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Dear Town and Parish councillors,

Thank you for taking the time to read my March update.

If you'd like to know more about any of the subjects mentioned, to raise issues of concern or to invite me to a local event, please contact me at sarah.dyke.mp@parliament.uk.

Thank you for your work and I look forward to hearing from you.

Health & Care

I attended an event in Westminster to raise awareness of the new [Pharmacy First](#) service. Launched at the end of January, Pharmacy First enables community pharmacists to provide advice and supply prescription-only medicines for seven common health conditions: sinusitis, sore throat, earache, infected insect bites, impetigo, shingles and uncomplicated urinary tract infections.

Pharmacy owners have been calling for this service for many years and it goes some way towards putting much-needed funding into the sector, particularly after a real terms cut of 30% since 2015. The financial situation in community pharmacy remains unsustainable, however, and the Liberal Democrats are calling on the Government to implement a long-term plan for pharmacy services. We've lost 51 community pharmacies in the South West since 2019, as I discovered when I spoke to community pharmacists who were demonstrating outside Parliament later that month.

Figures obtained by The British Dental Association project that £8m of the NHS dental budget in Somerset is going unspent. In a parliamentary [question](#), I asked the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care how she could justify that to my constituents, who are suffering in agony while unable to access NHS dentistry.

At the end of the month, I visited [Critchill Court](#) in Frome to talk to manager Nichola Read and Mel Lock, Executive Director of Adult Services at Somerset Council, about the proposed acquisition of the home by a new provider, Agincare. It's been a worrying few weeks for both staff and residents, after Somerset Care announced that it was ceasing operations at both Critchill Court in Frome and Sunnymeade in Chard. There's still some work to be done to enable the transfer to Agincare to go ahead, but things are progressing well. Nichola explained that her staff have shown an admirable loyalty to Critchill Court, despite uncertainty about its future, and are committed to ensuring the best possible outcome for residents.

[Compassion in Care](#)'s helpline received 486 reports of homophobic abuse in care homes over the past four years, yet the vast majority of service providers accounted for in those allegations are still rated as good by the Care Quality Commission. In a [question](#) in Parliament to the Minister for Women and Equalities, I called on the Government to take action to end discrimination against LGBTQ+ residents in care homes and to ensure they are safe in the care system.

I attended an event organised by The British Association of Social Workers to find out more about their [Homes Not Hospitals](#) campaign. No one should be failed by our health, housing, and care systems, yet more than 2,000 autistic people and people with learning disabilities are being held in hospitals, often away from their communities and in isolation for several years. The Homes Not Hospitals campaign is calling for community care and provision to ensure that people with learning disabilities or autism are supported to live independent and fulfilling lives in their own communities.

More than 7,000 women are diagnosed with ovarian cancer each year in the UK, yet awareness of its symptoms remains worryingly low, with just 21 per cent of women able to name bloating as a possible cause for concern. At the start of March, I joined [Target Ovarian Cancer](#) at a parliamentary event to mark Ovarian Cancer Awareness Month. The charity is campaigning to dispel common myths about ovarian cancer and raise awareness about the disease.

The chance for me to support another very worthwhile cancer charity came with the Westminster launch of [Race for Life](#). Last year, more than 250,000 people took part in runs across the UK, raising more than £30m for vital research into the disease.

Economy

In a parliamentary [debate](#) on the Budget, I blasted the Government for trying to pull the wool over constituents' eyes. The Office for Budget Responsibility says that public spending per head has fallen by £680 in the past three years, but the Budget did nothing to rectify that. We urgently need measures that help grow economy, fix the crisis in our NHS and help people struggling with the cost-of-living crisis.

Environment & Animal Welfare

In a [debate](#) about neonicotinoids and other pesticides, I called for more rigorous testing of chemicals before they are approved for agricultural use.

