

- **Local Government Reorganisation** – The revised business case for One Somerset was submitted to Local Government Secretary Robert Jenrick by Monday's (9th November) deadline. The final deadline is 9th December. The Minister's decision will almost certainly require a public consultation exercise in February-March before he fully makes up his mind in June/July. More information on One Somerset is here www.onesomerset.org.uk. The district councils in Somerset as you know are going with their own unitary option, Stronger Somerset, on which you can find full info here www.strongersomerset.co.uk. BANES and North Somerset have not submitted any case for reorganisation.
- **County council elections 2021** – Next week's full council meeting (Wednesday 18th) will be asked to request the Secretary of State to defer the scheduled county council elections of May 2021. This is set in the context of the local government reorganisation debate with the likelihood that a unitary council will replace the existing local authorities in 2022. The cost of elections county-wide is put in excess of £1 million and it does not seem sensible to have elections in May when we are likely to then hold a second set of elections 12 months later for the new authority. The current timetable shows that public consultation by the SoS on local government reorganisation would be taking place in the run up to the May 2021 elections, indeed actually going into the 'purdah' period, and this may be confusing for the electorate. A final decision on a preferred unitary option would then be due within a matter of four to eight weeks after the May 2021 elections. Should the SoS decide not to consult on the unitary proposals, then the 2021 elections would go ahead as planned.
- **Democracy** – A full county council meeting will be held virtually using Microsoft Teams next week on Wednesday 18th November. The agenda was published yesterday (Tues). Anybody who wants to speak on an agenda should register by calling 07790577336 or 07811 313837 or 07790 577232, or by emailing democraticservices@somerset.gov.uk. Details of all upcoming meetings are available here <https://bit.ly/2YiKBRb>.
- **Climate change strategy** – A draft strategy showing how Somerset could become net zero carbon by 2030 will be put for approval to full council next week (18th November). The full paper is here www.somerset.gov.uk/climate-emergency. It has a focus on nine key themes, which are energy, transport, built environment, business and industry, natural environment, farming and food, water, waste, and communications. The paper outlines what action will be taken under each theme, and it also gives actions for *everyone* to contribute to Somerset becoming carbon neutral by 2030.
- **Finance** – Two years ago I was reporting to parishes how the auditors had issued an 'adverse' finding against SCC, saying 'if you carry on as you have been, you will run out of money' and I made the point that we were not carrying on as normal and had already been taking difficult decisions to turn finances around – remember the cuts to winter road gritting (later reversed) etc which caused so much upset? It is that historical issue that the district councils have clung to when making claims in their Stronger Somerset case. Well, the auditors have now caught up and this year have recognised the financial health of SCC by giving us an 'unqualified' rating. The auditors stated SCC had delivered its in-year savings target and kept spending within budget for 2019-20 resulting in a £6.4 million underspend (which is where the community climate change fund money comes from, for instance) and put £32.7 million into reserves to make us better able to cope with future pressures. The auditor's report in full is here <https://democracy.somerset.gov.uk/documents/s16053/Somerset%20County%20Council%20-%20Audit%20Findings%20Report%202019-20.pdf>.
- **Somerset Coronavirus Support Helpline** – 0300 790 6275 is the number to call if anybody is in need of Coronavirus-related support from county or SWT councils. It has received around 9,500 calls to date and is staffed jointly by the district councils and county councils seven days a week 8 am to 6 pm. Medical advice is not given and people should use the 111 NHS online service if they cannot get help online. The district council's usual helpline number is also still available.
- **Coronavirus web page** – All coronavirus information and help from the county council can be found in one place here <https://www.somerset.gov.uk/coronavirus/covid-19-latest-advice>. It is regularly refreshed throughout the day. You can sign up for automated updates.

