



# Local Community Network

**Chard and Blackdowns LCN Meeting notes  
Tuesday 21<sup>st</sup> April 2026, 2.30-4.30pm  
HYBRID – Churchinford Village Hall, and Online**

**Chaired by Beth Poole, Somerset Council LCN Link Officer**

## **Attendees:**

Beth Poole	Somerset Council
Cllr Sarah Wakefield	Somerset Council
Emma Gifford	Environment Agency
Jon Nicholson	Somerset Council
Katherine Beverley	The Octagon Theatre & Westlands, Yeovil
Michelle Brooks	Somerset Council
Paul Elliston	Somerset Rivers Authority

## **Virtual Attendees:**

Andrew Plumbly	Beercrocombe Parish Council
Matthew Hopkinson	Somerset Council
Mark Palmer	Neroche Villages
Martin Middleton	West Hatch Parish Council
Richard Harrison	Taylor Wimpey, Exeter

## **Apologies:**

Cllr Martin Wale	Somerset Council
Colin Fisher	Stoke St Mary Parish Council
Gwyn Hughs	Somerset Council

## **Summary of key points of discussion and outcomes:**

### **Item 1: Welcome and apologies**

Beth Poole (LCN Link Officer acting as Chairperson) welcomed attendees. Apologies received. It was acknowledged that Beercrocombe parish council were in attendance because they are looking to change to the Chard & Blackdowns LCN from Levels & Moors to which they are currently aligned. Beth explained that there are likely to be changes to the geographic boundaries and groupings of some LCNs—including this one—pending the outcome of Somerset Council’s community engagement review,

which we anticipate will be known from mid/late summer and implemented from autumn.

### **Item 2: Parish Updates and Local Priorities**

Beth invited attendees to share updates, priorities and concerns from their area or parish. None shared.

### **Item 3: Arts Engagement and Outreach**

Katherine Beverley (Arts Engagement and Outreach Manager) gave an update on the Arts Engagement and Outreach Programme (funded by Arts Council England and Somerset Council), with a remit to work countywide; they've prioritised Chard/surrounding areas as an identified area of need. Katherine outlined activity over the last 3 years and the next steps.

#### **Reach & growth:**

A map of ticket "bookers" for financial year 2024/2025 for events at the Octagon Theatre showed attendance is drawn from across Somerset (noting one booker may represent multiple attendees). Since receiving Arts Council England funding in 2023, the programme has scaled up year-on-year, with more outreach classes/workshops/projects delivered across Somerset since the Octagon Theatre closed and demand is growing.

#### **Participation:**

Weekly classes (often venue-based) plus holiday workshops/projects, engaging a wide age range—from early years to older adults (such as Parkinson's dance).

Play Day programme (free events): They took over Play Days previously run by South Somerset District Council and now runs 4 Summer Play Days in parks (recent locations: Chard, Wincanton, Langport, Yeovil), aligned to Arts Council priority areas in South Somerset. Activities include circus skills, face painting, music workshops, etc. and are said to be very well attended. They added indoor Winter Play Days in February half term. The Chard Winter Play Day had 564 attendees (children/young people/parents), a 122% increase vs previous year; local feedback said it was the busiest Chard Guildhall had been.

#### **Arts for health & wellbeing (preventative focus):**

- Somerset Wellbeing Orchestra (with Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra), delivered with partners including the Watch Project (Chard) and The ARK (Merriott); supports adults facing mental health challenges (no musical experience needed).
- Parkinson's Dance (Langport) and Movement Through Cancer (Yeovil).
- Time Together for new parents/babies (0–12 months) supporting postnatal mental health (Wincanton, with Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra and The Balsam Centre).
- Memory Choir launched this year in Yeovil (with Alzheimer's Society), reported as going well. Emphasised benefits like improved confidence/mobility, peer support networks, and respite for carers.

#### **Creative learning & education:**

Worked with 93+ primary/secondary schools across Somerset last financial year. In the local area cited partnerships with Holyrood Academy, Manor Court, plus work with Redstart, Ruishton, and Avishayes primary schools.

