

ILMINSTER DIVISION COUNTY/DISTRICT COUNCILLOR REPORT JANUARY 2021

As updates are distributed on a regular basis, the following is an overview for the month.

COVID PUBLIC HEALTH UPDATE

Anyone with any concerns can contact the Covid helpline at - **0300 790 6275 – 8am – 6pm.**

More up to date information on the vaccination programme is available at:

<https://www.somersetccg.nhs.uk/health/local-services/health-services-during-coronavirus/covid-19-vaccinations-in-somerset/>

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/coronavirus-vaccination/coronavirus-vaccine/?priority-taxon=774cee22-d896-44c1-a611-e3109cce8eae>

Anyone having had the vaccination MUST still obey the national lockdown rules.

The Somerset Covid-19 Outbreak Management link is:

docs.somerset.gov.uk/wl/?id=cwwiCDvrJwOacrn04qvVuSxWMVb1yLfh

This link gives more details about Tier 4 <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/tier-4-stay-at-home>

The key message remains the same – Hands - Face – Space

Significant assistance has been provided by staff at both SCC and SSDC in support of setting up the vaccination programme. Whilst some disquiet has been expressed in relation to the impact on core services it is felt that there is an overwhelming moral obligation for our local authorities to provide this support, which is not intended to be long-term. Staff have received praise across the board for their pro-active, committed and flexible approach.

As SCC's Adults Scrutiny meeting this month concern was raised about the future sustainability of some care homes given the number of care home patients affected by the impact of Covid-19.

SOMERSET COUNTY COUNCIL

Government funding for Covid - Individual authority allocations from the £1.6bn Covid-19 fund was announced this month. SCC's allocation fell by £5m+ from the previous award, down from £15.6m to £9.9m. The reason for this is that those counties in two tier areas, have had 35% 'top-sliced', with the money re-directed to District Councils. It is of concern that, as a result of what could be seen to be an arbitrary two-tier funding allocation, vulnerable Somerset residents and care home workers may be worse off; until now SCC has been focused on delivering PPE, social care, childcare, shielding and other critical services, incurring significant local costs.

Transport - Current concessionary bus pass rules have been suspended so that these can be used on all public services before 9.30am.

SCC has been working with Community Transport and Slinky Demand Responsive services to allow free travel for bus pass holders when attending vaccination appointments.

SSDC COVID RESPONSE

SSDC is committed to supporting local communities but there is recognition that it is not viable at present to continue to maintain business as usual. £8.8m has been distributed in business grants to over 1,000 businesses (a total of £45m. since last March).

Homelessness is being well managed, with no-one being denied the offer of a roof over their heads, although a small minority have declined to take this up.

Increased support has been provided to those facing financial hardship. SSDC staff have also been assisting with 'track and trace', and working with local businesses investigating breaches, and enforcement. Looking forward, a post Covid Recovery Plan is in preparation working jointly with other districts, SCC and other partners.

COVID IMPACT ON EMPLOYMENT

During both lockdowns the Government has provided some direct financial support to businesses and employees and the expected peak in job losses is now likely to be in 2021. Sustaining employment, creating new jobs and supporting people into employment is critical for Somerset's economy. A network of Employment Hubs is being created to help people to find work or move into self-employment.

Around 70% of Somerset businesses have furloughed some staff, over half of Somerset's manufacturers believe they will have to cut jobs, and one in three small businesses say they will need to make redundancies. 35% of closed small businesses are not sure whether they will re-open. Around 90% of businesses within the tourism/leisure sector have been closed during the Coronavirus lockdown periods with more than a third having to lay off staff and/or enforcing unpaid leave. High levels of unemployment are seen in a high claimant count alongside a lack of new employment opportunities.

As the Job Retention scheme is wound down, we do not know how many of those on furlough will retain their jobs and therefore what the impact on employment will be.

