

Somerset West and Taunton Council

Full Council – 7 July 2020

Signing of Charter for Compassion

This matter is the responsibility of Executive Councillor Member Chris Booth

Report Author: Paul Harding, Strategy Specialist

1 Executive Summary

- 1.1 The Charter for Compassion is a document, linked to a world-wide movement, through which community groups, public bodies, faith organisations and individuals can commit to work together to find solutions to local issues, doing so in a way that is underpinned by values of compassion, fairness and respect, in order to alleviate suffering.
- 1.2 The Council was approached to sign the 'Charter for Compassion', which was due to take place at the Feelgood Festival, at Woodlands Castle, Taunton on 10th May 2020. Due to restrictions on public gatherings this event was postponed and no new date has yet been confirmed.
- 1.3 The Charter is compatible with, and supports our corporate priority objective to *'Develop and deliver effective communications, consultation and engagement which listens to and engages with our residents and stakeholders and is central to the delivery of our services, strategies and plans'*.
- 1.4 There is no cost to signing the Charter, no request for funding nor any future obligation to make payment in relation to the Charter.
- 1.5 The Charter has no status in law and is not therefore something that attracts penalties or external enforcement, for example.
- 1.6 The signature is a public commitment to the principles expressed in Charter.
- 1.7 It is not clear at this point on which date the signing would take place.
- 1.8 This report is on the agenda of the Scrutiny Committee at their meeting of 1 July 2020. Recommendations from that meeting will be shared with Full Council on 7 July.

2 Recommendations

That Full Council agrees that:

- 2.1 SWT sign the Charter for Compassion (at a date to be confirmed)
- 2.2 the Executive member for Community, Cllr Booth, be the signatory, on behalf of the Council.

3 Risk Assessment

- 3.1 There is a risk, albeit low, that in signing the Charter, the Council may set unrealistic expectations for others. Whilst suggestions, recommendations and requests for the Council to take action, or stop action, on particular issues will be considered in a respectful way it does not mean that we will always wish to, or be able to, accede to these requests, in particular, the statutory regulatory and enforcement roles conferred upon the Council. This may leave us open to criticism, and we need to understand that.

4 Background and Full details of the Report

- 4.1 The Leader and the Portfolio holder for Community were approached to sign the Charter for Compassion; which was due to take place at the Feelgood Festival, at Woodlands Castle, Taunton on 10th May 2020. Due to restrictions on public gatherings this event was postponed and no new date has yet been confirmed.
- 4.2 Citizens Somerset were also invited to sign the Charter at the same event and had agreed to do so. They still intend to sign the Charter once a new date is set.
- 4.3 It is felt that by both the Council and Citizens Somerset expressing commitment to the principles of the Charter it will set a shared positive base for their engagement with each other and with others going forward.
- 4.4 Citizens Somerset promotes itself as a community organising group which aims to build diverse alliances of communities across Somerset, launching with Taunton and West Somerset, which organise for power, social justice and the common good.
- 4.5 Citizens Somerset are a Chapter established under the umbrella of Citizens UK which started as London Citizens in 1996, and came to national prominence during the 2010 United Kingdom general election when all three leaders of the UK's three largest political parties addressed a large meeting of its members in what it billed as the "fourth debate", in reference to the three TV debates;
- 4.6 Citizens Somerset state their member organisations are churches, schools, youth organisations and other civil society groups who are non-partisan and aim to promote greater democratic participation in public life. They have groups focused on their priority issues of housing and homelessness, safety on the streets and public transport. These issues are reflected within our own Corporate Priorities.
- 4.7 The Charter itself was established back in 2008. Originally the idea of Author Karen Armstrong, it is now supported and encouraged around the world by religious leaders groups and prominent individuals. The Charter itself calls on people to activate the 'Golden Rule' of compassion around the world which is simply 'to treat all others as we wish to be treated ourselves'.

- 4.8 There is no cost to signing the Charter. Signature is a public commitment to the principles expressed in the Charter.
- 4.9 The Charter is a simple one-sided document which is provided at **Appendix A** to this report.
- 4.10 The Charter is worded as follows:

'The principle of compassion lies at the heart of all religious, ethical and spiritual traditions, calling us always to treat all others as we wish to be treated ourselves.

Compassion impels us to work tirelessly to alleviate the suffering of our fellow creatures, to dethrone ourselves from the centre of our world and put another there, and to honour the inviolable sanctity of every single human being, treating everybody, without exception, with absolute justice, equity and respect.