Support includes Continuing Professional Development for teachers, in-school workshops (inc. touring companies), and access to performances (e.g., Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra concerts at Westlands). Invited additional school contacts.

### **Talent & career development:**

Careers event days (technical and performance roles), school talks, work experience, apprenticeships/internships, and paid opportunities for returning graduates (e.g., assistant youth theatre roles). Also provide **artist support** and development (studio space, mentoring, commissions) and community events (e.g., intergenerational projects, tea dances).

### **Access & inclusion:**

£3 ticket scheme for low-income residents/households for shows/events.

Support for low-income participation in classes; buddy support for first-time/anxious attendees; support for school travel costs to performances (e.g., pantomime).

### **Funding model:**

Local authority-managed venue/service; Arts Council England National Portfolio Organisation funding secured for a further 2 years (then reapply); Somerset Council funding (discretionary), plus additional fundraising from towns/parishes, trusts, earned income, donations, and sponsorship.

### **Chard LCN area investment figures (not countywide):**

- Approx. £40k/year investment in Chard (excluding staffing/marketing/time).
- 2,500+ pupils engaged in Chard schools in the last year.
- Noted Play Days likely attract attendees from surrounding parishes, as well as Chard.

### **Q&A highlights:**

Confirmed the engagement team is 6 full-time + 5 part-time.

Programme has expanded beyond South Somerset (e.g., Shepton Mallet, Bridgwater, Taunton), but distance makes Watchet/Minehead harder to serve directly.

Emphasised outreach is important to sustaining support for the Octagon while closed; all reported growth has occurred during closure and is expected to increase further on reopening.

Shared that Somerset Council approved a growth bid funding the outreach programme for the next 5 years, giving stability through the Octagon reopening.

On expanding to Minehead: proposed a replicable “model” approach—secure funding for initial years, then hand over delivery to embedded local partners/charities; also has a costed Play Day model (scaled options) that a town/parish council could commission. Signposted to Minehead and Watchet LCN (Sam Murrell is LCN Link Officer) to explore opportunities.

On live music/venues: acknowledged Westlands’ limitations (e.g., stage/dressing rooms) but expects the Octagon’s mid-scale capacity to help attract more live music and reduce reliance on travel to bigger cities/venues.

#### **Item 4: Mount Hindrance Farm site north of Chard**

Richard Harrison (Land and Planning Director) presented an update on the Mount Hindrance Farm development (north of Chard) and invited questions during/after.

#### **Site status & scope:**

Outline consent granted November 2025 establishing access and principle of residential development; proposal is for 295 homes plus a local centre (convenience retail), 2 community football pitches, land for Chard Football Club (relocation facilities), open space, allotments, and landscaping. Site described as 3 mixed agricultural fields (~23 hectares) plus a small hardstanding area.

#### **Key constraints noted:**

Dense scrub; trees with potential bat roosts; high voltage electricity mains through the site; potential badger setts; multiple water mains, including a major trunk main requiring protection/stand-off; and need for dark corridors/appropriate lighting near bat habitats.

#### **Layout/design approach:**

Aims to broadly retain the previously consulted outline layout (development split east/west with pitches central) while accommodating constraints. Includes a NEAP (play area for children up to ~14), added “kickabout” area (informal space alongside formal pitches), allotments and orchard planting, emergency access, and bus stops (per outline).

**Housing mix & affordability:** Mix from 1-bed flats to 4-bed houses; 35% affordable (just over 100 homes). Materials include render, red/buff brick, stone feature plots; varied roof types/colours.

**Parking & movement:** circa 1,000+ parking spaces across the site (allocated, visitor, and community parking for pitches/allotments). Emphasis on providing for car travel while also promoting active travel (pedestrian/cycle links).

**Chard Football Club:** Land transfer would enable the club to pursue Football Association grant funding and upgrade facilities (pitch/clubhouse), supporting potential promotion; club also interested in managing community pitches (overall uplift from current provision).

