

County Councillor's Brief for Town & Parish Councils



South Petherton and
Islemoor Division

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May/June 2014

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A slightly longer Brief covering two months:

Foster carers. The valuable work of foster carers has been recognised by Somerset County Council's Cabinet as they approved a scheme to pay them. Previously, foster carers only received an allowance to cover the cost of looking after a child, which pays for utility bills, clothes, food and pocket money. Only foster carers providing specialist placements have been paid fees for the care they provide to a child. Now all foster carers will be paid a fee as well as the allowance and will start on a progression scheme which allows them to earn more as they build up their experiences, skills and learning. This new scheme aims to help recruit more foster carers and improve the retention of existing foster carers.

- The new scheme will cost just over £1.1m in the first year. Following the expected increase in recruitment and retention of foster carers and reduced need for expensive external placements the scheme expects to save the council around £300,000 within three years and much more in the long run as growing demand and costs are reduced.
- The fostering allowance is to cover the cost of looking after a child, including: food, clothing, pocket money, personal and household expenditure, equipment, dental and optical needs, activities for the child and telephone expenses. The fee paid to foster carers is in recognition of their role supporting and looking after the child.

Join Fostering in Somerset on Facebook or follow us on twitter @fostersomerset.

A snap-shot of our health and wellbeing: Life expectancy in Somerset is higher than the national average, but nearly a quarter of children aged 4-5 are overweight (including obese) and the number of people aged over 65 is estimated to rise to 146,000 in the next seven years, according to the latest snap-shot of health and wellbeing in Somerset.

These are some of the key findings of the latest Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA), published online. The JSNA, produced by Somerset County Council and other organisations, collects together information from a wide range of sources to highlight important trends and changes in housing, transport, community safety, care, employment and other issues that affect the health and wellbeing of the Somerset population.

For the first time, detailed information and data is available as an entirely web based resource at www.somersetintelligence.org.uk making it easier to access and to update. A short online summary “Somerset: Our County 2013/2014”, looks at key areas and population trends, the economy, children and young people and lifestyle issues.

Some key issues:

- One of the key issues this year is the continued decrease of Somerset’s teenage pregnancy rates.
- Relationship and sex education has been given a much higher priority locally, more health clinics in schools and better information and access to contraception and sexual health services have also helped to reduce levels of teenage pregnancy.
- The summary highlights that 23.4 per cent of reception class aged children (4-5 years) are overweight (including obese) and at year 6 (10-11 years) this is 31.9 per cent.
- The Somerset Health and Wellbeing in Learning Programme supports schools to promote healthy weight activities. These include encouraging children to increase physical activity and take small steps to eat healthier food and by promoting cooking in the curriculum. The team have also set up brief workshops to help school staff support families and children to achieve a healthy weight.
- Universal Infant Free School Meals will be introduced in September.
- Other findings include: In general, Somerset people enjoy relatively good health in comparison to national figures
- Somerset has a higher proportion of older people than the national average and this age group is growing faster than others. The 65+ age group is projected to rise by 30 per cent by 2021
- More young people under 18 are being admitted to hospital due to alcohol
- More than one person in a 100 has autism which indicates that in Somerset there are 5,300 people who may have autism
- 80% of students stay on into further education
- The number of patients over 17 diagnosed with diabetes is 24,400 and increasing

Minister gets Flood Action Plan update. Environment Secretary Owen Paterson was in Somerset at the end of June to receive an update on the Levels and Moors Flood Action Plan. His latest visit to County Hall underlined the continued Government commitment to the Plan that aims to reduce the impact and risk of flooding in extreme weather.

The Plan is being coordinated by Somerset County Council and delivered by a wide range of partners. The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs was updated on the work underway including:

- Dredging and river management – there are six dredging teams at work, some seven days a week, and the programme is on target to be completed by October.

- Infrastructure projects – work is progressing on plans for a ring bank at Thorney, road raising at Muchelney and work to improve the capacity of water flow under the A372 at Beer Wall.
- The proposed Parrett sluice – a workshop was held recently to review options with further design and feasibility work commissioned.

Work is also advancing well on the design of key highway upgrades, and on identifying priorities for a further phase of dredging.

Among the other actions to reduce the risk of flooding is a proposal to create a Somerset Rivers Board (SRB). This will be a way for local partners to take more responsibility for flood risk and water management across the County.

The Minister was told that options under review include organisational structures, legislative requirements, and funding models. Proposals being considered include an appropriate catchment-wide funding mechanism to generate additional funds.

The Flood Action Programme is being led by a Leaders Implementation Group, involving a wide range of partners. A further meeting is due in early July and it is anticipated that this meeting will sign off proposals for the Rivers Board for wider consultation.

Broadband Rollout. Through my regular with SCC officers I have gained additional information on the progress of the Broadband rollout across the County..

The Somerset project is the largest in Europe. Residents will want to be aware that the speed of roll out, and coverage has largely been dependent on BT's commercial decision (which will provide 88% coverage), with SCC taking up the slack under the Connecting Devon and Somerset (CDS) umbrella. It is intended that by early 2016 everyone will have a minimum of 2mbit coverage. By the end of July 2014 60k premises will be covered. A further £22.75m. has been allocated to complete the project, but this is dependent on SCC gaining match funding. SSDC has already indicated their decision to commit funds in support and other stakeholders have been approached.

It is important to note that once cabinets are in place, all users will need to contact their Internet Service Provider to update their contracts.

With the support of Ilminster Chamber of Commerce, a workshop is planned for September 10th within Ilminster division to support users. It is intended that these workshops meet local demand and will be on such topics as iCloud social media, online marketing etc. Those with a particular topic of interest should contact Kate on 07753496603.