As I outlined in a [speech](#) at our Spring Conference recently, the Liberal Democrats are spearheading the fight against profiteering and polluting water firms who are getting away with environmental destruction. Recent [figures](#) released by the Environment Agency have revealed that Somerton and Frome was polluted by sewage 4,046 times in 2023, for a total of 46,323 hours. There were 82 sewage dumps into the River Cam at West Camel's Frog Lane pumping station alone, which I took the opportunity to visit during heavy rain at the end of the month. I'm calling for tougher action to stop sewage being dumped in local rivers, including replacing Ofwat with a regulator that has real teeth to clamp down on these polluting firms. I'm also calling for a ban on bonuses for water company bosses whose firms have pumped filth into our waterways

[Slow The Flow](#) is a charity set up in the aftermath of the 2015 Boxing Day floods to look at natural ways of reducing flood risk. Natural Flood Management and Sustainable Drainage Systems have many benefits, including affordability, their contribution to climate change mitigation, improvements to water quality and increased biodiversity, so I was delighted to meet with Slow The Flow in March to discuss their latest research. During my time as Lead Member for the Environment and Climate Change at Somerset Council, I was involved in piloting [slow the flow techniques](#) with EU partners.

I had a meeting with Ed Molyneux of [CPRE - The countryside charity](#) to talk about the issues facing rural areas such as Somerton and Frome and how we can work together to protect our beautiful countryside. I'm proud to be a CPRE Rooftop Solar Champion in Parliament and have pledged my support to...

- The government setting a target for at least 60% of solar energy to be delivered through rooftop solar installations on new builds, commercial buildings and car parks.
- Making solar PV or thermal panels a standard expectation for all suitable new builds.
- Ofgem requiring Distribution Network Operators across the country to invest in local grid capacity to better accommodate increased generation from solar and heat pumps.

I added my name to a cross-party letter calling on the Government to ensure that the [UN Global Ocean Treaty](#) is ratified into law before the end of this Parliament. The Treaty provides a legal framework for creating a network of ocean sanctuaries across the two thirds of the world's oceans that lie beyond national jurisdiction. I also signed an open letter calling on the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero to ensure that rural off-grid households are able to decarbonise in an affordable and easy way by incentivising the take up of [renewable liquid fuels](#).

For more than a decade, [Dogs Trust](#) has been raising awareness of the cruel puppy smuggling trade. At a parliamentary event organised by the charity, I was glad to support its efforts and celebrate the second reading of the Animal Welfare (Import of Dogs, Cats and Ferrets) Bill.

For one week in March, I took part in [The Big Plastic Count](#). Although I try to keep my plastic footprint to an absolute minimum, I was still surprised by my tally at the end of the week. Too much plastic is produced by supermarkets and big brands and we often have little choice about packaging. I am strongly committed to reducing the UK's impact on the environment through disposable products. I want to ban non-recyclable single-use plastics and replace them with affordable alternatives, aiming for their complete elimination within three years, and to end plastic exports by 2030.

Farming & Food

On the 19th of March, I led a parliamentary [debate](#) on UK food security. The UK produces just 53% of the vegetables and 16% of the fruits that we consume. That makes our fruit and vegetable supply vulnerable to outside factors, as seen when a shortage of tomatoes hit the UK last February. When we consider that we import most of our fresh produce from southern Europe, a region that will be heavily impacted by climate change, it is essential that we focus on putting in place the necessary measures now.

At the end of last month, I visited the [rural health hub](#) at Frome Livestock Market, where a wonderful team of nurses and wellbeing practitioners offer free, confidential health checks every second and fourth Wednesday of the month. I even managed to persuade my brother, who was at the market to sell some of his sheep, to have a check-up.

Farming can be a very isolating and lonely occupation, with many farm workers spending long hours alone, leaving them with little time to access healthcare. In the farming community, mental health is often overlooked, yet it is one of the biggest threats the industry faces. A recent study by the Farm Safety Foundation, with whom I've been working on their [Mind Your Head](#) campaign, revealed that poor mental health among farmers and agricultural workers is of growing concern. In a sample of 450 farmers under the age of 40, respondents almost universally agreed that poor mental health is the biggest hidden problem facing the industry today.

Rural health hubs, which offer both physical and mental health checks in a place and at a time that's convenient to farmers and their families, are a brilliant idea and one that I'm keen to see rolled out elsewhere and for other hard to reach groups.

At the start of the month, in a farming [debate](#), I outlined the litany of ways in which the Government have ignored and neglected farmers. I also met with British egg, pig and poultry producers to discuss what they need from a future government. The Liberal Democrats have a clear plan:

- Raise the farming budget by £1bn, to support domestic food production.
- Fix workplace shortages and let farmers, fishers and food processors recruit the skilled workers they need.
- Reopen and fix botched trade deals.

