



23rd February 2021

Good Evening Mayor and Councillors,

COVID

As we 'go to press' with this month's District Council Briefing, we are awaiting the announcement from the Prime Minister as to what the next stage of the Covid response will be. Therefore, your District Council, as has previously happened, will await the outcome of the announcements and will respond accordingly.

As of this moment, a large number of our staff remained deployed in support of the vaccine roll-out programme across the district. This has even involved our Chief Executive and senior management staff. Together with staff furloughed from the Octagon Theatre and Westlands, they have undertaken roles that have ranged from making calls on behalf of the NHS, to data inputting to directing cars and parking.

As well as supporting the vaccine roll-out, our officers have been busy dealing with grant applications from businesses around the district in order to support them through the current restrictions. At last look, over £5m had been paid out in business grants, in addition to other mandatory and discretionary grants. Additionally, SSDC staff are continuing to support enforcement and provide safe accommodation for anyone in urgent need during the pandemic.

BUDGET

However, despite the on-going pandemic, normal SSDC business goes on. As always at this time of year, the main administrative business of the District Council is centred around producing a draft budget for the next financial year. This will go before SSDC's Full Council on the 25th February for approval. As you may appreciate, the last 12 months have been a challenging time financially for many councils around the country. But prudent financial management over the last few years, have meant that the impact has been less severe in South Somerset than may be being experienced elsewhere.

However, the highlight for many from this budget will be the proposed increase in the South Somerset District Council portion of your Council Tax. The proposal will equate to an annual rise of 2.91% or £5, which translates as £177.11 for a Band D property (£17.71 for those paying in 10 monthly instalments or £14.76 for those paying in 12 monthly instalments). This sum also includes £1.85, which SSDC collects on behalf of the Somerset Rivers Authority.



PHOSPHATES AND THE SOMERSET LEVELS

Meanwhile, the issue of phosphate levels in the waterways of the Somerset Levels and its impact on the planning system, has been a priority of the District Council. SSDC, in partnership with neighbouring authorities whose streams and rivers feed into the Somerset Levels, have sought to find a solution to this problem. On Thursday the District Council will discuss a proposal being put forward that should help alleviate the issue as well as a motion being brought by Cllr Mike Stanton with regards to *The Sewage (Inland Waters) Bill*.

AREA WEST

As you are aware, due to the deployment of staff in support of the vaccine roll-out, it was decided to suspend Area Committees for the moment. Hopefully, they will return in March. However, informal consultations are still being held and recommendations being made to the Chief Executive to award grant funding towards projects that have been applied for. For example, at the end of January, the Area West Committee Chair recommended to the Chief Executive, after a consultation, that the sum of £10,750 be granted to North Perrott Cricket Club towards the purchase of an all-weather two-lane cricket net system.

At January's Full Council, Cllr Hamilton was confirmed as the Vice-Chair of Area West Committee. Since then, he has been supporting the Chair, Cllr Jason Baker and officers in planning applications and helping determine Market Town Investment Group (MTIG) grant funding applications, some of which Ilminster has been a beneficiary.

Earlier in the month the results of a public consultation over the final layout of Holyrood Street in Chard, were announced. This work is one part of the Chard's overall regeneration programme, as well as being a part of the High Street Heritage



Action Zone (HSHAZ) project. £1m was awarded for the whole scheme from HSHAZ which was then match-funded by SSDC, giving a total of £2m towards the work.



Image: An artist's impression of what Holyrood Street could look like (SSDC, <https://www.southsomerset.gov.uk/news/2021/2/holyrood-street-public-consultation-sees-changes-to-final-designs/>).

UNITARY & LOCAL ELECTIONS

Little has changed since our last briefing to you. At the time of writing, the two unitary proposals from the County Council and District Councils had been submitted and a consultation on the consultees has been undertaken.

A decision with regards to the County Council's application to delay local elections this year was still awaited.

LEISURE FACILITIES

Due to LED deciding not to continue with the operation and management of SSDC's leisure centres, a tendering process was initiated, and the successful bidder was announced as the not-for-profit trust Freedom Leisure. LED's contract will end in April at which time Freedom Leisure will be ready to take on the new 15-year contract. As well as the facilities at Goldenstones and Westland Sports and Fitness Centre in Yeovil, they will manage the Wincanton Community Sports Centre and take on the new facility being built at Boden Mill, Chard.