BUDGETS AND PRECEPT

At every level of local government our parishes, towns and local authorities are in the final stages of preparing their 2021/2022 budgets. There is likely to be an impact on council tax-payers, with some precepts set to rise, to take into account lost revenue and increased costs over the last year. In some cases however, acknowledging the hardship caused by Covid, it has been possible for current council tax levels to be maintained without increase. At SSDC a £5 council tax increase is proposed for Band D properties.

There has been a delay in finalising SCC accounts, largely due to challenges with some asset valuation (e.g. schools etc.), requiring further work on providing evidence.

COUNCIL TAX SUPPORT SCHEME

A re-design is planned this year to make it more cost effective and efficient, and to increase the overall level of support for the lowest income families, giving stability for applicants and reduce the administrative burden as a result of the introduction of Universal Credit.

It is expected that an income banded Council Tax Support scheme will be implemented with effect from 1 Apr. 2021 if approved by SSDC Full Council.

FUTURE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN SOMERSET

I am advised that it is likely that there will be a delay in relation to the start of the consultation process, and that it is still unclear whether or not the planned local elections are likely to go ahead.

DEVON & SOMERSET FIRE & RESCUE AUTHORITY

Consideration is being given to changes to the governance structure: still under discussion. As the number of incidents continues to decrease there is an increased focus on prevention and protection responsibilities, matched to risk.

The recent changes to operational activity, which has seen the introduction of roving vehicles, have proven to be more effective and efficient, and to improve recruitment.

It is intended to temporarily increase the number of firefighters by 12 for a period of three years, to mitigate the number of retirements anticipated.

Council tax precept is limited to a max. of 2% inc., resulting in be some reliance on reserves to balance the budget. Public opinion broadly favours an increase to protect service levels.

Even taking into account an increase in the council tax precept, available funding will still decrease. At present £1.9m. of revenue has been lost due to Covid. (75% of this is to be funded, with the remainder over 3 years). A reduction in council tax receipts is expected, as more households will rely on benefit support.

A recent inspection to review the response to Covid, has been very positive, and can be viewed at <https://www.justiceinspectors.gov.uk/hmicfrs/>).

The inspectorate praised staff welfare, the ability to maintain and protect statutory services and adapt to changing risks. It also recognised the support given to partners through driving ambulances, fitting masks and PPE, and deliveries to vulnerable people. The work has now been extended to support the vaccination programme.

POLICE

A verbal update was provided this month by Stephen Trace (PCSO) and the new Beat Manager, Rob Chidgey.

A warning was given about recent shed break-ins in the Horton and Broadway area. Considering is being given to installing CCTV in Chard town centre, at the rear of The Guildhall, and also funding for mobile cameras for anti-social behaviour hotspots.

A recent stabbing in Chard is thought to be linked to drug dealing, and other drug related incidents. An increase in the number of 12-13 year olds being groomed is also of concern. Police now have additional powers to issue higher fines, of £800, to those committing Covid breaches by attending small gatherings of more than 15 people within residential properties.

There has been a sharp increase in the number of breaches being reported by local people during this lockdown; 3,138 total breach reports and 240 FPNs issued.

In total there have been 43,454 breach incidents reported and 980 Fixed Penalty Notices issued in Avon and Somerset.

DOMESTIC ABUSE

The Home Office has launched a new 'Abuse Codeword Scheme' to provide a way for people experiencing domestic abuse to signal that they need immediate help by using a codeword in their local pharmacy. The 'Ask for ANI' scheme allows those at risk or suffering from abuse to signal that they need help and to access support. By asking for ANI, a trained pharmacy worker will offer a private space where they can establish if the victim needs to speak to the police or would like help to access support services.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/pharmacies-launch-codeword-scheme-tooffer-lifeline-to-domestic-abuse-victims>

Guidance: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/domestic-abuse-how-to-get-help>

SSDC PERSONNEL

Netta Meadows, SSDC's Director for Service Delivery, is to become the CEO for the Scottish Borders Council, providing the opportunity for SSDC to re-consider the make-up of its Senior Leadership team. As future focus is moving towards regeneration and economic development, consideration is being given to appointing a dedicated director to this role.

