

- Junction 25 – Cabinet has now awarded the contract but the contractor will not be made public for another few weeks as there are some legal bits and pieces to get out of the way first. Contrary to what I was told a month ago, it is now costed at £19.2 million against the previous £18.328 million. I think the difference represents a £1 million capital funding request on which county will vote in February. If councillors don't agree the bid, then the shortfall would have to be made up by savings elsewhere. I believe March has been pencilled in for the start of the work.
- A358 – You will by now be aware that Highways England have postponed the announcement of their preferred route until the Spring of 2019. Before then, they will set up a community liaison forum, early in the New Year. From what I have read, it seems to me this will create at least a six-month delay in the timetable, meaning work might not start until 2022 rather than 2021. It also looks to me as if Highways England is leaning toward a hybrid scheme incorporating sections of two or more of the routes on which they consulted.
- 2019-20 finances – Councillors have been receiving a series of briefings on the county's financial situation and how the budget might look for the coming financial year. My work commitments prevented me attending my own group meeting on this, so I'm not sure how much I can say about it. But from what I've seen, it is going to be another round of very difficult savings proposals. Bear in mind that in September when we passed a series of emergency savings plans, it was being said that everything had been cut to the bone, then there are no further savings left to be achieved without a lot of pain. I am still awaiting a report from the temporary finance officer on what a 'core council' might look like – this is where we provide only those services which we are legally required to provide, as this has been the direction of travel for some time.
- Highways capital grant – Separate from the above, county have received a £9.98 million highways grant as a result of the Budget. It can only be spent on capital projects and has to be used before the end of the financial year, and because Skanska have to scale up their workforce to be able to complete any new and unplanned work, it's not certain we can spend it all, but we will do our best. One idea being looked at is whether some revenue projects can be turned into capital projects so the money can be used for those and the revenue spend would then be released to help with the financial situation. Also received £4 million for pothole repairs.
- Local Government funding settlement – you may have seen that Somerset received £6.5 million additional funding for social care and was accepted this time as a Business Rate Retention pilot area for 2019/20. This should bring in around £6.8 million for the county, of which half is assigned to projects that support economic activity.
- Broadband – An update on the Connecting Devon and Somerset superfast broadband phase two roll-out is due to come to my scrutiny committee in March. I complained it is far too long to wait and pressure needs to be kept on CDS to get on top of Gigaclear and get things moving, and so I wanted an update brought to our January meeting. However, the officers said there would not be anything substantial to say before March, so there is no point having a committee update in January – which again tells me how poorly CDS are managing this situation. They did agree, though, to prepare a briefing paper for members in January. My position on this subject has not changed.
- Bus subsidies – Given the improving state of Somerset County Councils finances it has been agreed to reverse an earlier decision taken last September to consult on the future of all subsidised bus routes across the county. This consultation would have looked at the future for all such routes, which are currently part-funded by SCC. The decision effectively protects subsidised routes from any cuts as part of the 2019/20 budget process.
- Dementia care – County is now offering grants to community groups and other organisations and even individuals who can supply services to care for people with moderate to severe memory loss or dementia. Priority is being given initially to projects which enable day-time provision of activities, allow unpaid carers to have respite, or enable those under 60 years of age to take part in activities. Grants are available from £250 to £10,000 and will be available for five years. Later rounds of funding will have different funding limits and priorities. An expression of interest form has to be

completed and filed electronically, and these will then be assessed by a virtual panel who will make a decision on the application. More info from CommissioningTeamMailbox@somerset.gov.uk.

- HIV and Sexual Health – County's three-year contract with the Eddystone Trust for provision of these services comes to an end in March, and they now want to deliver it in a different way so recently ran a public consultation on how to do it. The service costs £150,000 a year and this funding will continue. It provides free and confidential access for adults and young people to contraception and testing for HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Rates of STIs are increasing in Somerset and demand for the service is rising. The consultation was available online at <http://www.somersetconsults.org.uk/consult.ti> and although the deadline was Christmas Eve, any late comments I think would still be welcomed via TPS@somerse.gov.uk.

- Fire safety – As part of the fire service's ongoing prevention and protection strategy, residents are encouraged to ask for Home Fire Safety Checks by calling 0800 05 02 999. Equipment that can be provided for vulnerable people includes smoke and heat detectors, carbon monoxide detectors, hard of hearing alarms, and arson proof letter boxes. Any publicity you can give to this would be welcome.

- Somerset Wood – Volunteers are being sought to help plant the first batch of 1,200 trees, which are being delivered in the first two weeks of January and need to be in the ground by the end of February. Anybody interested should contact Alan Hall, of West Monkton PC, who is co-ordinating the work on alanhall@westmonkton.net.