers extending from springs on Dartmoor all the way to our estuaries.
- Five lovely estuaries, all different in nature. The Yealm at Noss Mayo, the Erme at Mothecombe, the Avon at Bantham, the Kingsbridge and Salcombe estuary and the Dart at Dartmouth. ^[1]_{SEP}

Totnes Heritage Festival

The festival held on Saturday 27 September was a great success with several events fully booked and venues reporting a high attendance. A big vote of thanks goes to the town council for its support and assistance together with its financial contribution.

New Electric Vehicles for SHDC

Following a successful trial last year, SHDC now has 11 electric vehicles in its shared fleet with West Devon. The expanded fleet will be used across a range of council services, helping to reduce emissions, improve air quality, and set a leading example for others. You will soon see the new EVs in action on the streets.

Cllr John P Birch

SHDC Member for Totnes

29 September 2025