

ILMINSTER DIVISION COUNTY/DISTRICT COUNCILLOR REPORT MARCH 2020

Given the unusual circumstances in which we now find ourselves, due to the Coronavirus, there have naturally been significant challenges faced by both national and local government, necessitating a number of measures being put into place.

Both SCC and SSDC have held emergency full council meetings this month and now have dedicated teams in place to ensure that where possible normal services can be maintained. Although there has been some criticism at times, we are facing an unprecedented situation and overall the feedback and comments I have received from constituents has been really positive, with everyone working collectively for the common good in keeping us all safe and well, with access to essential services. Of particular note has been the swift action of local communities and parishes to step up to the mark, with a number of support groups, which I have joined, now well established to deliver shopping, collect prescriptions etc.

Over 900 SCC employees, a third of the total workforce, have volunteered for redeployment to other more essential roles in the current crisis. Under the circumstances, whilst progress is desirable for other ongoing local authority projects, control of Coronavirus is the top priority.

Both SCC and SSDC have been prompt in responding to enquiries, and both have set up dedicated sites to keep residents informed, which are updated several times a day.

Normal scheduled meetings are due to resume shortly, being conducted with the aid of such technology as Zoom and Teams which, where permitted, will enable public participation.

<https://www.somerset.gov.uk/coronavirus/>

<https://www.southsomerset.gov.uk/news/2020/3/coronavirus-covid-19-how-we-are-supporting-our-communities-and-the-most-vulnerable/>

FUTURE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT

There have been some changes to SSDC's Senior Leadership Team in response to renewed focus and priorities. The changes are envisaged to be interim for the next 12 months.

A new Council Plan has been agreed, along with the other Somerset district councils. SSDC's CEO, Alex Parmley, is leading on this project with the support of a Programme Team, including others from across the four councils, to deliver increased efficiency and improvements in quality of life for residents and communities by completing Transformation, and to finalise, agree and deliver the proposed Digital Strategy.

Martin Woods is now Director of Place, responsible for delivery of SSDC programmes including:

- Chard Regeneration Programme
- Accelerating Housing Delivery and the Affordable Housing Programme
- Children in Poverty and Struggling Families Project
- Community Transport
- Economic Development Programme

Netta Meadows is now Director of Service Delivery, continuing to lead Transformation.

Clare Pestell continues as Director of Commercial Services, leading on developing options and plans for a shared approach to commercialisation and investment, and remains the lead officer for the Environment Strategy and Climate Change.

An interim Director of Strategy and Support Services will be recruited internally.

DATA PROTECTION – INFORMATION COMMISSIONER'S OFFICE

Whilst preventing the spread of the COVID-19 virus is the priority, there is recognition of the importance of organisations being able to work together to respond to the pandemic. Data Protection Officers have a key role to play where there is a need for public bodies and health practitioners to communicate directly with people when dealing with this health emergency.

There is continued support for those working in information rights across all organisations, acknowledging that working from home can bring practical challenges. The helpline (0303 123 1113) remains open, and the ICO website provides information on topics like cyber security for remote working, data protection impact assessments and handling subject access requests.

PUBLIC HEALTH UPDATE

As of 28th March, Somerset recorded its first three deaths to COVID-19. All cases had underlying health conditions and were at Taunton and Somerset NHS Trust.

AVON & SOMERSET POLICE

A weekly update is being provided by Chief Inspector Sharon Baker, to ensure that everyone is kept well informed.

Staffing – the police are seeking to bolster resilience, including bringing colleagues back from secondment to ensure continuity in the running of core policing functions.

New Policing Powers – the public are asked NOT to report people congregating and/or ignoring social distancing rules. Officers are patrolling the streets as normal and will make clear the importance of enforcing the new measures, dispersing groups of more than two people.

At this stage, people should NOT report non-essential businesses trading. They have been told to close and the police will work with local authorities to make sure this is respected. Those that continue to flout restrictions could face prohibition notices, fines and potentially lose their license. Do NOT contact the police on 101 to report instances of people and businesses ignoring the new restrictions imposed by Government; focus will be on engaging, explaining and encouraging compliance, before moving to enforcement.

It is important to remember that the purpose of these new powers is to save lives by protecting the public and the NHS.

Regulations provide powers to officers and PCSOs to:

- require the closure of premises and businesses
- restrict movement and gatherings

If someone is outside the place where they are living without reasonable excuse, the police can:

- direct that person to return to the place where they are living
- give the person concerned any reasonable instructions considered to be necessary
- use reasonable force to remove the person to the place where they are living
- instruct gatherings of people to disperse and direct or remove them from that gathering

Where someone over 18 is believed to have committed an offence they may be issued with a fixed penalty notice for £60. The regulations include powers to direct those with parental responsibility to ensure children comply.

Protecting officers and staff – measures are in place to protect officers and staff, including encouraging home working, moving meetings to Skype, and providing daily guidance.

LEAD THEFT

Churches in our area have suffered lead thefts in recent weeks. Local residents and wardens are asked to be extra vigilant, particularly as churches remain closed for the time being.