#### **Section 106 / CIL & contributions (headline items):**

- £4.2m+ education (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities, primary, early years, secondary)
- Funding toward General Practice capacity (to National Health Service)
- ~£340k highways/transport improvements
- ~£400k community changing rooms
- Building safety levy (post-Grenfell remediation fund) ~£340k
- Community Infrastructure Levy to Somerset Council ~£0.75m

#### **Sustainability/ecology measures:**

- Stand-off from badger setts (avoid disturbance/licensing)
- Limited hedgerow removal with compensatory planting; lighting strategy to protect bat foraging/flight paths

- Phosphate mitigation ~£860k (upgrade of septic tanks in River Parrett catchment to reduce phosphorus)
- Biodiversity features: bat/bird boxes, bee bricks, hedgehog highways; 5,000+ trees proposed (incl. woodland/orchard), alongside protection/enhancement of existing TPO trees.
- Homes: PV panels, triple glazing, EV charging, wastewater heat recovery, reduced water use/water butts; ~5% betterment vs building regs; cited ~17,000 kg CO<sub>2</sub>/year saving vs baseline.
- Drainage: Sustainable Drainage Systems with attenuation basins; discharge limited to greenfield runoff rates plus climate change allowance; submitted to Somerset flood team.

**Programme (indicative):** Planning permission is targeted for this summer with hope to start on site by end of year; show homes summer next year (2027); first completions from Autumn/Q4 2027; football facilities likely 2028 following land transfer and club funding process.

#### **Q&A / discussion points:**

Martin Middleton (West Hatch Parish Council) raised concerns:

- Why mitigation funding targets septic tanks elsewhere rather than Chard sewage works capacity (and downstream impacts).
- Need to guard against “watering down” affordable housing delivery.
- Strong caution on estate management companies (quality, transparency, auditable accounts; enable resident control early, not at end).
- Also flagged LCN geography/boundaries: Chard-centred LCN not always a fit for parishes nearer the motorway; Taylor Wimpey landholdings/issues elsewhere (e.g., Blackdowns Vale).

Cllr Wakefield asked where affordable housing will be located (preference for pepper-potting) and whether there will be flats/ flats over garages.

Richard’s responses:

- **Wastewater capacity:** Wessex Water confirmed adequate capacity and their upgrade programme includes flows from the site; developer also pays statutory water infrastructure charges.
- **Affordable housing:** Will be pepper-potted; mix includes 1–2 bed flats and 2–4 bed houses; includes 7–8 wheelchair houses, sited on flatter areas to meet accessibility needs.
- **Estate management:** Charges and management company details must be clear to buyers pre-purchase; governed by New Homes Ombudsman; residents can change provider collectively if service poor (service-contract model).

Mark Palmer asked about bungalow provision due to ageing population; Richard said none proposed currently. Cllr Wakefield, from an adult social care perspective, expressed a preference for “houses for life”—homes that remain usable as needs change (e.g., ability to live downstairs with adaptable space/shower), rather than defaulting to bungalows. Richard said that homes are M4(2)\* compliant (adaptable/lifetime homes) with downstairs WC sized to allow conversion to wet room and potential for downstairs room to become bedroom if needed.

\*M4(2) standard is part of Building Regulations, England, which sets out minimum access standards for new homes. It's currently optional but expected to become the mandatory minimum standard across England.

## Item 5: Highways

### Highways maintenance – gully/grating repairs:

Mark described a recent repair where a rocking gully grating was re-bedded and the carriageway re-tarmacked, but the gully pot itself was left full of mud and a second nearby grating in similar condition was not addressed.

Jon Nicholson (Assistant Highways Service Manager) explained that re-bedding a gully frame/cover and cleaning the gully are separate jobs; the attending officer/contractor may complete the reset but not automatically raise the follow-on instruction to empty/clean the gully. Jon noted inspectors will always attend the reported location but may not always identify other defects nearby depending on approach direction/time and scope.

Mark raised concern that even if a pot is emptied, the connecting pipework may still be silted, and hand-clean teams typically cannot verify flow without equipment. Jon advised the published gully-clearing schedule/map is due to be updated, and confirmed additional funding has been allocated this financial year for gully cleaning (and related road repairs/sign cleaning), with the expectation of increased frequency to “re-establish” the network.

