

County Councillor's Brief for Town & Parish Councils



South Petherton and
Islemoor Division

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Budget for 2014/15. On 18 Feb I returned from a visit abroad to attend and vote at the very important County Council meeting to set the budget for 2014/15. Whilst the austerity drive continues we have been able to protect many key budget areas in line with our policy to ensure the most vulnerable are protected. It is a long hard process that none of us particularly like but it faces the reality of the national economic and financial situation. On the plus side we have continued to ensure there is no rise in Council Tax for the 5th year in a row; £10million has been saved from the budget and £329m remains available for services, including £160m for vulnerable adults, £40m for children, £9.98m for schools and a £46 m capital investment fund has been created.

Flooding. Last month I gave my full support to dredging and had already been lobbying for it at SCC. I was delighted to read the Environment Agency has now changed it's stance, common sense has prevailed. We all acknowledge Flood Mitigation is highly complex and demands a multi-faceted approach; but having lived in the Netherlands and seen how they protect low lying land below sea level, it is possible and I shall be working hard to ensure all possible measures that can be taken are taken. SCC has already pledged another £250,000 for local mitigation measures. This spring we need to identify those local schemes that will help our residents in South Petherton and Islemoor. Finally, additional funds for dredging and Flood relief have been granted by Central government, acknowledged our crisis with £10 million.



The Secretary of State when visiting Somerset in January asked for a 20 year Action Plan to be developed by mid-March to look at the various options for the sustainable management of flood risk on the Somerset Levels and Moors. Dredging is part of that plan (see Map). The EA will be using the 1960s Tone Valley scheme as the basis for their design.

The 20 year Plan will also consider a range of other sustainable options for improving the area's flood resilience in the long term, such as maintenance, land management and community and business resilience. Dredging of an 8km length of the Rivers Parrett and Tone will begin next month (March) provided it is safe and practical to do so.

Health and Well Being 2013/14. I can now confirm all the submissions have been agreed. I have had to adjust the sums in one or two cases. The individual organisations that have been awarded grants have been notified separately. I am limited to a total of £5,000 and was not able to leverage any more out of the system, even if I tried, which I did. As soon as the cheques are available I shall be presenting them to the beneficiaries. Those that did not get through this financial year will be at the top of my list for the next financial year starting in April and we do not have to wait until the end of 2014 to submit applications.

Fairer Deal for Somerset. The SCC has been working really hard on Central Government to recognise the special nature of Somerset. There has been considerable senior level interest in Somerset because of the flooding and there are already additional funds being made available to assist the recovery and for future preventative works.

Highways. All available County highways assets and contractors are rightly concentrating on the clean up on the Somerset levels. This work and the commitments during the flooding have had a knock on effect on the regular work scheduled before March 2014. Some of the maintenance and improvement projects have been postponed and will have to be done later than planned or anticipated. In the meantime keep recording and reporting all defects and problem areas.

Small Improvement Schemes. The really good news is that the two main highways projects I am allowed annually were approved in late February. The Footpath from Lightgate lane in South Petherton will now be built, permitting easier access to the Doctors Surgery and the Community Hospital. The four new sets of curb stones will be installed in Merriott and I remain hopeful we will also get the 20 mph signs and Wig-Wag lights outside the schools in South Petherton and Shepton Beauchamp.

Potholes Report. Despite the appalling weather, flooding and budget restrictions the County Council has maintained a strong and robust road repair regime. Indeed with the new contract there have been improvements. By 14 March 24,475 potholes had been repaired, about the same as this time last year. We retain our position as one of the best in the South

West. That may come as surprise to those that have seen and reported more potholes, and of course the flooding has caused even more damage; but it does emphasise this important task is like repainting the Forth Bridge - continuous.

SCC Chief Executive. Some of you will have heard the SCC Chief Executive has left the Council by mutual agreement. . She has received the contractual minimum salary payment this Council can make - £40,000 in lieu of notice, the minimum payment this Council could make. This is very satisfactory and compares well with some settlements elsewhere. Patrick Flaherty has been appointed as Acting Chief Executive. We move on to the important duties of helping Somerset cope with the biggest civil incident of recent years with the flooding.

Broad Band - Connecting Devon and Somerset (CDS)

Recent concerns about Broadband access have been brought to me and having researched it again in some detail I would like to allay some of the concerns and address some of the inaccuracies and confusion that seem to have spread throughout the community. The roll out of Superfast Broadband is a three year programme that I am monitoring very closely as your County Councillor. I have attended briefings on the subject and have been in direct contact with the Council officers and other parts of CDS. I have expressed my concern that the website gives inadequate information and needs to explain better what “under evaluation means”. There has been no fobbing off or attempt to misinform.

The Connecting Devon and Somerset (CDS) programme will bring fibre broadband to 90% of premises across Devon and Somerset by the end of 2016. Everyone will receive at least 2mbps. We are lobbying government for additional funds to raise coverage to 95% by 2017. The programme is the largest scheme of its type in England; it is a complicated engineering challenge that under current funding will take another 2.5 years to complete. The Final Coverage map on the website was only ever intended to be a top level guide – the programme requires a great deal of flexibility – the impact of flooding and recent adverse weather provides an example of why the roll out is not set in stone.

On the CDS website it states that most of the area is, at present ‘under evaluation’. This means that the programme is still in the planning phase and is subject to detailed engineering and technological survey work. It does not mean that the area is under evaluation as to whether it will receive fibre broadband or not. These local surveys are taking place and the entire telephone network is being evaluated, area by area, to establish which exchanges need modernisation, how much lead or copper wiring needs replacement, how much fibre optic cabling and where and so on.

The roll out deployment plan of the new technology is dependent on this survey work, which includes liaising with Highways and Planning departments, securing wayleaves (where permission is needed from a landowner to enable work to be carried out), working with utility companies. That all comes before dealing with the physical challenges often presented by flooded or blocked ducts that are only discovered when the roads or pavements are actually dug up. CDS assessed that this approach was the most cost effective and provided the best use of funding. If the survey work had been completed upfront, it would have meant an indefensible delay to the start of the actual roll out.

In Somerset we have a large and complicated geography, so we need to ensure the investment works hard for us and reaches out as far as possible. To enable the programme to work as efficiently and provide the best value for public money as possible, the network

often needs to be built out from existing enabled telephone exchanges. This inevitably means that some areas are serviced before others.

Announcements on the next enabled exchanges are made every quarter followed by a break down of the communities that each tranche of work will reach. Once fibre broadband comes to your area, CDS will be contacting the Parish Council and providing information on how to subscribe to the new service, which will mean arranging a new tariff with your individual ISP. The programme sends quarterly updates to Parish Councils on how work is progressing as well as updating Ready for Service map at postcode level whenever an individual cabinet goes live.

I will continue to watch this programme closely and provide regular updates through my monthly newsletters to Parishes and at the Parish council meetings.

In the meantime keep checking the CDS website www.connectingdevonandsomerset.co.uk for the latest information. ENDS