



# Sarah Dyke

MP for Somerton & Frome

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Dear Town and Parish councillors,

February has been another busy month, both in Westminster and the constituency.

My team, who are based at my office in Sparkford, received 1,429 emails in February and sent 1,339. We successfully closed 1,085 cases in the course of the month. The most popular casework topics were Israel/Gaza (33% of correspondence), support for the 'Buy British' campaign (26%) and constituency flooding (10%).

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](mailto:sarah.dyke.mp@parliament.uk).

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

## Health

Last month, I had a constructive meeting with [Symphony Healthcare Services](#) at Wincanton Health Centre. SHS was established in April 2016 and is wholly owned by Somerset NHS Foundation Trust. Managing Director Kerry White, Medical Director Dr Berge Balian, and Andy Palmer, Clinical Lead at Wincanton Health Centre, talked to me about the challenges facing general practice, particularly in rural areas, and explained that GPs now have a list of 2350 patients each, when the Royal College of General Practitioners says that the optimum number is 1850. Wincanton Health Centre has experienced some significant challenges over recent months, but Symphony and the surgery's strong multidisciplinary team are already bringing about improvements and are committed to providing continuity of care to patients. Of Symphony's 17 surgeries across 22 locations, Wincanton Health Centre continues to be one of the highest rated by those who use it.

At the start of the month, I went to the launch of [Pancreatic Cancer UK](#)'s "Faster, Fairer, Funded" report, which calls for improvements to treatment and care for people with pancreatic cancer across the UK. The report proposes implementing an Optimal Care Pathway for people diagnosed with this deadly disease. Developed alongside a group of pancreatic cancer experts, including healthcare professionals and people with lived experience, this pathway would improve both treatment and survival rates. If implemented today, it could result in 5000 people living longer and better lives in the next five years alone.

I'm pleased to be one of the first 100 MPs to have pledged their support to the [Lobular Moon Shot Project](#), a proposed £20m, five-year research project to fully understand the biology of the second most common type of breast cancer. 1000 people a day globally and 22 people a day in the UK are diagnosed with lobular breast cancer. The disease rarely shows on a mammogram and is therefore often diagnosed later.

In a parliamentary debate, I [laid out](#) the many ways in which the Government's approach to obesity has failed. The Liberal Democrats are calling for a robust obesity and food strategy, restrictions on TV and online junk food advertising, and a requirement for junk food giants to pay their way if they refuse to change.

At the end of the month, I was pleased to attend an event organised by the [All-Party Parliamentary Group on HIV & AIDS](#) and [HIV Outcomes UK](#). With data highlighting stark inequalities, we must support all those living with HIV to have a good quality of life. This will also be critical in achieving the Government's target of ending transmissions by 2030.

## Environment

At the end of February, I met up with representatives from [Frome Families for the Future](#) and [Friends of the River Frome](#) to learn more about the [River Vision Project](#). The project aims to make the River Frome a place that everyone can enjoy and, thanks to the hard work of volunteers, it now has a grant from Frome Town Council to improve access to the river at Rodden Meadow. The River Vision Project encourages the community to care about and fight for a vital local resource and I was very impressed by the passion and energy of the people behind it.

In the same week, I attended the launch of [The Rivers Trust's State of Our Rivers Report](#). Our rivers are in a desperate state, with no single stretch in England in good overall health. The Liberal Democrats have called on the Government to:

- End sewage dumping.
- Ban water executives from paying themselves bonuses until sewage dumping stops.
- Transform England's water companies into public benefit companies.
- Abolish Ofwat and replace it with a new regulator with proper teeth to tackle sewage dumping.
- Introduce a sewage tax to fund the clean up of the most polluted lakes, rivers and coastlines.

Five million disposable vapes are thrown away weekly in the UK. This figure has quadrupled in just one year. Many of these vapes will end up in our environment, our rivers and the ocean, where they can cause harm to animals and marine life. At a parliamentary event organised by the [RSPCA](#) and the [Marine Conservation Society](#), I pledged my support to a ban on disposable vapes.