It is also necessary in both public and private life to refrain consistently and empathically from inflicting pain. To act or speak violently out of spite, chauvinism, or self-interest, to impoverish, exploit or deny basic rights to anybody, and to incite hatred by denigrating others—even our enemies—is a denial of our common humanity.

We acknowledge that we have failed to live compassionately and that some have even increased the sum of human misery in the name of religion.

We therefore call upon all men and women to restore compassion to the centre of morality and religion to return to the ancient principle that any interpretation of scripture that breeds violence, hatred or disdain is illegitimate to ensure that youth are given accurate and respectful information about other traditions, religions and cultures to encourage a positive appreciation of cultural and religious diversity to cultivate an informed empathy with the suffering of all human beings—even those regarded as enemies.

We urgently need to make compassion a clear, luminous and dynamic force in our polarized world. Rooted in a principled determination to transcend selfishness, compassion can break down political, dogmatic, ideological and religious boundaries.

Born of our deep interdependence, compassion is essential to human relationships and to a fulfilled humanity. It is the path to enlightenment, and indispensable to the creation of a just economy and a peaceful global community'.

- 4.11 The Council is already pursuing what can, in essence, be described as a compassionate agenda for our District. From the climate emergency, community safety, tackling homelessness, affordable housing, employment and sustainable transport we aim to impact positively on the lives of our communities to reduce suffering and inequality.
- 4.12 Signing the Charter signals that empathy and compassion will be underpinning, and be a major driving force, to help bring change in social issues in the District and beyond. It signifies a genuine desire to deliver compassionate change.
- 4.13 Due to ongoing restrictions around public gatherings we do not know at this point when the signing of the Charter will take place. All concerned would much prefer a public signing that an online event.

- 4.14 What this report seeks is agreement that SWT sign the Charter (at a date to be confirmed) and that the portfolio holder for Communities be the signatory on behalf of SWT, since he is most likely to have the closest ongoing relationship with Citizens Somerset, due to the scope of his portfolio.
- 4.15 The signing event could be organised at short notice and may not dovetail conveniently with our democratic timetable, hence this report being brought forward now, in advance of the date of the signing event being known.
- 4.16 The following links are provided for supplementary background reference, but are not essential to the report:

- The Charter website can be found from this link:

<https://charterforcompassion.org/charter>

- Citizens Somerset website can be found from this link:

<https://www.citizensuk.org/somerset>

5 Links to Corporate Strategy

- 5.1 The Charter is compatible with, and supports our corporate priority objective to *'Develop and deliver effective communications, consultation and engagement which listens to and engages with our residents and stakeholders and is central to the delivery of our services, strategies and plans'*.

6 Finance / Resource Implications

- 6.1 There are no financial implications associated with this report.

7 Legal Implications

- 7.1 There are no direct legal implications associated with this report.

8 Climate and Sustainability Implications

- 8.1 There are no direct Climate and Sustainability Implications relating to this report.

9 Safeguarding and/or Community Safety Implications

- 9.1 There are no safeguarding and/or community safety implications relating this report.

10 Equality and Diversity Implications

- 10.1 The ethos of the Charter supports objective 6 of the Council's approved Corporate Equality objectives which is 'to improve opportunities for integration and cohesion'.
- 10.2 It also supports the Council Public Sector Equality Duty (created under the Equality Act 2010) by supporting the elimination of discrimination, harassment and victimisation and fostering good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it; through promoting compassion.

11 Social Value Implications

- 11.1 There are no direct Social Value Implications arising from this report (as defined for report purposes).

12 Partnership Implications

- 12.1 The Charter for Compassion provides an umbrella for people to engage in collaborative partnerships, to bring to life the principles articulated in the Charter for Compassion through concrete, practical action in a myriad of sectors.

13 Health and Wellbeing Implications

The Charter is focused on using a compassion approach to alleviate suffering within communities and is therefore compatible with our community ambitions around health and wellbeing.

14 Asset Management Implications

- 14.1 There are no asset management implications arising from this report.

15 Data Protection Implications

- 15.1 There are no data protection implications arising from this report.

16 Consultation Implications

- 16.1 There are no consultation implications associated with this report.

Democratic Path:

- **Scrutiny – Yes (1st July 2020)**
- **Executive – No**
- **Full Council – Yes**

Reporting Frequency: ☐ **Once only**

List of Appendices

Appendix A	Charter for Compassion
------------	------------------------

Contact Officers

Name	Paul Harding, Strategy Specialist
Direct Dial	01823 218751
Email	p.harding@somersetwestandtaunton.gov.uk