



Sarah Dyke

MP for Somerton & Frome

 sarah.dyke.mp@parliament.uk

 020 7219 4975

 House of Commons, London. SW1A 0AA

Get the latest:



sarahdyke.uk



facebook.com/SarahDykeSomerset



[@SarahDykeLD](https://twitter.com/SarahDykeLD)

Dear Town and Parish councillors,

It's been a busy start to 2024, with plenty of pressing local issues to address.

Last month my team, who are based at my constituency office in Sparkford, processed 709 cases and resolved 447.

If you'd like to know more about any of the subjects mentioned in this update, 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.

Local Government Funding

Councils up and down the country find themselves in dire straits, because the funding model for local government is broken, even more so in rural areas. In the last financial year, rural councils could budget only £77 per head on discretionary services, while urban areas spent more than double that. I have taken every opportunity over the past month to raise this important issue, both in Parliament and elsewhere. I had a lively discussion on the BBC's Politics West programme on the 14th of January and highlighted Somerset Council's struggle to provide discretionary services in a parliamentary debate the following day.

On the 17th of January, I had a meeting with James Holden of the [County Councils Network](#) to discuss the unprecedented pressures councils are facing, the local government finance settlement and devolution.

In a parliamentary debate about the funding and governance of Somerset Council at the end of the month, I referred to the letter signed by 46 MPs from all political parties, myself included, calling for an urgent rethink on council funding plans. I have experienced - and continue to experience - the privilege of working in local government. I have seen the positive impact that it can have on our communities and I am determined to defend it.

The funding of local government is a national problem and requires a national solution. Following the debate, I appeared on ITV West Country news to push for change.

Health

Community Pharmacies

This month, I've been working to raise awareness of the desperate situation facing community pharmacy and the fact that local pharmacies across the country are being forced to close. Wincanton no longer has a pharmacy in the town centre and, having lost two of its three pharmacies, nor does Glastonbury. At the start of January, I met with the owners of Bruton Pharmacy to hear first-hand just how serious the crisis is. Like pharmacy owners up and down the country, they're grappling with soaring costs, a workforce crisis and uncertainty about their NHS funding beyond March, when their five-year contractual framework comes to an end. I was astonished to learn that the owners are currently dispensing some of the UK's most widely prescribed drugs at a loss, subsidising the NHS.

When inflation and increases in business and staffing costs are taken into account, funding for community pharmacy is decreasing year on year, according to [Community Pharmacy England](#). Unlike typical businesses, pharmacies are unable to raise prices to their primary customers (NHS patients) to address the funding squeeze.

I've repeatedly called for emergency funding to keep local pharmacies open and reverse closures. The new [Pharmacy First](#) service was launched at the end of the month, with the aim of easing pressure on GPs, but pharmacies will only be able to deliver it if they're still in business.

Dentists

The [British Dental Association](#) recently said that NHS dentistry is facing access problems “on an unprecedented scale”. I have been in touch with dental surgeries across the constituency and none could provide details of any NHS dentists in the area taking on new adult patients. This is causing many constituents anxiety and distress. In a parliamentary debate on NHS dentistry, I highlighted these issues and said that the people of Somerton and Frome deserved better. The shortage of NHS dentists is limiting access to oral healthcare, especially for elderly residents who are at higher risk of dental decay and social isolation.

At the end of the month, I joined parliamentarians at an event hosted by the [Association of Dental Groups](#) to discuss how the UK can fill the gap in its dental workforce. There are currently more than 5,500 dental vacancies in the UK and we have per capita among the lowest number of dentists in Europe. Alongside 30 other MPs and Peers, I've urged the General Dental Council to reform the Overseas Registration Exam that dentists must pass in order to practice in the UK and which currently isn't fit for purpose. Just 1,000 extra dentists would deliver 750,000 additional appointments. This would make an enormous difference to the residents of Somerton and Frome and to people up and down the land.

NHS and Social Care

On the 18th of January, I had a meeting with Peter Lewis, Chief Executive of [Somerset NHS Foundation Trust](#), at West Mendip Community Hospital in Glastonbury. We discussed the pressures facing the health service, the vital relationship between the NHS and social care, and the importance of community hospitals.