## Flooding

In a [question](#) to the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, I pointed out that, ten years on from David Cameron's promise to spend £100m protecting the Somerset Levels, constituents are still experiencing devastating floods with increased regularity. Later, in a debate about flooding, I [called](#) on the Government to provide urgent access to Property Flood Resilience Repair Grants. These would allow residents to better protect their homes from flooding in the future.

Back in the constituency, I visited the River Cam at Yarlinton with Cllr Henry Hobhouse to see the state-of-the-art depth-measuring devices that are being installed to monitor river levels. A joint initiative between Liberal Democrat councillors and Somerset Rivers Authority, the solar-powered units will send real-time messages and alerts to residents when water levels begin to rise. This is exactly the sort of extreme weather resilience measure that's needed in isolated rural communities.

## Farming

I was delighted that so many MPs, peers and farming experts took the time to join me at a parliamentary event I co-hosted in support of [Mind Your Head](#), the [Farm Safety Foundation](#)'s annual campaign highlighting the significant mental health risks associated with working in agriculture. A recent study by FSF 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 (95%) agreed that poor mental health is the biggest hidden problem facing the industry today. As the daughter and sister of farmers, this is an issue that's dear to my heart. I understand how important it is for farmers and farm workers to look after their mental health and to be open to having conversations about how they're feeling. At the event, I had the great privilege of meeting Andy Eadon. Andy and his wife Lynda lost their son [Leonard](#), a farmer, to suicide in 2022, at the age of just 22. In the midst of personal tragedy, Andy and Lynda have made it their mission to bring communities together, to get people talking and to champion British farming. During Mind Your Head week, the couple asked farmers, their families and associates to join together for a Big Farming Tea Break and take time to talk.

In a written question to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, I asked whether she and the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs would make an assessment of the adequacy of mental health service provision in rural areas. In the middle of the Mind Your Head campaign, it was disappointing to receive the [response](#) that there are no plans for a specific assessment. On the day that the Prime Minister spoke at the NFU Conference, however, I was pleased by the announcement that the government would be making up to £500,000 available to help deliver projects that support mental health in the farming sector. Of course, there's still much more that needs to be done.

## Transport

Bus meetings, bus announcements and my bus campaign kept me busy last month. At the start of February, I met [Somerset Bus Partnership](#)'s leadership team via Zoom. We discussed the county's threatened bus routes, bus franchising and the Bus Passenger Charter. Later in the month, at the Bus Advisory Board, First Bus South were asked to outline what the network would look like from April 2024 if the current funding they receive to support the 54, 58, 25 and 28 services were withdrawn. This led to speculation about the future of the four buses and a great deal of anxiety for passengers. I held meetings with stakeholders to discuss the situation and provided regular updates to constituents. Eventually, First Bus South and Somerset Council reached an agreement to keep all four services running until the end of March 2025. Services 54, 58 and 58A will remain unchanged, but there will be some alterations to the 25 and 28 buses. In order to keep these services operating in the long term, we need to use them regularly and encourage others to do the same. Timetables for First Bus services in Somerset can be found [here](#) and Somerset Council's bus page is [here](#).

Thank you to all those of you who have signed and shared my bus petition, which closed at the end of the month. We've gathered 1,150 signatures so far. Paper petitions can be returned to Kate Ness-Pomroy at 9 Woodside Court, Sparkford, Yeovil, BA22 7LH.

Following the announcement about the four routes, I had a meeting with Peter McNaughton of First Bus and Linda Snelling of Somerset Bus Partnership and the [Yeovil Bus Users](#) group. We visited the bus station in Yeovil, as well as the former bus depot, which is slated for demolition. After our meeting, I had the pleasure of catching the number 54 to and from Somerton and speaking to bus users about their experiences and their relief at the good news.