Education & Childcare

At my recent coffee morning in Baltonsborough, the owner of Somerton's Acorn Day Nursery, Katryn Bennett, told me about her [petition](#) calling for fair funding of the Early Years Sector. I later visited Katryn's nursery to talk to staff about the funding challenges they're facing and to speak to parents about the difficulties of accessing affordable childcare. Acorn Day Nursery receives £5.23 per hour per child from the Government for the three- and four-years-olds in its care, but rising overheads mean that each hour costs Katryn between £7.50 and £8. It's no wonder that more than 3,000 childcare providers closed in the last year alone. The Liberal Democrats have a clear and properly funded plan to ensure all parents can access childcare that is flexible, affordable and fair, as I outlined on BBC Points West later that day.

In a parliamentary [question](#) to Education minister Damian Hinds, I raised the concerns of a teacher from Frome who told me that too few pupils are successful in their EHCP applications.

I had a meeting with Lindsey MacDonald of the charity [Magic Breakfast](#) and broadcaster and food policy adviser Caroline Kenyon to talk about the benefits of school breakfasts. Magic Breakfast believe no child should ever be too hungry to learn. Through donations from individuals, trusts and corporate partners, they're providing free breakfasts for more than 200,000 children and young people in communities with high economic need every school day. That afternoon, I gave a [speech](#) to the Lib Dem Spring Conference on tackling the root causes of persistent absence in schools. In England, more than 20% of pupils are persistently absent. This number has doubled since before the Covid pandemic. Solving this crisis will involve a number of different measures, but the provision of breakfast is undoubtedly one of them. Magic Breakfast's most recent research found that 78% of schools agreed that breakfast has a positive impact on attendance.

The 7th of March was [World Book Day](#), which was marked with an event for MPs and peers in Westminster. 1 in 12 children in the UK don't have a book of their own. This goes up to 1 in 8 for children receiving free school meals. On World Book Day, children receive a voucher entitling them to a free book, from a range designed to appeal to all ages, interests, and stages of reading.

Transport

On the 13th of March, I had the opportunity to ask my first [question](#) at Prime Minister's Questions. Since the railway stations in Langport and Somerton closed in the 1960s, there's been a 28-mile gap in the line between Taunton and Castle Cary, the longest section without a station between London and Penzance. Building a new station for the Somerset Levels would give more than 50,000 people easy access to the rail network, provide a boost to the local economy and reduce our reliance on cars. The Langport Transport Group and the then Somerset County Council submitted a robust business case for a new station to the Department for Transport back in 2022, but there has been no decision to date and no update since July of that year. It's time to get this vital project off the ground, so I challenged Rishi Sunak to support the proposed station. Disappointingly, he didn't provide an answer to my question, but said that, as a result of the Government's decision on HS2, billions of pounds of funding had been freed up to invest in local transport across the country. The following week, I took the opportunity to [ask](#) the Minister of State for Rail and HS2 whether my constituents were likely to see any of that money. The Minister agreed to write to me with an update on the station, but he didn't promise any HS2 money for the constituency.

Until the middle of April, I'm running a petition giving residents the opportunity to express their support for the proposed station and putting pressure on the Government to give it the green light. Please consider sharing the link:

<https://www.sarahdyke.uk/campaigns/new-train-station>

The Liberal Democrats were the first UK political party to adopt the recommendations of the 'Get Britain Cycling' report as official party policy. We believe that investment in cycling and walking is vital if we are to improve public health, tackle climate change, and reduce congestion. So I was pleased to attend the launch of a new [report](#) by think tank Create Streets which shows that areas that enable walking and cycling bring a whole range of benefits for everyone.

I was delighted by the news that the [number 1 bus](#) will continue to run. Many constituents had been in touch telling me how vital it is to their communities. Despite unprecedented financial pressure, Somerset Council has managed to maintain all existing bus subsidies this year. We all need to do our bit now by using the buses whenever we can and encouraging others to do so. Remember: it currently costs just £2 for a single fare anywhere in Somerset.

<https://www.firstbus.co.uk/somerset/plan-journey/journey-planner/>

Planning & Housing

In a parliamentary [debate](#) about planning reform, I emphasised the importance of localism in the planning process. I also met up with the [YMCA](#) to discuss their aim for every young person to have access to affordable, good quality, safe and secure housing.

