

ILMINSTER DIVISION COUNTY/DISTRICT REPORT AUGUST 2020

This month, with many choosing to take annual leave, there has been less activity, and a number of meetings cancelled.

FUTURE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT

This decision by SCC to push ahead with their One Somerset agenda, has caused some consternation amongst the four Somerset district councils. Their own business case, 'Stronger Somerset', proposing two unitary authorities, has just been published and can be accessed via the strongersomerset.co.uk website.

There has been some challenge to this being the preferred option, which is contrary to the decision taken by SSDC at their Feb. meeting which agreed on 'closer collaboration and cooperation' with the other districts. My understanding is that having consulted with ministers, the current government position is to encourage the formation of unitary authorities, hence the decision to produce this business case.

A number of virtual meetings are planned for the next week or so to allow members to make comment and debate the issue.

All PCs and TCs have been invited to join a series of virtual meetings hosted by SSDC this month:

Tues. 22 Sept. 2.00 -3.00pm

Fri. 25 Sept. 9.30 – 10.30am

Mon. 28 Sept. 4.00 – 5.00pm

Tues. 29 Sept. 4.00 - 5.00pm

POLICE

Domestic Violence – there is concern that the issue of domestic abuse, where men are the victims (1 in 3), remains under reported. A new initiative 'ManKind', funded by Avon & Somerset Police, is hosting two 9-week online Pattern Changing courses via Zoom for men.

For further details call 01823 334229 or email training@mankind.org.uk

COVID-19

The number of cases across the SW remains low when compared with other areas of the country. There continues to be a slight rise in daily cases overall, and there are fears that over this bank holiday weekend we may see a further increase as people gather together. There is no room for complacency.

• Keep Your Distance • Keep Washing Your Hands • Isolate if you have symptoms (dry cough, fever, taste/sense of smell) • Do not go to work if you have symptoms.

The issue of wearing face masks in shops, offices, public transport etc. has been raised. Many people are non-compliant (although some exceptions are allowed). Whilst shops are choosing not to ensure this is being enforced, maintaining that they have no power to insist, it is worth remembering that it is illegal NOT to wear a face mask.

During a virtual meeting this week the PM indicated strongly that there is no desire for the country to go into lockdown again, due to the negative impact of such measures, but that local lockdowns, should they become necessary, will continue.

PUBLIC HEALTH

Many people will have heard the news that the government is dissolving Public Health England. Locally, our own Director of Public Health is employed by SCC, so this decision will not directly impact on the employment of the SCC public health team to provide a joined up health response, but it will have an impact on their work.

They work closely with Public Health England (PHE) colleagues, especially in the SW. They are awaiting further information about the new 'Institute for Health Protection' and what it will mean, although it is assumed that many will transfer to the new organisation.

Other than their Health Protection role, PHE have an important role around national policy for health improvement and it is unclear what direction this will take, but it will impact on the normal 'business as usual' approach. National discussions about the future arrangements are ongoing.

SSDC FULL COUNCIL

At this month's meeting the annual achievements report was received. The Council also agreed to continue with the changes to the Council's Constitution relating to delegated decision-making powers, and the holding of virtual meetings during Covid-19. Concern was however raised about the validity of recent decisions made, as these changes to the constitution were due to have been reviewed some time ago.

ILMINSTER/CREWKERNE SCHOOL REVIEW

Amelia Walker was appointed to the role of Assistant Director of Education Partnerships at the end of July. To date, I have not received any further information in relation to decisions over the future of education in Ilminster/Crewkerne.

SW EMPLOYERS PANEL

Agreement has now been reached on the pay award applicable for Chief Executives of Local Authorities from 1 April 2020, an increase of 2.75%.

LICENSING

A number of applications for TENS were received this month, largely relating to public events that organisations wished to hold. Applicants should bear in mind that when submitting applications, it is a requirement that they must have a written Covid-19 plan and risk in assessment in place; the absence of this has been the cause of several applications being refused or withdrawn. Sports and recreation associations do have guidelines available.

Statutory Taxi & Private Hire Vehicle Standards

There is evidence to support the view that taxis and private hire vehicles are a high-risk environment, in terms of the potential for abuse and exploitation of children and vulnerable adults. Nationally, the number of sexual crimes reported which involve taxi and private hire vehicle drivers is of concern; links between the trade and data on reported sexual assaults, have been established in many areas, resulting in tighter licensing controls being introduced.

SSDC AREA WEST

Agenda items this month largely related to planning applications and appeals related to other communities within Area West.