Mark was encouraged to report the gully online now it is known to be uncleared, and to include context/photos and flag that multiple gullies along the road are affected (to frame it as a system issue). Mark agreed that reporting online is worthwhile to ensure the council is aware, even if delivery depends on available finances.

**Highways maintenance – workmanship and oversight:** Martin said parish-level frustration often comes from crews fixing only the specific potholes on the list rather than assessing/repairing the next defects along the same stretch. He questioned value for money of quick/temporary pothole fixes that can fail quickly and asked for more proactive local assessment. Jon explained that during periods of exceptionally high pothole numbers, teams may do make-safe “plug” repairs quickly, then return for fuller repairs when conditions allow. They are looking at different ways of working to reduce missed issues, but noted crews are typically dispatched with a defined list and limited materials/time.

Martin further criticised temporary warning signs left up for months on rural lanes (including issues with cable ties and impacts on horse riders), asking for better sign removal and rural sensitivity. Jon said there are legal/financial mechanisms: under the New Roads and Street Works regulations a site is not complete until signs are removed, and financial penalties can apply; he passes sign-removal issues to the street works team to enforce but does not know contractual obligations.

**Enhanced Highways maintenance update:** Beth confirmed all parish clerks have been sent a letter about changes to the enhanced Highways maintenance scheme. Parishes were invited to raise any specific queries now or via email.

**Planned works:** Beth said information has been circulated about planned Highways works for financial year 2026/2027 in the Chard and Blackdowns LCN area as part of a commitment to be provide early information so communities can plan. Precise

locations for scheduled works are on the [Public Information Portal](#) under the heading “Capital Structure Maintenance Project” (noting schedules can change due to emergencies or weather). Beth advised checking the [Causeway One.Network](#) website for all other utility and contracted roadworks.

### **Item 6: Parsh Preparedness Survey**

Dr Paul Elliston (Resilience & Adaptation Community Outreach) explained the purpose of the parish preparedness survey: to give Somerset Council a clearer, parish-informed picture of the risks communities face (to support statutory risk assessment duties), because previous understanding has been largely top-down (national risk register → regionalised by police area) and inconsistent/anecdotal at parish level.

Survey results feed into a developing community resilience dashboard, combined with other data sources (for example census data and mapping such as flood risk by parish), to build a more detailed view down to local community network or parish level where possible. The dashboard framework looks across several strands of resilience, including perceived level of hazard/risk, how prepared communities feel to deal with hazards, wider social and economic context, community and communications infrastructure (as this affects emergency response).

The aim is to tailor support offered to communities, so it matches what parishes need (example given: work revealed some communities wanted to focus more on power outages than flooding). Parishes have also used the survey as a prompt to recognise gaps in preparedness; there is an open invitation to contact the team for additional support.

The survey was designed to be quick and low-burden (described as about five minutes, tick-box style), recognising parish councillor/clerk workloads. Thanks were given to parishes that returned responses (Chard, Hatch Beauchamp, Pitminster, Stoke St Mary, Tatworth and Forton, West Hatch). Parishes who have not completed it can request a copy to participate (to be circulated with meeting notes).

Early county-level findings (not enough responses yet for confident local community network-level analysis) indicate that top hazards reported (by frequency and severity) include strong winds, power cuts, and loss of access due to road issues (including disruption from roadworks and road traffic incidents), plus flooding and severe cold/snow/ice.

Preparedness scores are generally lower than risk scores. Relative strengths include strong sense of community, reasonable understanding of local risks, some ability to communicate internally/externally. Weaker areas identified include coordination/interface with formal emergency responders, training for volunteers/coordinators, resources and funding routes, plans/processes, equipment, and knowing how to use/manage it, keeping decision/action records during incidents to support learning and improvements after events.

Cllr Wakefield asked whether the work includes access to public defibrillators; response indicated the platform is being built in stages, starting with flooding-related risk management and adding other hazards later.

