

Small Improvement Schemes briefing note.

All parishes in the division are potentially affected by the SIS programme, so this briefing is being sent to all.

I am afraid it is necessarily very lengthy, and if you are interested in pursuing an SIS, you will need to read all of it and carefully consider the points I am setting out here.

- There are some action points near the end where I am asking clerks to respond as soon as you can, please.

I have now received my mandatory SIS training, which allows me to propose two schemes in each financial year.

The window opened last week for proposals to be put forward, and it will close on October 31.

Contrary to the information councillors were given at our welcome day shortly after I was elected, there will not be any other application windows this year.

So, if I do not meet the October 31 deadline, we lose a year.

However, with any scheme that I propose, there is no guarantee that it will actually be accepted into the SIS programme this year.

After submitting an application, the county will use a scorecarding process to reach conclusions about 'deliverability', looking at key aspects of the project, such as how it sits with the aims of their strategic transport plan, safety, the need to purchase any land, ongoing maintenance costs, and other factors.

I will be involved in the scorecarding exercise, which will happen during November.

Decisions on which schemes are going to be accepted for the current programme are then announced in January, 2018, and an explanation will be given for any which do not make the cut. There is a budget of around £2 million for SIS, so any rejection will not be on cost grounds alone.

There is no upper or lower cost limit for a scheme, although if we were looking at more than £100,000, then it is likely to be bumped across to whomever deals with 'large' schemes - and I have not yet had experience of what happens there.

If a parish council is able to contribute toward the cost of a SIS, or can obtain some funding (in cash or in kind) from a third party, then that will improve the chances of a scheme being progressed, although it will not necessarily make the scheme any easier to deliver.

There is a reluctance to work on projects which look uncertain at the outset to be delivered or where it becomes clear from an early stage. This is because the cost of such work has to be set against the county's revenue budget (which is subject to severe downward pressures), while completed schemes come out of the allocated capital budget.

If a parish council is funding the full cost of a SIS, then the scheme can be progressed in parallel with any which I propose and it will not come out of my allocation of two schemes.

County council officers can also propose a SIS where they have identified an issue themselves, and this would be in addition to my own allocation of two schemes.

Please be aware - and I believe I have already mentioned this to a number of parishes - that from making an application to actually seeing the scheme completed, can be many months and even some years.

The feasibility work and design of a scheme can take up to 18 months, and it can easily be another 18 months before work is completed.

There will be at least two rounds of public consultation with any SIS, one after a feasibility study to ask for public views on what should be done, and then another one when the proposed design is finished in order to receive feedback on it.

Any strong objections would cause some delay, while the points were assessed and where possible mitigated.

If a scheme is being fully funded by a parish council or third party, then the consultation is with the parish council and not the public.

Where parishes border another county council division, then it is possible for me to liaise with my neighbouring county councillor and put forward a joint SIS (which would count as one for each of us, leaving us one more each).

Action point coming up:

I am aware that several schemes may previously have been promised to parish councils in the division, although none were actually proposed.

- Can I please therefore ask each of you to let me have details of any SIS pledges made to you, together with the date and a copy of the council minutes where they were recorded and any other supporting correspondence.
- If you have not been promised a SIS but would like one, then please also notify me, especially if it is for an issue which has been discussed and minuted.

I feel it is not the fault of parish councils that promised schemes have not yet been progressed, and my current line of thinking is to pick up the ones where councils have been waiting longest and to work through them in date order, which I can see may take us well into the quadrennial.

However, I am open to discussion on that point, as there may well be some schemes which are needed much more urgently than others.

I will liaise individually with you after receiving details of pledges and/or requests and I will want to visit and discuss on site with councillors as soon as possible, because time is short.

Action point coming up:

Public support/need is an essential requirement for any SIS proposal, even before any public consultation is carried out as part of the process.

- I therefore need to see any evidence to date which has been collected to show that a SIS is needed and that it is being supported by parishioners. I.e, letters/emails from the public to yourselves or your councillors, minutes of meetings where the public have raised the issue, etc.

Action point coming up:

We do not at this point have to say what SIS we want carried out - that will be decided during the feasibility and design stages.

What we do need to do, is say what is the issue we want to resolve. The focus at this stage is only on the issue. The focus at this stage is only on the issue. {repeated for emphasis}

So, for instance, we don't say we would like a 20 mph zone and pedestrian crossing installed in such and such a street.

But we do say, pedestrians in such and such street are at risk of injury from vehicle movements due to the narrowness of the carriageway and absence of footways, which is of particular concern when parents walk with young children because it is a main route to and from school, and we would like to resolve this by means of a SIS.

- Can I please therefore ask each of you to identify the issue for which you would like me to submit a SIS.

Action point coming up:

As mentioned, I am aware some parish councils would like to fund the full cost of a SIS, and in such circumstances I believe you can say what scheme you want carried out, but there is still a need to identify the issue involved and to demonstrate public support.

- Can you please confirm to me as soon as you can what those schemes are, although there is not the same time pressure involved with submissions.

Lastly, the SIS submission form is a deceptively simple two-page document, but the quality and depth of the answers I give to the eight or nine questions it asks will in large measure determine the success of the applications.

This is my first experience of SIS, so it is a learning curve for me and I am conscious of the responsibilities which are now on my shoulders. I will do my very best for each of you.

**Somerset County Council, Blackdown and Neroche division Cllr
Wellington Town Council, Wellington North ward Cllr**