

Withdrawal from Afghanistan

We will all have watched the coverage of the British Forces' withdrawal from Afghanistan with, I expect, very mixed feelings - pride in what our forces have achieved and their contribution to the evacuation, matched by concern for Afghan people forced to flee the country and those left behind.

SKDC has supported Government efforts and offered to resettle two families from Afghanistan within the district as part of Lincolnshire's contribution.

Our particular concerns should be for those whose lives are in danger because they helped British forces personnel, and others, in Afghanistan and it is right that we do all we can for them now that they need our assistance.

If they had stayed in their own country, they would undoubtedly have faced persecution and we are happy to help them start a new life here in South Kesteven.

Stamford Diversity Festival

The situation in Afghanistan brings home the need for us to acknowledge and interact positively with other cultures and nationalities, something superb illustrated at the recent Stamford Diversity Festival.

I was among the visitors to the festival and enjoyed the incredible variety of world music, arts and crafts and great food and drink available at the Recreation Ground.

It also proved to be a brilliant way for charities and organisations working locally, such as Stamford's Second Helpings and MindSpace Stamford, to further engage with the wider community.

Well over 1,000 people attended the festival and its organisers should be congratulated. I hope we can encourage similar eye-opening and thought-provoking events in the future.

SKDC Community Fund

I took pride in knowing that a £5,000 grant from the SKDC Community Fund went towards the cost of the Diversity Festival.

In the last round alone our Community Fund panel allocated more than £30,000 to community projects. There were ten successful applications across the district with money going to everything from setting up a nature trail, to an artwork project to support mental health. Once again, we have been able to fund an amazing range of grass-roots projects.

Locally, **Greatford Village Hall** can now replace old metal windows, wooden doors, rotten sills and refurbish its main hall floor, thanks to a £5,000 grant towards the second stage of its refurbishment project

And **Carlby Playing Field** can now install a combined climbing frame and slide on the children's play area thanks to a grant of £5,000.

The next closing date for funding applications is 22 October. For more information go to communityfund@southkesteven.gov.uk

SKCommunity Awards

Again illustrating just how much we value the community effort that makes our district tick, we have now shortlisted nominees in our Community Awards. Details of those shortlisted will be published in the next edition of SKToday, hitting doorsteps later this month.

More than 120 nominations were received across eight awards, ranging from celebrating youth initiatives to helping the environment, business contributions, supporting culture, boosting wellbeing and neighbourliness.

Two further awards for Volunteer of the Year and Community Group of the Year awards will be judged by SKDC from the short listed nominations in each category. We will be naming the category winners in October.

Arts and culture

There has understandably been widespread media interest in the council's ongoing review of how we provide much-valued arts and culture services, including some worrying headlines about the future of our Arts Centres.

While the review is still ongoing, I want to make it clear that none of our arts venues are at risk of closure. This review is more about how we deliver the service.

SKDC has a long history of supporting arts and culture in recognition of the contribution they make to the social well-being of the district. What we are doing is exploring a number of options for ensuring that a vibrant arts and culture programme is not only maintained, but also developed.

On the good news front, I saw for myself how the long-awaited restoration and redecoration of the Georgian Ballroom at Stamford arts centre is now under way.

We have also just announced a fantastic autumn season of shows and screenings details of which are available at <http://www.southkesteven.gov.uk/index.aspx?articleid=15557>

Progress on new housing

It's good to see progress on new council housing and I recently visited Meadow Close, Bourne, to see progress of a development of four flats and three bungalows. There is another development in the pipeline for Trinity Road in Stamford.

Quality housing is essential for everyone, and we are committed to working with our partners to provide sustainable new homes that people want and need – a key element of our corporate strategy.

Developing new homes in line with housing demand also helps to free up other, larger properties within the SKDC stock to ensure more residents have somewhere to live that suits their needs.

Still time for a green bin

With autumn now upon us, it's worth remembering that you can still sign up for a green bin for hedge trimmings, fallen leaves, grass cuttings, plants and weeds that will be collected from your doorstep every two weeks – you can even order an additional bin if you've already got one.

Join the 31,000 households that have signed up to our Garden Waste Collection Service by visiting www.southkesteven.gov.uk/greenbin to join.

Councillor Mike Exton

I cannot finish without paying tribute to my fellow councillor Mike Exton, whose passing has left a huge hole in the Stamford community.

In addition to being a South Kesteven councillor for 16 years and Chairman in 2008-9, Mike was a former Mayor of Stamford (2003-4), a serving Stamford Town Councillor and a former Lincolnshire County Councillor.

Mike was all things a councillor should be - passionate about public service, always available and willing to help. He was a true Stamfordian and will be sorely missed.