Transport

Buses

My [petition](#) to save several vital local bus routes will run until the end of February. I was already campaigning to keep the 54, 58/58A and the evening services of the D2 running, but I discovered last month that the no.1 bus is also at risk. This has now been added to the petition, a hard copy of which has been emailed to your clerk, and I hope that you'll consider encouraging local residents to add their name to it. Whether they're bus users or not, we can all agree that public transport benefits the communities in which we live and needs to be protected. Completed hard copy petitions should be returned to Kate Ness-Pomroy, G9/G10, Woodside Court, Sparkford, Yeovil, BA22 7LH.

Several constituents contacted me recently with concerns about overcrowding on the 77 bus service. I got in touch with First Bus, who told me that they're working closely with Somerset Bus Partnership and reallocating double decker buses to this busy service where they can. They're also exploring the option of securing additional double deckers.

In a parliamentary debate on rural transport, I stressed how important it is that the Zero Emission Bus Regional Areas (ZEBRA) funds for which Somerset Council has submitted a bid are released by the Department for Transport as a matter of urgency. They would bring environmentally friendly transport to our communities and ensure that residents who can't or don't want to use a car can continue to access services, jobs and education.

EVs

I also had a constructive meeting with James Court, CEO of [EVA England](#), last month to discuss EV charging in Somerton and Frome and the many benefits of electric vehicles. As an EV driver myself, I'm keen to see more charging points across the constituency and lower barriers to EV ownership.

Environment

Hedgerows

In a parliamentary debate on the 24th, I called for our wonderful network of hedgerows to be legally protected and for farmers to have appropriate, accessible and worthwhile incentives to preserve them. I believe that landscape conservation and sustainable agriculture must go hand in hand.

Somerset Wetlands

I took the opportunity to sing the praises of Somerset's wonderful wetlands in a parliamentary debate later in the month and highlighted how crucial these fragile ecosystems are in reversing nature's decline and fighting against climate change.

Gas Free Homes

At the end of January, I visited Barratt Homes' first gas-free site in the country, Delamare Park in Nunney. The 82 homes are fitted with air source heat pumps as standard and the development also includes EV charging points, more than three acres of open space and a five-metre ecological boundary, which will be preserved for nature.

Community Supported Agriculture

On Saturday 20th, I spoke at [Plotgate Community Farm's](#) Open Day at Barton St David village hall. Over the past fifteen years, Plotgate has developed a farm enterprise based on sustainability in land management and food production.

Storms and Flooding

Storm Henk was just the latest catastrophic event to result in flooding in the constituency. On my first day back in Parliament after the recess, I asked DEFRA Minister Robbie Moore whether communities would be assisted in creating bespoke extreme weather resilience plans. On the River Cam, a flood warning system is currently being piloted which will send alerts to residents when water levels start to rise. This is exactly the sort of extreme weather resilience measure isolated rural communities need and I took the opportunity of highlighting it in Parliament later in the month.

On the 11th of January, I tabled a parliamentary motion raising concern about the impact of flooding caused by Storm Henk and calling for increased Environment Agency funding. My Early Day Motion outlined the significant impact that flooding has on the mental health of those affected by it and highlighted that it is often the most vulnerable who experience the worst impact.

Farming

Almost half of British fruit and vegetable growers fear they will go out of business within the next twelve months, with 75% citing supermarket behaviour as the leading factor. In a meeting with Guy Singh-Watson, the founder and creator of Riverford, I explored ways in which farmers could get a fairer deal. On the 22nd, Parliament debated the Groceries Supply Code of Practice. The debate was prompted by a [petition](#) calling for the code to be reformed. It's clearly something that the residents of Somerton and Frome feel strongly about, because the constituency was in the top five for signatories nationwide. I called for farmers to have a fair deal for the work that they do and the food that they supply.

The strong arm of the supermarkets is leaving farmers stranded at the bottom of the supply chain. The imbalance needs to be equalised if we are going to ensure food security in the UK. 110,000 farms have been lost since 1990. As the guardians of the countryside, farmers know that farming and the environment are intrinsically linked. If we drive family farms out of business, they will be replaced with larger, industrial farms that will be less entrenched in our communities and care less about protecting biodiversity.