SSDC DISTRICT EXECUTIVE MEETING AUGUST 2020

The planned climate summary will now be scheduled for the Oct. meeting.

Local residents may be interested in participating in the government tree strategy consultation, which ends 11th Sept. <https://consult.defra.gov.uk/forestry/england-tree-strategy/>

Concern has been raised over the potential loss of income from recent commercial projects and their ongoing viability, the effect that Covid-19 will have on the projected rate of return, with a predicted loss overall of £500k p.a., and the subsequent impact on the repayment of commercial loans taken out by SSDC.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT ASSOCIATION NEWS

Commercial investments

According to the Commons' Public Accounts Committee, some councils have exposed themselves to commercial investments that risk cuts in local services and a big bill for local taxpayers.

Local authorities spent an estimated £6.6 billion acquiring commercial property in three years – 14 times more than in the previous three-year period – with a further £1 billion in the first half of 2019/20. Up to 91% of this commercial property spending was financed by borrowing.

The Chair of the LGA's Resources Board, said: "Councils have faced a choice of either accepting funding reductions and cutting services or making investments to try to protect them. This was an approach encouraged by government. Investments are made to try to plug funding shortfalls but also to help contribute to local economies. Councils continue to face significant extra cost pressures and huge income losses as a result of the pandemic. The Government's commitment to fund a portion of lost income from fees and charges is a step in the right direction, but does not cover full losses, nor does it extend to commercial income losses."

CHLG – Planning White Paper

Following the announcement for "Build, build, build" as part of a 'New Deal' for Britain, including investment in infrastructure, as well as further planning reforms to enable buildings to change use without planning permission, such as converting commercial properties into housing, the LGA has joined with other organisations in calling on ministers to keep planning in England local. They warned that taking planning powers away from communities and councils will deprive them of the ability to define the area they live in and know best, and risks giving developers the freedom to "ride roughshod" over local areas.

The letter underlined the importance of local communities being at the heart of post Covid-19 recovery.

The LGA Chair said: "Investment in infrastructure will be vital, but with local control over how this funding is spent, councils can play a key role in providing genuinely affordable homes, fixing the nation's roads, delivering high-speed broadband and high-quality mobile connectivity, boosting local economies, and tackling environmental challenges.

"Planning powers must remain at a local level, to enable councils to deliver resilient, prosperous places that meet the needs of their communities."

New laws have also been announced that will mean full planning applications will not be required to demolish and rebuild unused buildings as homes, and will allow homeowners to add up to two additional storeys to their property to create new homes or more living space.

Several online meetings have been held with the Minister for CHLG, Robert Jenrick, this month.

The Planning for the Future consultation planningforthefuture@communities.gov.uk which closes at 11:45pm on 29 October 2020 provides local residents with the opportunity to participate and express their views. <https://www.smartsurvey.co.uk/s/MHCLG-Planning-for-the-Future/>

The methodology for identifying housing needs and distributing housing numbers across the country has now been published. It is intended to drive down the timescale for producing a Local Plan down from 7 years to 30 months, with a focus on simplifying the system to obtain the right outcomes, along with a move towards more visual map-based plans. Much of the white paper focuses on changes to the system, with a focus on high quality design, and a move away from the current system of rules and tests being met.

There key areas of importance have been highlighted:

- Growth zone – to be agreed with the community
- Renewals – a simplified system of commission in principle
- Protected – green belt/other protected areas. Communities can also nominate other land.

S106 agreements and CIL are to be replaced by an infrastructure levy.

The aim is to ensure greater local engagement and democracy.

SSDC PLANNING

In response to questions relating to SSDC's five-year land supply, it remains at 4.5 years until the next review is undertaken. In relation to SSDC's planning service, steps are currently being taken to address the shortfall in qualified case officers, who each have a caseload of 56 per officer, excluding enforcement. Two key posts are undergoing the recruitment process currently, and the way in which applications are processed is being reformed.

The way in which the five-year supply is assessed will change for the next review, as the current local plan is now over 5 years old. SSDC will be reliant on the government's standardised methodology of housing need, rather than SSDC's assessment for the Local Plan.

It is believed that this will mean that the backlog of consistent under-delivery of housing will be dropped (and the necessary buffer required by the government for that calculation), which will help to demonstrate a five-year supply of housing land. However, the delivery implications of the pandemic are not yet understood.

BROADBAND

The provision of reliable Broadband access remains a challenge for many smaller rural communities, and some of our towns. This has been of particular importance since Covid-19 and the necessity for new ways of working, often from home, and via the internet.