- **Mindline 01823 276 892** – Tremendous help has been provided for vulnerable people throughout the pandemic by this charity helpline. It is available 24/7 to provide a listening ear should you feel you want to talk to someone. Calls are running at a rate of 600 week with the total now nearly 20,000. I have personally seen at first hand how they have helped a friend of mine who has been badly affected by the coronavirus restrictions and has lost his job.
- **Stepping Stones** – There is an urgent need to recruit more ‘Stepping Stones’ homes to support young people as they move from care into adulthood. Such homes help them gain crucial life skills and experience such as managing bills, cooking, shopping, accessing further education and employment opportunities, while providing a safe place for them to stay. Providers receive a payment starting at £185 per week. Because of the coronavirus pandemic there are currently more than 300 young care leavers in Somerset and the demand for placements far outweighs availability. Full info is here www.fosteringinsomerset.org.uk or you can call 0800 5879900.
- **Electric scooters** – A year-long trial has started to allow electric scooters on local roads following the Government’s recent announcement that they would be licensed for use in the UK. County has published an experimental traffic regulation order to permit scooters hired from businesses authorised by the Department for Transport to use cycle lanes, cycle tracks, and bus lanes. They are not permitted on roads with a 50 mph speed limit or higher. Electric scooters which are not part of the trial will remain illegal. The trial is phase one of a larger micro mobility plan for Taunton Deane which in future will incorporate e-scooters and e-bikes, as well as e-car schemes at mobility hubs across the district. The trial is part of a national, controlled trial by the Government to understand the impact and benefits the use of electric scooters may have to ease the burden on the transport network. It will be used to gather evidence on their safety, how people use them, whether the potential benefits can be realised, and how to manage the downsides. Any objections to the experimental traffic order can be made in the first six months by writing to Somerset County Council, Traffic Management, County Hall, Taunton, TA1 4DY, and quoting reference KT12082020. The deadline is 2nd April 2021. Comments in support can also be sent.
- **Hinkley Point C** – EDF is saying it may need to increase the maximum workforce on site beyond the 5,600 originally anticipated. The county council and districts are now looking at the potential impacts on the community of increasing the number of workers and how these would be handled, and the implications for the S106 agreement for the development. The Planning Inspectorate has been asked for guidance but not yet issued any.
- **Gateway Park & Ride** – As I previously reported, the P&R reopened on Monday (2nd November) and the security measures to stop future traveller incursions are on track to finish by the end of the month. There will remain a restriction on traffic turning right out of the site until Tuesday (16th November) so in the meantime drivers need to go around the J25 roundabout and double back. The pedestrianisation of East Street means a slight change to the route. The town centre stop is now Castle Way.
- **Covid travel review** – The county’s Active Travel Group is continuing to review temporary measures which were put in place during lockdown 1.0 such as the pedestrianisation of East Street, Taunton. They continue to welcome feedback on what works well and any suggestions for improvements which can be put forward here <https://somersetcovidactivetravel.commonplace.is>. The site includes a map showing all the issues that have been highlighted so far across Somerset. However, of the four that are marked as being in and around the Blackdown Hills, one is actually about Taunton High Street, another refers to the town of Street, and only two are actually local in Staple Fitzpaine and West Hatch. Junction 25 of the M5 figures heavily with a large amount of disquiet about the consideration given to pedestrians and cyclists crossing the roundabout. From what I can make out, J25 is in the top four or five single locations in the county where concern has been expressed.
- **Libraries** – Public libraries are still open but customers cannot browse the shelves during the lockdown. Instead, it is back to the order and collect service. The public computer network is still available for those who need it. The mobile libraries are still operating with the ‘library choice’

option but no browsing. The deadline for the return of any items already on loan has been extended to December 14. The online service for library members to download books, audiobooks, magazines, newspapers, and comics free of charge is also available. The Home Library doorstep delivery service is also still available for people who cannot leave home. Full info is here www.somersetlibraries.co.uk or by emailing librariesmail@somerset.gov.uk or calling 0300 123 2224.

- **Community Climate Fund** – Just a reminder which I'm sure you won't need, that the fund is open until midnight Thursday, 12th November, offering grants between £5,000 and £75,000 for parish projects to reduce carbon emissions or help make Somerset resilient to the effects of climate change. A second bid window opens from 1st December to 12th January. Full info is here www.somerset.gov.uk/climate-emergency.
- **Remembrance Tide** – It seems the county council rather jumped the gun when it cancelled its Remembrance events. I believe there may have been some confusion caused by different Government Ministers making contradictory statements, but the definitive word from the Prime Minister was that Remembrance Day events could still go ahead with social distancing observed.
- **Household Waste and Recycling Centres** – All HWRCs are open as previously, as Government guidance says they can continue to operate. Streetside collections are also unaffected by the second lockdown. The roll out of Recycle More, delayed from earlier this year by the first lockdown, is unaffected this time.
- **Winter gritting** – County will again grit 900 miles of road when needed this winter, which represents more than 20 per cent of the whole network. It is the same as last winter but with some roads around J25 added as well. A map of all the gritting routes as well as more information is available here www.travelsomerset.co.uk/gritting.
- **Festive Fund 1** - Somerset Community Foundation has a Festive Fund which offers £250 grants to community groups helping to reduce loneliness and spread Christmas cheer through food and festive activities. They need to explain how their work can combat the isolation and loneliness that many people can feel in the winter months. Applications can be made here <https://www.somersetcf.org.uk/festivefund> but the deadline is Friday, 13th November.
- **Festive Fund 2** - Western Power Distribution also has a Festive Fund with grants of up to £1,500 to support initiatives such as food and clothing parcels, hot meals, gifts, and support to vulnerable children, adults, and the elderly over the winter holidays. Councils, charities, and community groups can apply here www.westernpower.co.uk/ITT-festive-fund but again the deadline is coming up, Sunday (15th November).
- **Coronavirus testing** – The county council continues to roll out coronavirus testing facilities with the latest being a walk-through centre in Bridgwater Town Hall and another opening this week in RNAS Yeovilton. They are in addition to the drive-through test centres at Taunton Racecourse and Frome Cricket Club.
- **A Block** – The upgrade of County Hall's A Block has been completed and the building has been handed back by contractors Willmott Dixon in a ceremony involving six people including chief executive Pat Flaherty, council leader David Fothergill, and council chairman Nigel Taylor. You may recall this was quite controversial at the time because of the £10 million cost. However, it was work that had to be carried out because of the potential for the very old boiler to fail and the impact on the nearby Shire Hall and the courts which are held there. It was an invest to save project which was intended to save £700k or more a year by closing other sites and bringing staff back into County Hall to work (but that was pre-Covid, of course). I believe also it should have been completed months ago but has overrun. If and when physical committee meetings are again held, then they should now be in the new facilities and no longer in the Taunton Library Meeting Room. Clearly, it is a sensitive issue, because I have not been officially told about the handover, I had to find out for myself. More on this when I know it.
- **Home fire safety** – There is now much more focus on keeping us safe and preventing fires from starting in the first place. So, Devon and Somerset Fire and Rescue Service is being more proactive in

encouraging homeowners and tenants to take up the offer of free home safety inspections. To book a free home safety visit call 0800 0502999 or email firekills@dsfire.gov.uk.