

ILMINSTER DIVISION - COUNTY COUNCILLOR REPORT MARCH 2014**COUNTY COUNCIL ACTIVITY**

Since the recent departure of the CEO the search is now on for a suitable replacement. Additional money for Broadband has been allocated, £22m. overall, and there is the expectation that there will be 95% coverage across the county by 2016.

My sponsored abseil is due to take place next week, so far I have received donations of £175..... more is welcome!

The small improvement scheme for flood prevention is now open for applications again, with a focus on providing grants to Parish, Town Councils and local community groups, rather than individuals.

FLOODING

The recovery phase is now well under way and local organisations such as Rotary have stepped up to the plate to provide equipment and assistance to enable people to make their homes habitable once more as quickly as possible. Tesco has also received praise for its contribution. News that the armed forces charged for the help they gave during the crisis has been greeted with some dismay by many, with the feeling expressed that they are actually paid by the tax payer.

HIGHWAYS/TRANSPORT

There continues to be frustration over outstanding issues, in this case particularly in relation to the lengthy closure of The Beacon, whilst subsidence is being investigated, and a petition has been launched by the local press.

LOCAL PLAN

SSDC brought forward their planned full council meeting to the middle of the month to discuss and make decisions in relation to the local plan, with particular reference to proposed changes to the direction of growth in Ilminster. As both the County Councillor for Ilminster (where SCC had an interest in the outcome), and also the District Councillor for Neroche I had been approached by residents on both sides of the argument, and after making a statement at the meeting abstained during the vote. Despite pleas from members of Ilminster Town Council and others, the decision was made for the planned direction of growth to be along the Canal Way end of town. The new proposals have now been submitted to the inspector, who it is expected will hold a further hearing before coming to a final conclusion. I have since received strong representations from one Donyatt resident, in relation to SCC correspondence over the tenancy for County Farmland and I am pursuing this on their behalf, where I believe that until the final outcome of the Local Plan is ratified any action, by any party, is premature and gives unnecessary cause for alarm.

ROYAL DEVON & EXETER NHS FT

As a Somerset representative on the Council of Governors I attend a number of meetings each month, and am currently the Chair of the Member Engagement Committee, where there is a desire to ensure that the general public have the opportunity to air their views over a range of issues concerning the future of acute hospital care provision. It is evident that there will be severe financial shortfalls for over 1/3 hospitals this year and more predicted for next. In this context I also represented patients at a conference held this month, where many of the NHS FTs across the region met to exchange views and air concerns. At the RD&E the key focus at present is on 'patient experience', and I was invited to take part in an observation exercise on a frail elderly ward, which proved very enlightening.

EDUCATION

The provision of free school meals for infants, planned for this September, continues to pose a huge challenge across the county, and has yet to be resolved.

I was present at the Somerset Youth Parliament Awards ceremony, held at Shire Hall, at which locally, Combe St. Nicholas was represented.

CHILDREN'S CENTRES

Budgets have been severely cut, from £7m. last year, to just £5.5m this year, with a similar level of reduction expected next year. The focus has been on reducing back room services and concentrating on front line staffing to support families as part of the Early Help Strategy, with an increase of 20 Family Support Workers across the County. I attended a 'Have Your Say' meeting at Ile Valley Children's Centre this week, along with just one member of the public, as part of a review of all centres. We met with SCC officers to discuss proposed future service provision at the centre. Unlike others across the county, there are no plans to close the centre, or reduce the range of services offered. It will however, be 'de-registered' for OFSTED purposes, thereby reducing the number of inspections required. **Suggestions with regard to other possible service user groups having access to the centre, to increase capacity, are actively being encouraged e.g. Youth Groups, IT support for job seekers etc.**

SOMERSET GOVERNORS' STRATEGY GROUP

As a long standing representative of this group, which focuses on supporting and developing school governors across the county, I have been very involved with the recruitment of the new Exec. Officer; interviews are expected to take place at the end of next month. There continues to be disappointment at the lack of representation by governors on this group.

With the increased responsibilities of governors, expressions of interest in joining are sought.

WILLOW SCHOOLS CO-OPERATIVE TRUST

The formal adoption of the constitution has now taken effect, and the inaugural meeting held. Due to my long standing involvement with several of the schools, I have been invited to join the board as an associate member, representing the SCC. The five schools involved, Ashill, Neroche, Winsham, Combe St. Nicholas and Buckland St. Mary are proceeding with the formulation of plans for mutual support, collaboration and cooperation, to ensure their continued progression. A number of other organisations have also expressed interest in involvement. Concern has been raised over the transfer of land assets where leases are currently held by SCC.

SOMERSET in CARE COUNCIL

I continue to be very involved with the Somerset in Care Council, attending their monthly meetings and helping youngsters to increase their cooking skills. I will once again be joining their residential weekend at the end of next week.

SOMERSET SKILLS AND LEARNING

At a recent meeting, in my position as Chair of the Advisory Board, I can advise that the planned date for transfer to Social Enterprise status has now been delayed until Aug. 2015. A further application is being made to the Skills Funding Agency for registration as an independent training provider.

SOMERSET RURAL YOUTH PROJECT

Previous concerns over board membership and changes to management appear to have been resolved, with the appointment of Nik Harwood as the new CEO, and the appointment of the new Board Chair expected to be announced shortly. I recently attended their residential development day in the Mendips where I took part in a self-assessment exercise