Equalities

Prior to the publication of the ombudsman's final report, I spoke in a [debate](#) on behalf of the 8000 WASPI women in Somerton and Frome, many of whom had been in touch with me. I explained that, if the government genuinely cared about these women, it had to commit to compensating them as soon as the ombudsman's final report was published.

I added my name to a Liberal Democrat letter calling on the Prime Minister to return the donations received from Frank Hester and make a commitment that any future donations or a peerage will be blocked.

On the 8th of March, I was thrilled to celebrate [International Women's Day](#) in conversation with Lynne Franks and many other inspiring women. The theme for 2024 was investing in women, so we discussed how we can break down the barriers that disproportionately affect women and reflected on the journey towards gender equality that's still ahead. Only 561 women have ever been elected to serve as MPs ahead of me and women still only represent 35% of Parliament. I'll continue to fight for women's equality, to create a more inclusive and equitable society where all have the opportunity to thrive and contribute to their fullest potential.

Post contains vital information about our finances, medical appointments, and even legal documents. But for millions of people, their living situation leaves them excluded from this essential service. People who are homeless, people experiencing domestic abuse and people from a Gypsy, Roma or Traveller community are disproportionately affected. Since 2018, Citizens Advice has been working with industry, regulators, charities and people with lived experience to develop a solution. At a parliamentary event, I showed my support for [Address & Collect](#), a free service by which people could opt to collect their post at a post office.

Meeting the Community

I visited Somerset Rural Life Museum in Glastonbury to see [Under the Surface: Somerset Floods Ten Years On](#), an exhibition of photographs by Matilda Temperley. As the photographer says, "There remain huge challenges in flood management across Somerset. At the same time climate breakdown is progressing faster than previously predicted and so it is more important than ever that flood resilience is prioritised." The exhibition runs until the 19th of May. The following day, I was delighted to attend the opening of [Casting Shadows](#), an exhibition of work by selected members of The Royal Society of Sculptors at ACEarts in Somerton.

I met with [Gavin Horgan](#), Headmaster of Millfield. Millfield employs 1,200 people across its sites. It has a brilliant track record in working with children with additional needs and we talked about the ways in which the school can share its knowledge and expertise with the state sector. We also discussed the importance of music, art and sport in education and how to teach students about AI. I also met with Councillor Liz Leyshon and John Revill, the Principal of [Strode College](#), to discuss his exciting plans for its future.

To celebrate English Tourism Week, I was lucky enough to have a guided tour of [Castle Cary Museum](#) in the company of Pek Peppin and Will Vaughan and to learn more about the Castle Cary Town Council's exciting plans for the Market House. Castle Cary Museum is a hidden gem and, if you haven't already been, I'd encourage you to visit. Staffed entirely by volunteers, it's open six days a week between Easter and late October and entry is free, although donations are encouraged. I was thrilled to find one of my forebears listed in the Castle Cary Market House Company ledger and to be asked to select a favourite item to mark the museum's 50th anniversary. (You'll have to pay a visit to find out what I chose!) The Market House was passed to Castle Cary Town Council on a 999-year lease in 2019, so is now, in effect, owned by residents. On the top floor is a wonderful Assembly Room, home to a Norman font, probably from the castle, which was found buried in a local garden in the 1980s. A new lift will make the upper floors of the building accessible to all and, once the work's completed, both the Assembly Room and the Billiard Room will be available for events, including concerts, parties and weddings.

To round off English Tourism Week, I had the great privilege of visiting A Place Called Home, an exhibition curated by Professor Lucy Bland and based on her award-winning book [Britain's 'brown babies'](#). It tells the largely hidden story of children born to black GIs and white women in the Second World War. The exhibition provided a compelling insight into the little-known history of these children, nearly half of whom were given up to children's homes.

Media

I was interviewed by Charlie Taylor on BBC Radio Somerset about the Budget and BBC Points West about the financial pressures that nurseries are facing. On [BBC Politics West](#), I discussed community pharmacy, housing for people with disabilities, WASPI women and the state of the economy.

And finally, having only taken up my seat in Parliament last September, I was pleased to find myself in the top three Lib Dem MPs who've contributed in parliamentary sessions in early 2024, according to [Scrutiny Counts](#).