Mark said his area’s main concern is loss of electricity and the need for a warm, safe place, with the village hall being used as a refuge; they are exploring a tractor power take-off generator to keep heating etc. running during outages (noting they have some

flooding but not at a level driving their planning).

Paul emphasised that having a place of safety is a key part of community emergency response; signposted a place-of-safety scheme and grants for equipment (not generators), and suggested alternative approaches used elsewhere (for example power banks). Mark queried whether the Neroche area is captured in survey returns (as responses are split across constituent parishes); Beth agreed to double-check and come back to clarify.

### **Item 7: Storm Choudra Flood Recovery and Flood Resilience**

Emma Giffard (Flood Resilience Engagement Advisor) reported that it was the second wettest winter since 2014 (with 2014 the wettest since records began in 1871), emphasising increasing weather extremes and that communities need to plan for more volatility (wet extremes and drought conditions). January rainfall was around double normal, with about a third falling in two days; February was also around double normal. March then swung back to much drier conditions (around half of normal rainfall), highlighting rapid shifts.

During Storm Choudra, nearly 3,000 properties were protected by existing flood defences (various authorities). Around 180 properties were protected through pump deployment. The Environment Agency deployed high-capacity pumps to around 19 locations, initiating deployment before agreed trigger points were met. Emma said the response will be reviewed, but she defended the overall approach, noting pumps were in place when needed and would not necessarily have prevented all property flooding.

Around 80–90 properties were reported flooded across Somerset (noting flooding is significantly under-reported). Emma highlighted few or no reports from the Chard and Blackdowns area, and asked parishes to encourage residents to report flooding so it can be evidenced and prioritised for funding. In the neighbouring Levels and Moors LCN area, around 30 square miles of largely agricultural land flooded at peak; but only around 20 of the flooded properties reported were located in this area. Emma noted the challenge that funding is driven by the number of properties protected, which disadvantages sparsely populated flood-prone landscapes.

Flood warnings mainly cover river and coastal flooding; there is currently limited warning capability for surface water and some upper catchments due to lead-time/data limits. Nationally during Storm Chandra there were around 110 flood warnings, including three severe warnings (very rare); Dorset was described as more impacted than Somerset in this event. Emma recommended using Met Office severe weather warnings (useful where there is no local flood warning service), which includes newer rapid guidance tools for flash flooding.

Emma said Somerset is comparatively successful at attracting flood funding and support since 2014, helped by the Somerset Rivers Authority, with additional council tax funding supporting extra work. Some roads have been raised, and overall road impacts were described as less than 2014, though still significant in places.

Somerset Council has triggered a statutory investigation for the Bath Pool area (more than 10 properties reported flooded) whilst the Environment Agency is undertaking asset inspections, planning repairs, and reviewing trigger points and lessons learned.

### **Who is responsible for what (clarification for parishes):**

The Environment Agency has a strategic overview, operates certain assets, is an emergency responder, and has a duty to warn/inform.

For designated main rivers, the Environment Agency has powers to act but does not have a general duty to maintain every watercourse; work is prioritised based on national funding, impact, and legal duties (for example as landowner).

Most smaller channels locally are ordinary watercourses: oversight/permissions/enforcement typically sit with Somerset Council, or with an internal drainage board in low-lying areas where relevant.

Riparian landowners have legal responsibilities for watercourse maintenance to the centre line of the watercourse; Emma referenced guidance available via government information on “owning a watercourse”.

### **Discussion / actions:**

Mark asked for a link to the legal guidance on riparian duties; Emma agreed to send links via Beth for circulation.

Cllr Wakefield raised that Ruishton experiences repeated bank overtopping and wants someone to speak with them about what happened and whether resilience measures are sufficient; Emma said the Environment Agency is happy to talk directly and encouraged contact.

For flooding/road safety signage queries, Emma suggested raising road issues with Paul as well, while also offering Environment Agency support for the flooding aspects.