Food

During the second reading of the Trans-Pacific trade bill, I explained why it poses a serious public health risk, makes us complicit in untold environmental harm and will damage British farmers. Last month, the Food Standards Agency had to issue a health warning after a rise in salmonella cases from Polish eggs and poultry meat, with 200 cases reported in 2023. That risk only grows when we open the floodgates to eggs and poultry produced to lower standards. When I spoke to Professor Chris Elliott, the leading food scientist, in preparation for my speech, he warned me about antibiotics deployed en masse without veterinary approval, Government control, or knowledge of the antibiotics' provenance. Professor Elliott cautioned that "most countries do not have the infrastructure, regulations or oversight of drugs or pathogens - we could be opening up Pandora's box."

In December, in a debate about public sector food procurement, I highlighted the central role that food must play in any credible health proposal, as well as any long-term environmental and geopolitical planning. In late January, I met with Dr Dolly van Tulleken and Dr Courtney Scott of the [Food, Farming and Countryside Commission](#) to talk about a citizen-led approach to food systems change, FFCC's research into ultra-processed foods and how to build a more food-resilient society.

Emissions from the food system, which currently equate to 35% of total UK greenhouse gas emissions, must come down if we are to meet our national climate pledges under the Paris Agreement. The Climate Change Committee and scientists are clear that these reductions won't happen without consumer behaviour change. At an event in Parliament organised by Oatly, I discussed how to develop and deliver an effective climate labelling system that works for consumers, industry, and the health of the planet.

At a parliamentary event hosted by the [Trussell Trust](#), I discussed their plans for a future in which no one needs to use a food bank. There are now more food banks in the UK than there are branches of McDonald's. The Trussell Trust is expecting this winter to be their busiest ever, with the soaring cost of living driving record numbers of people on the lowest incomes to food banks.

Equality

At a 50:50 Parliament event in Westminster last year, I was delighted to meet Professor Helen Pankhurst CBE, granddaughter of Sylvia, great-granddaughter of Emmeline and the founder of [Centenary Action](#). Women make up 51% of the population but still only account for 35% of MPs. In fact, there have only ever been 563 female MPs and, together, we wouldn't even fill the House of Commons Chamber. Last month, I signed a pledge to support actions that will deliver a Gender Equal Parliament by 2028. We need to see more women selected and elected. If you'd like to pledge your support, you can add your name here: <https://centenaryaction.org.uk/gender-equal-parliament-pledge>

Last month, I gave my backing to a campaign to secure public recognition for a trailblazing politician from Somerset. Margaret Bondfield, who was born and educated in Chard, became the first female cabinet minister when she was appointed Minister of Labour in 1929. A working class socialist and trade unionist, Margaret Bondfield was elected to Parliament in the December 1923 General Election. She had previously been the first woman to chair the TUC. Despite her significant contribution to public life, Margaret Bondfield remains largely unknown. The only statue to her is in Northampton, a town she represented, and there is no portrait of her in Westminster. To back the campaign to commemorate this Somerset-born trailblazer, visit [Margaret Bondfield Portrait - Labour Women's Network \(lwn.org.uk\)](#)

Defence

In questions to the Secretary of State for Defence, I highlighted the barriers women still face when trying to pursue a career in the defence industry. The Women in Defence Charter aims to have women make up 30% of the UK armed forces by 2030, yet the current number is a meagre 12%. I explained to fellow Members that many of my constituents work in the defence sector, whether at RNAS Yeovilton, Leonardo or Thales, and commended initiatives such as Leonardo's [AeroWomen](#) programme, the annual event which brings together women in the aerospace industry and provides a platform for the future generation to meet potential employers and explore everything that the sector has to offer. Later in the month, I attended an event organised by Leonardo to celebrate Yeovil's official recognition as The Home of British Helicopters. It was a great opportunity to discuss plans for AeroWomen 2024.

I had a very interesting tour of Thales Templecombe in mid-January, on which I was able to go behind the scenes in the mine warfare, acoustics, towed array sonar and submarine sonar production facilities. I was also given a demonstration of the firm's extremely impressive Multi-Domain Mission Support System. Thales Templecombe currently has more than 750 highly skilled employees on site and contributes £214 million to the South West economy.