Whilst no decisions have yet been made, any changes will be within the current budget.

SSDC has confirmed the appointment of a new Section 151 Officer, Jill Byron.

Cllr. Brian Hamilton has been appointed as Vice-Chair of Area West.

ENVIRONMENT CHAMPIONS

Currently there are 50 across South Somerset, with the intention to have at least one representative for each parish. With this in mind, anyone interested should contact:

ssdcenvironment@southsomerset.gov.uk.

SSDC work with Environment Champions to create a more connected and sustainable environment that is resilient. Zoom seminars are running during 2021, to share knowledge and ideas. Regular emails also inform champions of available funding/resources.

HIGHWAYS

New A358 – M5 Jct. 25 update

A new road layout for the A358 at Taunton has been opened as work to upgrade Jct. 25 of the M5 continues. The £19m scheme is due to be completed this summer.

The old section of the A358 between the Park and Ride and Jct. 25 roundabout is closed temporarily until the project is complete, at which point it will reopen to eastbound traffic only. Overall, Jct. 25 improvements will include an enlargement of the roundabout, a widened eastern exit, full signalisation and a new roundabout to access the proposed Nexus Jct. 25 site, with safer pedestrian and cycling facilities.

TRANSPORT

The issue of a continued lack of bus service provision within the outlying villages, for employment and education purposes, is ongoing and has been raised with SCC.

CANAL WAY HEDGES

I continue to receive communication relating to frustrations over the ownership and maintenance of hedges along Canal Way, as overgrowth is impeding pedestrian access.

FLOODING

SCC have provided an update to the findings of the Flood Risk Study of Ilminster. Options for a number of projects to be delivered within the upcoming financial year's budget, and the timing for completion, are now being assessed. Consideration is also being given to other organisations that will need to be involved, and additional sources of potential funding to enable prompt delivery. The following initial options are considered to be of the greatest benefit and value, and most likely to deliver positive results.

1. Wetland east of Ditton Road culvert
2. Basin in Education Centre south of Ditton Road culvert
3. Swale/Basin in field north of Blackdown View
4. Swale/Basin South of Adams Meadow

After establishing costings and viability local residents will be given the opportunity for input.

PLANNING

Phosphates and the impact on 5-year land supply

The legislation relating to this issue was written into English law on 1st Jan., so things have not changed, and local authorities cannot avoid having to address this. SSDC are continuing to seek a solution as quickly as possible. In the meantime, I understand that everything else continues as normal, including ongoing recruitment to the planning team. The situation causes issues for everyone involved in the delivery of sites, the potential impact on 5-year land supply, costly delays, and lack of continuity of build for developers. The phosphate-load calculator that Royal Haskoning is developing is 90% complete, which will assist applicants in being able to determine the levels of likely pollution, but a longer term policy/framework is not likely until the Autumn. It is expected that mitigation measures are in place before any developments are begun.

The leaders of all Somerset districts have met with Wessex Water, Natural England and the Environment Agency (which has admitted to a lack of funds to enforce pollution legislation). The district councils also submitted a letter to ministers early in Dec. outlining the impact of this on planning in the area. Disappointingly, there has been no response to date. It is expected that our local MPs be more pro-active in their involvement to resolve the situation.

Housing reform

At a meeting with Robert Jenrick, the Minister for Housing, Communities and Local Government, concern was expressed about the loss of amenity in our communities. He also voiced aspirations to improve building design and safety, along with a move towards smaller high streets, with the inclusion of housing and leisure.