As a not-for-profit trust, Freedom Leisure will reinvest all surplus income into the facilities they manage. Freedom Leisure already operate nationally managing a large number of facilities, including recently taking over those operated by the New Forest District Council.

WIDER DISTRICT

Around the District, other facilities are being provided. In Yeovil Recreation Centre a community studio space and café will open within the existing pavilion building. This was instigated as a result of a public consultation in early 2020, when people were asked what they would like to see at the centre. The funding for this project came from various sources including Sport England, Viridor, Yeovil TC, neighbouring parish councils and the Yeovil & Sherborne Hockey Club.

New ranger roles have been created at Ham Hill Country Park, thanks in part to funding received from the Culture Recovery Fund. This funding is part of a rescue package setup to 'safeguard cultural and heritage organisations across England from the economic impact of Covid-19' (SSDC). Due to staff redeployment and the unavailability of volunteers, much of the work to maintain this important site being left undone. This was coupled with the huge increase in visitor numbers as people flocked to the area. As a result of the £50k grant SSDC has been able to provide 3 further ranger positions to help with the workload.



Earlier in the month SSDC promoted awareness of empty homes during 'Empty Homes Week 2021'. SSDC have identified over 1000 properties that have been unoccupied for three months or more. Of those, 133 have been empty for over two years and 62 for over five years. What may be surprising, is that if a property is empty for between 2-5 years, their Council Tax is doubled and more than 5 years it is trebled. During the week, SSDC sought to encourage owners to look at bringing these houses back to the housing market by offering incentives to do so. The hope is to make these properties fit for housing and help reduce the number of people needing to access temporary accommodation.

Further information can be found at: <https://www.lendology.org.uk/what-we-do/empty-property-loans/> or by contacting Lendology CIC direct on 01823 461099.

TRAINING

SSDC encourages its District Councillors and officers to continue their personal development through courses designed to enhance their roles and duties. As such since your last meeting Cllr Hamilton has completed his Local Government Association (LGA) Leadership Academy Programme. In addition, he has attended courses run by the South West Audit Partnership (SWAP) - Cyber Security, Institute of Leadership and Management (ILM) - Leadership in 2021, the Small Charities Coalition (SCC) - The ABC of LGBTQ and the Local Government Information Unit (LGiU) – Managing Conflict. Sadly, courses that were organised by SALC this month have either been postponed or cancelled.

TV

Cllr Val Keitch, as Leader of South Somerset District Council, made a guest appearance on *Politics South West* on Valentine's Day, discussing the crisis of our tourism and hospitality businesses as a result of the pandemic, as well as the challenges surrounding some of our small local producers exporting into the European Union. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/m000sf7r/politics-south-west-14022021>

Val Keitch

Brian Hamilton



Information references:

It is almost upon us – Census 2021, 21st March 2021. All the details can be found here <https://census.gov.uk/>

For a guide to vaccinations in Somerset, visit <https://www.somersetccg.nhs.uk/health/local-services/health-services-during-coronavirus/covid-19-vaccinations-in-somerset/>

Visit www.southsomerset.gov.uk/coronavirus for information on a range of different matters including support that is available

For more information on the Self Isolation payments – <https://www.southsomerset.gov.uk/life-events/coronavirus-support/covid-19-test-trace-support-payment/>

If anyone would like to view any SSDC meetings they can be found at the following link: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCSDst3IHGj9WoGnwJGF_soA

SSDC agendas, minutes and decisions can all be found either through the 'Modern.Gov' application or by following the link: <https://modgov.southsomerset.gov.uk/uuCoverPage.aspx?bcr=1>

SSDC News:

<https://www.southsomerset.gov.uk/news/2021/2/new-purpose-built-community-facility-set-to-open-this-summer/>

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<https://www.southsomerset.gov.uk/news/2021/2/raising-awareness-of-empty-homes-during-national-empty-homes-week-2021/>

<https://www.southsomerset.gov.uk/news/2021/2/holyrood-street-public-consultation-sees-changes-to-final-designs/>

<https://www.southsomerset.gov.uk/news/2021/2/new-operator-for-south-somerset-district-council-s-leisure-centres-unveiled-as-freedom-leisure/>