Special Educational Needs and Disabilities

In mid-January, Parliament debated the important issue of fair access to free school meals for disabled children and those with special educational needs. I called for nutritional needs to be included as standard on every Education, Health and Care Plan and subsequently tabled a written question to the Secretary of State for Education asking her department to revise its guidance. I'm delighted to report that they've since confirmed that this will be done. Later in the month, I went to an event organised by a [group of mums](#) of children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities, who have started a campaign to ask the government for a reform of the SEND education system. I backed their call for a fairer, more accessible system in which every child is given the opportunity to thrive, not just survive.

On the 23rd, Parliament discussed persistent school absence. Many children who are absent from school have special educational needs and disabilities, but the current system does not adequately distinguish between them. I highlighted the case of a thirteen-year-old constituent who has autism and Tourette's syndrome and has sadly been out of school for two years. We need to recognise key differences in the SEND acronym, to set up a national SEND body, to have comprehensive training for all civil servants, Ministers and council and school staff, to put a mental health practitioner in every school, to ring-fence funding for local authorities to halve the cost of an EHCP for schools and to reform the Mental Health Act.

Planning

In a debate on the Revised National Planning Framework, I emphasised that the voice of local communities needs to be heard in the planning process.

Crime

In 2022, the cost of rural theft in the South West rose by 16.6% on the year before. In Parliament, I asked the Home Office whether the Government had made an assessment of the success of the new National Rural Crime Unit in improving police contacts with victims. The Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire acknowledged that combating rural crime was extremely important, but did not answer my question.

Mental Health

In the Trans-Pacific trade deal debate, I took the opportunity to raise the issue of the poor mental health experienced by many farmers and farm workers. In 2021, over a third of farmers surveyed by the [Royal Agricultural Benevolent Institution](#) were “probably or possibly depressed”. Trade deals are causing significant financial stress and uncertainty to many agrifood businesses and several dairy, beef and poultry producers have approached me for help, fearing that they may not be in business by the summer.

On the 15th of January, I met up with [Samaritans](#) in Parliament to mark Brew Monday, which helps dispel the myth of ‘Blue Monday’ and encourages people to reach out for a cuppa and a catch-up with the people they care about.

Local Services

In a debate about the implementation of the Shared Rural Network, which will deliver 4G coverage to 95% of the UK by 2025, I highlighted the fact that 39 postcode areas in Somerton and Frome don't even have soon-to-be-phased-out 3G coverage. I called for measures to help those who suffer the plight of poor mobile connectivity.

Rural shops have always been a lifeline for local communities, providing not only essential goods and services, but also a sense of connection. There are almost 18,000 rural convenience stores in mainland UK, employing over 174,000 people. 76% of them are owned and operated by independent retailers and 49% are in isolated locations where no other business trades. At the end of month, I attended the launch of the [Association of Convenience Stores'](#) Rural Shop Report 2024, which set out why we need to support these businesses to invest and grow so they have a sustainable future.

Holocaust Memorial Day

Last month, I signed the [Holocaust Educational Trust's](#) Book of Commitment, in support of those who were murdered during the Holocaust and in tribute to the extraordinary survivors who work tirelessly to educate young people today. Holocaust Memorial Day was established following an MP's visit to Auschwitz-Birkenau with the Holocaust Educational Trust. Andrew Dismore MP was so moved by his visit that, in June 1999, he proposed a bill "to introduce a day to learn and remember the Holocaust".

Constituency Events

On the 6th of January, I had the privilege of joining a Ukrainian Christmas celebration in Somerton. Several people at the gathering mentioned to me that they had concerns about their status in the UK beyond the initial three-year visa period, so I subsequently submitted a written question to the Secretary of State for the Home Office. I asked him whether he would take steps to extend visas issued under the Ukraine Extension Scheme and was told that the government is keeping the scheme "under consistent review". I will continue to look for opportunities to raise this matter in Parliament.

It was a great pleasure to join Catherine and Tim Millar in Castle Cary in mid-January to celebrate their tremendous fundraising for Save The Children. Catherine and Tim's "Art In Stitches" exhibition, which showcased their extraordinary textile art, raised more than £4,500 for the charity. This will go towards supporting children in the UK and around the world.

On the 13th of January, I spent a very enjoyable Saturday in Bruton. We started with a coffee morning, then headed out onto the doorsteps of Pitcombe to talk to residents about the issues that matter to them.