Last month, I visited the [A303](#) with National Highways and Galliford Try to get an update on the project. Among the many issues we discussed were the engineering of new bridges, safeguarding badgers and newts and the creation of attenuation ponds to mitigate flooding. It's been a challenging project, not least because of last month's heavy rainfall, but work is progressing well. The next temporary closure will be on the 12th of April and the project is due for completion in late 2024/early 2025. On an average day, the A303 carries 23,500 vehicles, but numbers increase significantly in the summer. The project to dual a three-mile single carriageway section between Sparkford and Ilchester will reduce congestion, improve journey times and make the road safer.

### **Local Government Funding**

Throughout February, I sought opportunities to raise the issue of local government funding in Westminster. On the 6th, I [called](#) for councils to be given the urgent funding needed to keep important recycling centres open, particularly in rural areas, where fly tipping is a very real risk. The following day, in a debate about local government finance, I [spoke](#) about the need for cross-party unity to fix the broken funding model.

On the 20th, Somerset Council set a [balanced budget](#), in spite of minimal support from Government. Some of the services initially considered for savings have been protected through devolution and partnership working with City, Town and Parish Councils. These include Somerset's CCTV service, Yeovil Recreation Ground, Taunton Visitor Information Centre, highways maintenance, RNLI lifeguard provision and school crossing patrols. Negotiations with Somerset's household waste recycling centre contractor are ongoing and no final decision has yet been made on savings in this area.

### **Education**

On the 6th of February, in a debate about nursery provision, I [called](#) for more ring-fenced funding for children with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs), so that nurseries aren't forced to hike their prices to survive, making them unaffordable to many hard-working families.

At the end of the month, I visited Frome College to meet bright, well-informed A-level Politics students. I talked about my journey into politics and answered their questions about the pressures on housing in Frome, the state of the NHS and the situation in Gaza. On the same day, I was invited back to Warminster College, my old school, to tour the facilities, talk to Years 7 and 8 about my experience of working in politics and field questions from Politics students. We discussed the polarisation of politics, whether the Liberal Democrats are in a renaissance period and the prospects for Reform at the General Election. Some of the younger students also wanted to know whether I had the power to bring the price of Poundland's sweets back down to £1!

In the same week, I [spoke](#) in a debate about funding for youth services. If local government were adequately funded, we could be doing so much more and making a real difference for young people.

### **Israel / Gaza**

On the 20th of February, I wrote to the Foreign Secretary asking him to work with his European and US counterparts to protect civilian lives in Gaza. Continued humanitarian suffering is an engine for continued and future terror, not a solution to it. The Liberal Democrats have continually called for an immediate bilateral ceasefire. We need Hamas out of Gaza. We need the hostages returned to Israel. We need to recognise Palestine as a sovereign state, with Hamas gone, and to support a transition to a true democracy. We need a permanent and lasting peace and the only way to achieve that is through a two state solution and widespread international support.

The following day, as parliamentarians, we had an opportunity to work together, to oppose Israel's planned military offensive on Rafah and to call for an immediate bilateral ceasefire. Sadly, the debate descended into an embarrassing row about the selection of amendments. The Liberal Democrats' [amendment](#) to the SNP ceasefire motion wasn't selected for a vote, but we indicated that we would support anything that got us closer to our position and to calls for an immediate bilateral ceasefire. That remains our stance and we'll continue offering to work with the other parties in the hope that Parliament will ultimately be able to speak with one voice.

### **Violence Against Women and Girls**

In an Opposition Day debate about banning knives and swords from UK streets, I [raised](#) the tragic case of my constituent Julie's daughter, Poppy, who was killed in her home with a knife already in her kitchen. Currently, offenders convicted of murder who use a weapon already available at the crime scene have a starting sentence 10 years lower than those who brought a weapon with them. The families of women killed by knives already in the home need to see equal justice.

In the Gaza ceasefire debate, I [raised](#) the important issue of the gendered face of conflict.

## **Industry and Employment**

In mid-February, I made a return visit to Leonardo. The Home of British Helicopters employs 3,300 highly skilled and specialist staff at its Yeovil site, including 150 trainees, and its UK helicopter business helps sustain approximately 12,000 British engineering and manufacturing jobs. I was particularly excited to discuss AeroWomen, a Leonardo-led event celebrating women in the aerospace industry, and to have a go on the world-leading Merlin simulator.

