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I'd like to take this opportunity to wish you all a very happy new year and to thank you for your hard work. Although my Westminster and constituency commitments make it difficult for me to attend your meetings in person, I'm keen to let you know what I've been doing recently on behalf of Somerton and Frome residents and to receive feedback from you on local issues. This is the first of what I hope will be monthly updates on my activities as an MP. If you'd like to know more about any of the subjects mentioned, please let me know.

Transport remains a key priority for me and I continue to push the Government for an update on the proposed Langport/Somerton station, by writing to the Secretary of State and raising the matter repeatedly in Parliament. The Strategic Outline Case submitted to the Department for Transport in February 2022 demonstrated the significant benefits the station would bring, including regeneration of the local economy and 'levelling-up', building social cohesion, improving access to education and decarbonising transport, but there's been no news since July 2022. At a recent meeting with Langport Transport Group and other interested parties, we discussed exciting opportunities for the project to lead the way in green railways for the South West.

In mid-December, I presented my parliamentary bill to ensure rural residents can access major employment and education hubs by public transport. The bill, which is due to have its second reading on January 26th, would set minimum service levels for public transport in rural areas. I also started a petition to save vital Somerset bus routes (www.sarahdyke.uk/campaigns/save-our-buses), having spearheaded a successful campaign in 2022 to keep the D2 bus running.

The environment remains at the heart of my work as an MP. England's sewage companies have been allowed to get away with dumping sewage in our rivers, lakes and coastlines for far too long. The Liberal Democrats have demanded an end to sewage dumping, a ban on

water executive bonuses until sewage dumping stops, the transformation of England's water companies into public benefit companies, the abolition of Ofwat and the creation of a new regulator with proper teeth, and the introduction of a sewage tax to fund the clean up of the most polluted lakes, rivers and coastlines.

Last month, I supported a Liberal Democrat amendment to provide compensation to those who've suffered illness as a result of sewage in English and Welsh waterways. The Victims and Prisoners Bill amendment came in the wake of Government statistics which found a sharp rise in the number of bathing water sites rated as "poor quality." Our precious rivers and waters bring a multitude of health benefits, as I see locally at Farleigh Hungerford and Vobster Quay. Negligent water firms urgently need to be held to account, so it was bitterly disappointing that more than 250 Conservative MPs voted to block our amendment. Later that week, as the Liberal Democrat spokesperson in the Opposition Debate on bonuses for water company executives, I continued to put pressure on the Government over the sewage scandal.

Having twice written to the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities about phosphate mitigation, I was delighted by the announcement that Somerset Council had secured £9.6m of Government funding to deliver mitigation measures. This will provide for long term nature recovery, whilst allowing the construction of much needed new homes across the county to go ahead.

In mid-December, I spoke in Parliament on the important subject of food procurement and healthy eating. A recent report by PISA revealed that 11% of pupils in the UK miss out on a meal at least once a week. The Liberal Democrats are committed to providing free school meals for every primary school child and every secondary school child living in a Universal Credit household. Later, I challenged the Government on its poor farming record, spoke up in support of animal welfare reforms and debated the Sustainable Farming Incentive. I also learnt how Fairtrade and its partners have been supporting farmers and workers around the world in 2023 and, at a cross party event hosted by the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, had a chance to discuss ways in which climate change disproportionately affects the health of children. The voices of young people need to be at the centre of our decision making on climate issues.

December saw the launch of my campaign to improve the mental health of farmers and farm workers. According to the Farm Safety Foundation, 95% of young farmers in this country identify poor mental health as their biggest hidden challenge. I called on the Health Secretary to meet me and the Environment Secretary to discuss how we can best support farmers and farm workers to develop robust mental health strategies.