A consultation has recently been launched seeking views on proposals to reform Strand 2 (land owned by a local authority or certain other public bodies) of the Right to Contest under the Local Government, Planning and Land Act 1980. Download the document [here](#). Currently longstanding vacant, derelict or under-utilised public sector land can have a significant impact on the attractiveness of a local area, sometimes acting as a focus for anti-social behaviour. Since 1980, the public has been able to request that the government considers whether certain publicly owned land is unused or underused, and if so direct that it be sold. NALC has been liaising with MHCLG on this right and currently local councils have the power to invoke the right to challenge other defined public sector landowners' under use of land, and refer such cases for consideration to MHCLG.

SOMERSET WASTE PARTNERSHIP

Re-cycle MORE – plans are in place to increase items re-cycled in weekly collections. Plastic pots, tubes /trays, food & drink cartons, household batteries and electrical items are to be included. Blue bags will be provided, and it is likely that collection days will change. Concern has been expressed about collections from communal living spaces which suffer from constraints for storing re-cycling.

Briefing sessions/workshops for the roll out of the Recycle More programme, due to be launched in South Somerset in June 2021, are to be held. The sessions will be by Zoom and will take the format of a short presentation followed by Questions and Answers. Several dates have been proposed for briefing sessions for SSDC Councillors, in addition to dates on which representatives from PC/TCs are invited to attend. These are:
Weds. 14 April: 6.30-7.30pm Thurs. 15 April: 6.30-7.30pm Mon. 19 April: 6.30-7.30pm
From 1st Feb. all household kerbside collections - recycling, rubbish and garden waste - will begin at 6am, rather than 7am. The aim is to step up staff and customer safety while ensuring waste services are maintained despite the ongoing disruption caused by Covid-19.

Garden waste collections - during the 1st lockdown green waste collections were suspended and subscribers advised that they would be given an extension period, with a recommendation that renewals are actioned at the end of each year of contract.

The contract with Viridor has now ended and it has been noted that the new contractor is not so willing to engage.

As 70% of food waste is considered to be avoidable and is very carbon intensive, SSDC is seeking to develop a food waste strategy as part of their climate emergency strategy.

CREWKERNE/ILMINSTER SCHOOLS

SCC have received a legal letter of claim relating to the latest consultation activity and are taking legal advice on next steps. Timescales for a decision have had to be revised, largely as a result of restrictions imposed by Covid; this has not been received favourably by some respondents, although some schools have been keen for the key decision to be delayed. Notification has now been published in the Chard & Ilminster News, and will be discussed at SCC's Cabinet meeting on 17th Mar.

A key element in shaping the future of schools in the area is the progress (or lack of it) of the Crewkerne key site. Several members of the public have been unhappy with the proposals put forward for the site. SCC is not in a position to negotiate until a decision is made. The developer has stated that they need an additional 110 houses to make it viable, which will encroach on industrial land. The planned new school was intended to be direct replacement for Ashlands School because of its age and condition but the community feels

a new school is not needed. The DofE requires at least 700 hundred houses to warrant their preferred option of a new 14-class school. Discussions have been held with SSDC re: the proposed changes and whether or not a school site is actually going to be needed. One issue concerns the entrance to the site, and the presence of lime trees; with this in mind, SCC intends to abort plans for the new school.

Funding for the school's reorganisation project for the Crewkerne/Ilminster area has been included in the one-off costs of the project, including possible refurbishment, over a period of three years, until 2024. The programme total stands at £5,112,600

HOME EDUCATING CHILDREN

The pandemic has put extra pressure on families with school age children. Several organisations have produced resources that might be helpful for parents or schools:

The Canal and Rivers Trust - The trust is sharing activities that encourage children to watch, read, do, play and create as they learn about our canals and rivers

<https://canalrivertrust.org.uk/explorers/learning>

Devon and Somerset Fire & Rescue Service - Children aged 5 to 7 can learn about what the fire service does and how they help us. They learn about common fire hazards around the home, how to keep their homes safe, how dangerous smoke can be and the importance of smoke alarms. They also talk about what to do if their clothes catch fire and how to call 999. School visits are not possible at the moment, but they have created bespoke 'virtual classroom' videos for Key Stage 1, supplied with a full lesson plan and support tasks for each. To access the video and teaching resources email education@dsfire.gov.uk

NEROCHE SCHOOL

As of 1st January, Neroche School became part of the Uffculme Academy Trust.