Having visited Thales UK in January, I was delighted by the [news](#) that the Ministry of Defence had signed a new 15-year contract with the company to improve Royal Navy ship availability and resilience. Many of the 150 new roles this contract will create will be at Templecombe in the constituency.

More good news came with the [announcement](#) of a £4bn gigafactory at the Gravity site near Bridgwater. This will put Somerset at the forefront of the green revolution and will bring huge benefits to the constituency in terms of highly skilled jobs, training opportunities and the supply chain. I was involved in the earlier stages of this project as Lead Member for the Environment and Climate Change at Somerset Council, so it was wonderful to see it come to fruition. The new factory will create up to 4,000 green-tech jobs in Somerset, as well as many thousands indirectly, and spearhead Britain's electric vehicle transition. The Liberal Democrats want electric vehicles to be an affordable and practical alternative for all and today's announcement is a significant step in the right direction. We're absolutely committed to tackling the climate crisis and air pollution across the country and believe the UK should target at least 80% renewable electricity by 2030, and implement policies now to make 100% renewable power possible.

At the start of February, I had a meeting with Ruth Lambert from the [Federation of Small Businesses](#) and FSB member John Mayer. Two thirds of small businesses in the South West have cited the general state of the economy as the biggest barrier for growth for 2024, according to the FSB's quarterly confidence survey. 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. That's why support for them is a crucial component of our industrial strategy. We're calling on the Government to set up effective incentives for research and development investment, decarbonisation, and the take-up of digital technologies, especially among small and medium enterprises.

In a debate about digital exclusion, I [outlined](#) the ways in which constituents are being let down and left behind. In Somerton and Frome, only around 40% of houses have access to full fibre broadband and 75% of the constituency is a partial 5G notspot.

## Media

In the run-up to my parliamentary event promoting the Mind Your Head campaign, I appeared on Caroline Kenyon's [Bread & Butter podcast](#), alongside Stephanie Berkeley of the Farm Safety Foundation and Gilly Steel of [Lincolnshire Rural Support Network](#). The following week, BBC Points West did a long report on farmers' mental health, featuring interviews with me, my brother, Stephanie Berkeley, Ed White from The Slow Farming Company and Countryfile's Adam Henson.

Later in the month, on ITV News West Country, I outlined the Liberal Democrats' rescue plan for British farmers. This would include raising the farming budget by £1bn, to support domestic food production, fixing workplace shortages to let farmers, fishers and food processors recruit the workers they need and reopening and fixing the botched trade deals and ensuring British standards are not undercut.

On February 22nd, I appeared on ITV's [West Country Debate](#), talking about the Kingswood by-election result, concerns about knife crime and support for farmers.

## Meeting the Community

It was a great pleasure to welcome Alistair Carmichael, MP for Orkney and Shetland and Liberal Democrat Home Affairs Spokesperson to the constituency on the 16th to talk to supporters and help launch my Glastonbury and Somerton General Election campaign. Wera Hobhouse, MP for Bath and Liberal Democrat Spokesperson for Energy & Climate Change also joined us.

On the 14th of February, I met constituents at an open forum event in Baltonsborough. We had a wide-ranging discussion about representation in Parliament, the state of our roads, the difficulty of getting an appointment with a GP, nutrient neutrality, the cost of living crisis, fair funding for early years education and mental health support for young people. The following day, I was joined by constituents in Wincanton. After an update on the work I've been doing, we moved on to a discussion about Gaza, local government funding and the difficulties of negotiating the benefits system. Constituents also spoke to me one-to-one about challenges they're facing, which my team and I have now taken up on their behalf.

My next open forum events will be in Curry Rivel on the 12th of April and Castle Cary on an April date TBC. Both will take place in the afternoon. If you'd like to come along, or know constituents who might be interested, please email [sarah.dyke.mp@parliament.uk](mailto:sarah.dyke.mp@parliament.uk). We'll forward full details nearer the time, but space for each is limited, so don't delay!