SCAMS

Whilst much good work is being done within local communities to support those in isolation, you are urged not to engage with anyone you do not know, and especially not to hand over any money or banking details. There have been several instances of people offering to do shopping, taking money and then disappearing.

Telephone scams are also on the increase. Common at the moment is someone saying they are from your credit card company and that they are calling about a suspicious card transaction. Increasingly at this time of year are emails purporting to be from HM Gov't relating to a tax refund. Hovering over the 'sender' prior to clicking on it will indicate the email address it was sent from.

SUSTRANS

The planned meeting with SCC, at which it was intended to discuss the Donyatt Halt cycleway, has been postponed.

BROADWAY – SUGGS LANE FLOODING – There has been no further progress this month.

FLOOD AUTHORITY UPDATE

This winter has been very wet, with February 2020 being the wettest February on record. Rainfall totals have been exceptionally high in Somerset and neighbouring counties. Incident Rooms have been manned, with duty officers issuing Flood Alerts and Warnings and field teams working around the clock, checking and operating flood defence schemes. The 800 volunteer flood wardens have been assisting the Environment Agency providing on the ground feedback and raising awareness of how to prepare for flooding in their communities. We would like to publish stories of how your local flood warden has helped your community this winter in our next Flood Warden Newsletter which will be going out in April. Send your stories to floodwessex@environment-agency.gov.uk

RECYCLING CENTRES

Somerset's 16 Recycling Centres will remain closed until further notice as the Somerset Waste Partnership follows Government advice to avoid non-essential contact and travel, and to ensure public and staff safety at sites where physical distancing is difficult. They are requesting that you:

- Hold on to garden waste until centres reopen. Home composting of grass-cutting and hedge trimming may be an option for some and advice on this can be found on their website.
- Hold on to any bulky waste items and other materials until centres reopen.
- Do not leave waste outside centres or elsewhere; this is fly tipping, and a criminal offence.

SSDC PLANNING – COVID-19

In response to the health emergency the Government has urged Local Authorities to maintain their planning functions as much as possible, requiring LAs to adapt to new ways of working. SSDC have set up a webpage <https://www.southsomerset.gov.uk/services/planning/planning-faqs/> to try to answer the frequently asked questions about the planning function, and setting out some of the necessary changes being made. Further updates and briefings will appear regularly. SSDC will also use email addresses for sending out planning consultations.

RESIDENT PARKING IN ORCHARD VALE

Following concerns raised by local residents, I have contacted Yarlinton about the absence of signage, and have received this response.

'Neither the Community Partner team nor the Independent Living team have removed signage from Orchard Vale; it may have been damaged/broken or removed by someone else. As we are currently re-branding we do not have any signs available that we can re-erect. I apologise that the residents there have experienced issues parking near their property, but we are unable to police any parking or reinforce action against those who do not following instructions. However, as you have suggested, this sign improved parking for our customers, and we will explore the option of re-erecting signage once we have completed the rebranding.'

SCHOOL CHILD CARE

After the government's initial announcement in relation to school closures and the provision of child care for the children of key workers, some local schools have experienced problems with parents and carers as a result of a lack of understanding as to what the specific arrangements are and who is eligible. This appears to have been largely resolved for the time being.

LOCAL BUSES - WINSHAM

In response to resident concerns I have received the following information.

'I can confirm that as far as Winsham is concerned there is no impact as a result of Buses of Somerset withdrawal. The 96 which serves Winsham is a funded service and will remain so with no changes in timetable planned. The 99 from Chard to Taunton is being withdrawn by Buses of Somerset after operation on Saturday 4th April, however we are currently out to tender for a like for like replacement and we should be able to confirm full details soon. There are no other services in South Somerset affected by Buses of Somerset withdrawals.'

ACTIVITIES/MEETINGS

2/3	SSDC CEO meeting
2/3	Ashill PC meeting
4/3	Winsham PC meeting
5/3	Queen's College performance
6/3	Women's World Day of Prayer – BHMC
6/3	Whitelackington VH quiz
7/3	Horton Lent lunch
8/3	Gemini carnival club fund raising breakfast – Donyatt VH
9/3	Friends of Ilminster Library meeting
9/3	Ilminster Lit. fest meeting
9/3	Donyatt PC meeting
11/3	Ilminster resident meeting re: parking
12/3	Ilminster Education Foundation meeting
12/3	Kingstone parish meeting
13/3	South West Employers Panel
13/3	Devon & Somerset Fire & Rescue Authority meeting
13/3	Cheltenham Race Day charity event
14/3	Whitelackington VH table-top sale
18/3	SSDC full council

All other meetings/events this month have been cancelled, and I am not now in New Zealand as previously planned.

Apologies for any delay in responding to emails/phone calls as the volume has been exceptionally high, and whilst concerns continue over the Coronavirus I have also increased the number of Samaritans duties I am carrying out.

If anyone knows of anyone in the area requiring help or support in any way, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Stay safe and well.