Specific postcode information is available on request and can be accessed by using the website link www.connectingdevonandsomerset.co.uk or by contacting SCC on 01823 359208

Scrutiny - Policies and People.

Ambulance Services: On 25th June I visited the NHS SW Ambulance Trust where it was deeply impressive to see a dedicated staff doing their best to provide us with a fantastic service, in which they largely succeed. The Trust covers 20% of mainland Britain, serving 5.3 million residents and 17.5m visitors with 4,112 staff and 2785 volunteers with 96 Ambulance Stations, 6 Air Bases, 4 clinical call centres and 2 Hazardous Area Response teams. Last

year (2012/13) there were 153,500 patient transport journeys and 231,126 used the out of hours service. The emergency 999 service is used by around 2500 patients a day. The cost is £147.2 million annually

On Friday 27 June the Trust reported to County on the delivery of the Ambulance Service and the operation of the 111 service. There is an acceptance that the rural nature of our communities, and the distances involved, cause problems in meeting national and local targets for an 8 min. response time. Nevertheless, the Trust is close to the national target of 75%. Poor handover times at hospitals has meant that in April 163.45 hours were lost.

Stroke Services: An update on the future provision of stroke services within the county has revealed a move towards more effective Early Supported Discharge, with all agencies working together more effectively.

Care Act. An update was provided on The Care Act 2014, and the impact on local residents. This Act will have a major effect on our lives in Somerset. The proposed limit for a person's contribution towards their care is to be £72k. There will also be deferred payment options available through loans against property value. The intention is to replace the current complex legislation with one overall framework. Public consultation on the proposals ends on 15th Aug. An update was also given on personalised care budgets, allowing those in receipt the opportunity for more choice and control.

The Beacon, Ilminster. I know the closure of the Beacon has affected a far wider area including the roads around Ilton, Barrington and Hambridge. A request has been made to explore the possibility of compensation for local businesses affected. At the time of writing we await a formal response, but early indications are that as the issue appears not to be the construction of the road itself, but the underlying geological structure; this means the collapse is likely to be considered 'an act of God'. Exploratory work is now being undertaken as a matter of urgency, with a plan of action, and timescale expected within a few weeks. A number of options are expected for both short-term solutions, or a more permanent fixture of the problem.

Get Set. I attended a briefing on this new initiative, being rolled out between now and Sept. This is part of the planned changes to Children's Centre provision, and a move towards closer working with districts, schools and other partners to support families with children right through from 0 to 19 years old. Within SSDC the officer with overall responsibility for this is Savaria Moss.

Children's centres will remain the key point of contact for enquiries on issues such as school attendance, healthy eating, finding a job, benefits entitlement etc. To find out more visit the website www.getset.somerset.org.uk or call 0845 345 9122.

Public sector strikes Members of the public are advised that Council services and schools across Somerset could be affected by a national one-day strike taking place on Thursday 10 July. Somerset County Council is looking at the potential impact of the strike and putting contingency plans in place to make sure services can continue wherever possible. The Council's main objective is to protect vulnerable people and these services will be prioritised.

A list of schools affected by the teachers' strike will also be available on Somerset County Council's website. The decision on whether to remain open or close will be made by individual head teachers, and many will make an early decision to help parents make plans for on the day. The County Council will be listing these online at

www.somersetnewsroom.com stating whether the school will be open, partially open, or closed. Where a school is not listed it means no details have been provided to the Council at this stage, although the list will be updated through next week.

A303 public exhibitions. A series of exhibitions on improving the A303 are being held during July by Devon County Council, supported by Somerset County Council. They are part of a study into improving the A30/A303 between Honiton and Broadway. The drop-in sessions will set out the progress of the study so far and next steps to improve the route.

The exhibitions to be held in Somerset are:

- Tuesday 15 July, 3pm-8pm The Shrubbery Hotel, Ilminster
- Thursday 17 July, 3pm-8pm The Guildhall, Chard

The study results will feed into the Government's full review of the route from Stonehenge to Honiton, carried out by the Highways Agency, which will publish its finding in autumn 2014.

Fostering and adoption information event. More foster carers and adopters are needed in Somerset to provide loving, safe and stable homes for children in care. An event is being held on Monday 7 July at Staplegrove Village Hall in Taunton from 7-9pm to provide information and advice on what you need, how to apply and what it is like to become a foster carer or adopter. People are invited to pop in for a chat. A short presentation will take place at about 7.30pm and social workers and foster carers will be on hand to answer questions.

In Somerset, foster carers and adopters are needed for children of all ages but there is a particular need for people to foster and adopt older children and siblings groups and foster carers are needed to take children long term. Sue Blatcher is a Long Term Foster Carer in Somerset. She said: "I like long term fostering because the children are part of the family and you have time to build relationships. My last long term placement was 10 years ago and the young man who is going to be 21 this autumn is still with me, he's very much part of my family. And when my daughter got married he was an Usher at her wedding. He is my son, he is my youngest boy. That's my proudest moment."

Sue has made a short film about her experiences as a Long Term Foster Carer, watch the film, and films from some other foster carers, here: <http://www.fosteringinsomerset.org.uk/SuccessStory/>

To find out more about fostering visit: www.fosteringinsomerset.org.uk and for adoption visit: www.adoptioninsomerset.org.uk or call 0800 587 9900.

Road closures lists: To see the lists of road closures in Somerset go to <http://www.somerset.gov.uk/roads-parking-and-transport/road-closures/>