

County Councillor's Brief for Town & Parish Councils



South Petherton and Islemoor Division
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Happy New Year 2014



Flooding.

We have seen a terrible amount of Flooding over the past 6 weeks or so. After Christmas I wrote to the SCC with my appreciation and to say thank you to all the Highways teams, contractors, the duty Staff at SCC and, to the many residents, for all their efforts during the storms helping each other. The contribution of SCC was enormous. During the heavy rainfall 23/24 December the council received over 350 calls, responding to more than 150 reports of hazards in the road, including 40 fallen trees and other debris, and more than 50 incidents of drains and gullies blocked by branches. There were 10 teams working on flooding issues and a further 10 tree contractors dealing with fallen trees throughout the day. As heavy storms continued to batter the county through the night, the council doubled the number of out-of-hours emergency gangs and opened up the Yeovil Highways depot to co-ordinate its response efforts. Similar levels of activity were seen in January

At the beginning of the month I went out to see for myself the effect of the holiday storms and to personally thank those that had helped to do so much. The sight of the Levels from Barrington was a real shock.

Cllr John Osman, Leader of Somerset County Council, said: "It's at times like these that the County Council seems at its most vital – going the extra mile to help the public. Thank you to everyone for their efforts."

Flood Plans. Some of you will know a flood summit in March 2013 came up with a 14 point plan. I am very disappointed with the lack of action by the Environment Agency. Some of my residents in Hambridge and Westport, the rest of Islemoor and no doubt the rest of the Somerset levels know, have known for decades, indeed generations, that a major part of the answer is to dredge the rivers. Not only has the EA sat on £300,000 of taxpayers money from Somerset available specifically for this task, they appear incapable of taking any action either. Government ministers and senior officials have been invited to come and see for themselves the damage in Somerset.

Flood fund boost. The County Council has been doing all it can. The first local flood mitigation projects will have been approved and are being put in place. This programme is being repeated in 2014/15. A further flood funding boost of £500,000 has been proposed for

river dredging by Somerset County Council. It brings the total proposed by the council to £1m and followed a mini flood summit, held in the county in January. The Council is planning to increase its offer of £300,000 for dredging, and with the £200,000 for local flood prevention schemes, to a total of £1m – with a rallying call for Government and the Environment Agency to dig into their own pockets and find the further £3m needed to enable a comprehensive dredging operation for the Rivers Parrett and Tone.

Children's Centres.

I have been closely monitoring and advising on the ongoing reorganisation of Children's Centres. I am particularly interested in what will be available for the increasing numbers of military families that will be joining us in Somerset. This reorganisation is based on simple principles which Frances Nicholson restated to the Full Council last November: Providing services that people need where they need them; People before buildings; Where there is childcare, there will be childcare. This is not about a diminished service. This is about a better service. It is about taking on 30 more front-line workers to provide support to families. It is about investing an extra £1 million to pay for these new front-line workers. It is also about sorting out the previous 41 centres that spent over 50% of the budget on administration, management and building costs.

"A lot has been written and reported on in the media – some has been fair and accurate, some has been frankly shoddy and inaccurate. In some cases the media appears to have deliberately worried families claiming their local centre is to close when there is no such plan; that is frankly reprehensible, as are claims on radio and television that 18 centres will close. So I state again, unequivocally so that there shall be no room for doubt, that childcare provision is not affected by any proposed reorganisation of the structure of Children's Centre services. The proposed restructure is all about people. It is about investing more money in front-line services and front-line staff. It is also about getting the help to the people who need it where they need it. And it is about cutting management and building costs that currently amount to more than 50% of the entire budget. All aims everyone can support. Currently proposals are being drawn up area by area for the whole service and for each centre, with specific local consultation as appropriate to the significance of any proposed changes.

Good news for young people in foster care

Somerset County Council welcomed the government's announcement to set aside £40m to allow young people to remain in foster care until age 21. Cllr Frances Nicholson, Cabinet Member for Children and Families at Somerset County Council, said: "In Somerset, we already offer some young people the opportunity to stay with their foster carers after they turn 18 and we have been moving forward to make staying in foster care an option for all young people. "Government's announcement was fantastic news. The extra funding and the amendment to the Children and Families Bill to give all young people the right to stay in foster care until they are 21 will allow us to widen our existing scheme and strengthen our commitment to young people in care in Somerset."

I have been asked to join the SCC Fostering and Adoption Board and am presently undergoing training for the role.

Home to School Transport Policy

The SCC Cabinet recently resolved to approve changes to the home to school transport policy. This will affect: pupils starting or transferring schools on grounds of faith from 1 September 2014 onwards, the amount that parents pay will be increased to the same level paid by parents whose child is not eligible for free home to school transport (currently £602.25); the Local Authority will run bus routes with effect from 1 September 2014 to faith schools enabling parents to purchase seats; the Local Authority will also offer seats on buses that are running, to low income families who live beyond the statutory limit of 15 miles at the reduced paid seat rate (currently £305.35) in line with other children of low income families not attending their nearest or catchment school.

Those pupils already in receipt of a denominational subsidy at the end of the 2013/14 academic year will be protected until the pupil completes his/her education at the end of year 11 at the current school. If a pupil moves schools, or if a change of address means that current school is no longer the nearest faith school to home, the subsidy will no longer be paid. In cases where the Local Authority takes over the running of a bus contract previously organised by a 3rd party, parental contributions will also include any separate, additional contribution that is currently made by parents directly to the 3rd party; sibling protection will be offered to those pupils currently in years 4, 5 and 6 where an older sibling is receiving a subsidy to the same nearest faith secondary school at the end of the 2013/14 academic year and is still in a statutory year group at the time of admission of the younger sibling.

SCC Achievements 2013. The County Council was very busy last year seeing the welcome transfer of Public Health, a valued new addition to the Somerset County Council family. Our Child Protection services have had a rough time during 2013 and nobody wanted the OFSTED outcome that we received. The response has been fantastic and our social workers and support staff are working hard to improve the quality of support to the county's most vulnerable children. Better things are just around the corner. Our Adult Social care teams see so many people with real safeguarding issues and concerns, it could be overwhelming. So to see our teams across Somerset work tirelessly to help and protect vulnerable adults is both remarkable and humbling. Our in-house learning disabilities service has been the subject of numerous inspections over the last 12 months and not a single significant issue has been reported. This is a credit to all of the team. We do face some difficult choices, and we will have some tough times as we try to protect our vital frontline services.

Health and Well Being

Finally a big thank you for all the ideas that have been submitted for grants from the Health and Well Being £5,000 grant fund each County Councillor has at their disposal. I have submitted 8 projects for final approval and the closing date is 28th February 2014. The scheme provides a fixed sum to each Member to support local voluntary and community group initiatives in their division. It enables small grants to be provided at a very local level to help communities and neighbourhoods develop local activities that foster better links between the people living there. One of the most important things we can do to help improve health of wellbeing is to support locally-led activity that encourages people to connect together, particularly people who find it hard to integrate into their local community. I hope to be able to distribute the cheques during March. As far as I know this programme will be repeated in 2014/15 and if we cannot squeeze in late comers we will resubmit them this coming summer.