The Gigabit Broadband Voucher Scheme, to subsidise the cost of building faster broadband for homes and businesses, remains active until Mar. 2021. The scheme is targeted at rural, hard-to-reach areas that are not likely to be connected through the commercial rollout of gigabit networks in the near future. Many homes and businesses in this area may still be eligible for funding towards the cost of installing gigabit-capable broadband when part of a group scheme.

Rural premises with broadband speeds of less than 100Mbps can use vouchers worth £1,500 per home and up to £3,500 for each small to medium-sized business (SME) to support the cost of installing new fast and reliable connections. <https://gigabitvoucher.culture.gov.uk/>

FAIRTRADE

The management committee held its AGM this month, with the next meeting due in Nov., at which plans for next year's Fairtrade Fortnight will be discussed. Individuals or organisations wishing to participate are all welcome. To find out more visit the website at <http://www.ilminsterfairtrade.uk/>

LIBRARY SERVICE

Steps are being taken to link customers to items requested prior to lockdown, and which they would still like to borrow; the online reservation system remains closed in order to clear the backlog. To cancel any previously ordered items go to www.librarieswest.org.uk. If necessary, to obtain a PIN reminder click on 'Log In', then 'Forgot my PIN'.

Once items are available, the library will contact you to arrange collection. Items are usually held for 14 days

Ilminster Library current opening times are: Monday and Thursday – closed.

Tuesday 10am - 12.30pm 1.30pm - 4pm

Wednesday 10am - 12pm

Friday 10am - 12.30pm 1.30pm - 4pm

Saturday 10am - 12pm alternate Saturdays (next open 12th and 26th Sept.)

It is important to ensure that items are returned (to any library that is open) when due to avoid fines.

There are also 1000s of e-books, e-audiobooks, magazines, newspapers and comics available to download for free. Social media pages also have new videos, links and other information to suit all ages and interests – from regular story-times for children to gardening tips and health & wellbeing videos. www.facebook.com/somersetlibrariesuk or www.twitter.com/SomersetLib

DONYATT VIRTUAL FLOWER SHOW

This year's annual show will be 'virtual' with a limited number of classes to enter.

Class 1. A pair of matching, home-grown fruits or vegetables.

Class 2. A home-grown flower of any kind.

Class 3. A photograph that you have taken depicting 'Lockdown Life'.

Class 4. Your best home-cooked meal.

Class 5. A home-made summery dessert.

Class 6. A craft item that you have made during 2020.

Class 7. An original poem or short story.

To enter, email a photo of your entry to donnagrabham@hotmail.co.uk by Friday 11th Sept.

Only one entry per person per class. All entries are free and are open to any age!

WINSHAM CHALLENGE

It is with pleasure that I was asked, along with Cllr. Sue Osborne, to judge the Winsham Grand Challenge. With over 60 entries in 7 categories, it really was a challenge to pick out the winners!

CHARD MUSEUM

The museum has now reopened, with small groups allowed in one at a time, managed by an online booking service, either via the following link <https://www.chardmuseum.co.uk/visit> by emailing the museum at info@chardmuseum.co.uk or calling on 01460 65091.

ACTIVITIES/MEETINGS

1/8	Chard business meeting
1/8	Chard Museum
2/8	Horton Service
3/8	Horton Prayer
4/8	SSDC Licensing
4/8	Statutory Taxi & Private Hire Vehicle Standards training
5/8	Chairing virtual meetings training
5/8	Horton Quiz
5/8	Winsham PC
6/8	SSDC District Executive
6/8	DSFRS Standards Committee
7/8	SCC social services
9/8	Meeting with SCC Leader
9/8	Horton service
10/8	Horton prayer
10/8	Planning reform meeting
10/8	Horton Playing Field projects
11/8	SSDC CEO meeting
11/8	Meeting re: SEN education
11/8	SSDC Briefing re: future of local government
12/8	SSDC Area West
12/8	Horton quiz
13/8	LGiU training – chairing virtual meetings
16/8	Horton service
17/8	SSDC Licensing
17/8	Horton PC
17/8	Chaffcombe PC
18/8	SSDC Licensing (x2)
20/8	SSDC planning workshop
20/8	SSDC Group Leader meeting
20/8	SSDC FC
23/8	Horton service
25/8	Boris Johnson virtual meeting
26/8	SSDC Stronger Somerset briefing
26/8	Fairtrade AGM
27/8	Licensing - Statutory Taxi & Private Hire update
27/8	SSDC planning meeting re: carnival application
27/8	Planning briefing with Robert Jenrick
28/8	Sophy Layzell book launch
30/8	Samaritans core skills training