I spoke in Parliament last month to demand that the Government ensures that the forthcoming Fair Funding Review addresses the unequal way in which rural councils are

funded. The cost of providing services in rural areas is higher than in urban areas, yet rural residents will receive 13% less spending per head in social care support. Later in the month, I took the opportunity to raise the issue of poor rural connectivity. In Somerton and Frome, 4.6% of people - over five times the national average - have broadband speeds below the legal universal service obligation.

Having lent my support to the National Federation of SubPostmasters' campaign to keep DVLA services within the post office network, and used a parliamentary debate in the autumn to demand a rethink from the Secretary of State, I was delighted by the announcement in December that the DVLA and Post Office Ltd had agreed an extension to their current contract. The extension brought to an end widespread uncertainty about whether customers would be able to renew their driving licence or pay their vehicle tax at post office counters beyond March 2024. I know how important post offices are to constituents, particularly in rural areas, and I'm committed to ensuring they stay open and continue to offer a full range of services.

On December 3rd, I celebrated Small Business Saturday by visiting Langport Local, a new local produce market in the centre of the town. Small businesses are the backbone of our economy, the heart of our local communities, and they create the jobs we all rely on. The Liberal Democrats know that small and medium enterprises are the engine to drive us towards achieving the UK's huge potential for sustainable economic growth. We've called for the original 'Energy Bill Relief Scheme' to be extended for six months, paid for through a proper windfall tax on the record profits of the oil and gas giants, demanded a complete overhaul of the unfair business rates system, suggested ways of addressing the workforce and skills shortages and pressed for an industrial strategy, which would include support for SMEs.

I had a meeting with Avon and Somerset Police at the start of December to talk about Operation Bluestone, the force's specialist approach to rape and sexual offence investigations. Avon and Somerset Police was one of five forces to pilot the scheme which, alongside other measures implemented as part of the Rape Review, has led to a marked improvement in the police and criminal justice response to rape. It's now being used as the basis for a new national operating model. Later in the month, I spoke in Parliament in favour of my Liberal Democrat colleague Christine Jardine's amendment to the Victims & Prisoners Bill, calling for mandatory training for police officers and Crown Prosecution Service employees on the impact of trauma on victims of violence against women and girls. I also attended a sobering event organised by Killed Women, a campaign network for the families of women killed by men. They had just carried out the first national survey of bereaved families who find themselves in this terrible situation, the findings of which are both stark and powerful. Only 4% of family members said their loved one's killing was 'not preventable at all'. 90% of relatives who saw a conviction felt the prison sentence was too short. 66% of

family members said they were aware that the killer had a prior history of violence or abuse. We need to protect women's lives and ensure justice.

On the BBC's Politics West programme, I appeared on a panel with Dan Norris, Metro Mayor for the West of England, and Sir Robert Buckland. I explained to presenter David Garmston what it means to me to be an MP and how hard I've been working on behalf of constituents since being elected in July. Other topics discussed included Clean Air Zones and the difficulty of recruiting and retaining foster carers.

I was delighted to hold my first coffee morning in Somerton at the end of the year. It was a chance for constituents to meet me, to hear about the work I'm doing on their behalf and to ask questions. Issues raised in Somerton included renewable energy, dangerous driving and access to NHS dentistry. I'm committed to holding these open forum events across the constituency each month, so do keep an eye open for details of the next one.

Finally, I wanted to make you aware of the Community Ownership Fund, which gives local people the chance to buy and run amenities such as pubs and village halls at risk of closure. The Fund is already supporting almost 200 projects across the UK, including Keighley & Worth Valley's historic railway bridge, the Queen's Ballroom in Blaenau Gwent and Lochranza Country Inn on the Isle of Arran, and it would be fantastic to see some Somerset treasures added to the list. The Fund runs until March 2025, with four bidding windows per financial year, and the current window is open until the 31st of January: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/community-ownership-fund-prospectus/community-ownership-fund-prospectus--3>

I hope these newsletters are a productive way for us to keep in touch. If you'd like to raise issues of concern or to invite me to a local event, please contact me at sarah.dyke.mp@parliament.uk