### **Item 8: Future Agenda Items/Speakers**

Our next meeting date is confirmed as **7:00pm Thursday 7<sup>th</sup> July 2026 at The Guildhall, Chard (in-person only) for our Annual General Meeting**. No specific suggestions received for agenda/speakers. Requests can be made via email should anyone think of anything. At the AGM meeting, a chair would normally be elected, but future arrangements are uncertain pending the outcome of the wider community engagement review. In the meantime, business continues as usual.

Beth reflected on the trial of **daytime vs evening meetings**: attendance has not materially changed, but daytime meetings have enabled **officer attendance** that is harder in the evenings.

### Item 9: Anything else

Flagged urgent financial support for low-income households struggling with heating oil costs, noting this is particularly relevant for rural homes. Asked parishes to direct residents to Citizens Advice Somerset (with phone option for those without internet) [Citizens Advice Somerset - Crisis Resilience Fund](#)

Promoted free National Health Service cardiovascular health checks currently available at Chard, Taunton and Wellington libraries for people aged 40–74, with an additional dementia check for people aged 65+. Encouraged residents to check dates/locations and book. [Health Check Locations](#).

Highlighted that Step Up Somerset (Somerset Council funded) continue to offer free/subsidised workshops covering topics linked to mental/physical wellbeing and encouraged sharing with networks [Step Up Somerset - Community Learning](#)

Mentioned Wessex Water drop-in sessions to help with bills and general water supply enquiries [Wessex Water - Community Drop-ins](#)

Beth asked for constructive feedback on the first edition of the Chard and Blackdowns LCN newsletter, explaining the aim was a more engaging format than standard forwarded emails. Mark suggested sharing the newsletter via parish social media and notice boards to raise awareness of the LCN and its purpose. Beth confirmed there is no official LCN social media page, but parishes and organisations are welcome to share on their own channels and print for notice boards. Please send Beth local items/events to include in future editions.

### Item 10: Close and networking

Beth thanked speakers and attendees for their input and closed the meeting.

### SUMMARY OF ACTIONS:

1. All parishes to review the letter on the Enhanced Highways Maintenance Scheme changes and send any specific questions to [mike.odowdjones@somerset.gov.uk](mailto:mike.odowdjones@somerset.gov.uk) and/or [chardandblackdownslcn@somerset.gov.uk](mailto:chardandblackdownslcn@somerset.gov.uk)
2. Parishes to report gullies/drainage issues online, ideally with photos and noting if there are multiple affected gullies (to evidence a wider problem).
3. Parishes to encourage residents to report flooding incidents so they are evidenced for prioritisation and funding.
4. Emma Gifford to circulate links/guidance on riparian landowner responsibilities.
5. Cllr Wakefield to advise Ruishton Parish Council to contact the Environment Agency for a discussion on repeated river overtopping, what happened in the recent event, and whether current resilience measures are sufficient.
6. Cllr Wakefield to advise Ruishton Parish Council to raise issue of road sign placement during flooding with Highways and Somerset Rivers Authority, with Environment Agency input on flooding context if needed.
7. Appeal to parishes who have not yet completed the parish preparedness survey to use it to identify gaps and request support where needed.
8. Parishes to consider registering/aligning with the [Place of Safety](#) scheme and explore available grants for resilience equipment (noting generators are not funded)

under the cited scheme).

9. Partners to provide feedback to Beth on the Chard and Blackdowns LCN newsletter, send items/events for inclusion and share among their networks as they see fit.
10. Partners to send Beth suggestions for future agenda topics and speakers ahead of the next meeting.

#### **APPENDICES:**

Presentation – LCN: [Click here to view](#)

Guest Speaker (Arts Engagement & Outreach): [Click here to view](#)

Guest Speaker (Mount Hindrance, Chard): [Click here to view](#)

Guest Speaker (Parish Preparedness): [Click here to view](#)

Guest Speaker (Storm Choudra): [Click here to view](#)

Parish Preparedness Survey: [Click here to view](#)

Enhanced Maintenance - New Process Letter 080426: [Click here to view](#)

Enhanced Maintenance - Parish Information Sheet: [Click here to view](#)

Newsletter: [Click here to view](#)