LIBRARIES

Library loans have been extended, and 'in-person' customer contact services reduced to a minimum, in line with Government Covid guidance.

All items on loan, but not overdue, have been automatically extended to at least 31st Mar.

For items overdue before 25th Dec. borrowers will need to review these via their account.

Return dates may be extended again, to ensure items borrowed are not due back until after Lockdown 3 is lifted. You do not need to visit a library to return items at present.

All returned items are quarantined for at least 72 hours and remain on your account until the quarantine period is completed. Items are backdated to the date they were returned.

OCTAGON THEATRE

The RSA has carried out research on the localised impact of the pandemic on employment. This shows that 26% - 28% of all jobs are at risk in each of Somerset's Districts.

Plans are under consideration at SSDC to invest in refurbishing the Octagon at a cost of £23.1m, which will increase its size to a seating capacity of 900 and expand its use as a conference and event venue within a wider area. It is intended to be part of the long-term investment strategy to create jobs and support economic recovery. Approval has been given in principle to proceed, which will enable access to funding from the arts council and other organisations. The decision has caused some discussion over considerations such as the impact on other local arts venues, in addition to transport provision and parking.

ELECTION

With Covid-19 restrictions likely to continue for some time, and some local elections due to take place next spring, voters are encouraged to register for postal votes, which can be done by accessing this link. www.gov.uk/government/publications/apply-for-a-postal-vote

HORTON VILLAGE HALL - Volunteers are needed to join the management committee.

ACTIVITIES/MEETINGS

3/1	Isle Valley service
4/1	Horton prayers
5/1	SSDC Scrutiny
6/1	Horton quiz
6/1	Winsham PC
7/1	SSDC DX
8/1	SCC Children's services meeting
10/1	Isle Valley communion service
11/1	Ilminster Lit. Fest
11/1	Donyatt PC
12/1	CAMHS meeting
13/1	Horton quiz
14/1	SCC Regulation committee
14/1	Fairtrade committee meeting
15/1	Isle Valley prayers
15/1	DSFRA member forum
15/1	SCC Crewkerne/Ilminster schools meeting
16/1	Samaritans Recruitment interview
17/1	Isle Valley service
18/1	Isle Valley prayers
18/1	Mental Health resources training
18/1	Review of remote education provision for schools
18/1	Horton PC
19/1	Samaritans recruitment interview
19/1	Ilminster Town Council
20/1	Isle Valley Prayers
20/1	SCC Cabinet
20/1	Police IAG meeting
20/1	Area West Chapter workshop
20/1	Ilminster Lit. Fest meeting
20/1	Horton quiz
21/1	SCC Health & Wellbeing Board
21/1	Meeting with SSDC leader
21/1	SSDC Full Council
22/1	Ilminster flood alleviation update
23/1	Samaritans recruitment interview
24/1	Isle Valley service
25/1	Isle Valley Prayers
25/1	SCC Crewkerne/Ilminster Schools update
25/1	Ashill PC
26/1	Isle Valley Prayers
26/1	Christians Against Poverty meeting
26/1	Ilminster Lit. Fest meeting
27/1	Isle Valley Prayers
27/1	SCC Adult Scrutiny
27/1	SW Councils End Point Assessments
27/1	SCC Children's Scrutiny
27/1	School Governor Protecting Children Safeguarding Training
27/1	Horton Quiz
28/1	SCC Audit Committee
28/1	Isle Valley Coffee morning
28/1	Somerset Disability Engagement Service Virtual Coffee morning
28/1	School Governor Exclusion training
31/1	Isle Valley service