

SOMERSET COUNTY COUNCIL
Adam Dance and Jo Roundell Greene
Report for MARCH 2023

The last few weeks have been extremely busy with many budget meetings and review of the ongoing preparations for the new Somerset Council. Vesting day, when all the services will move to one place and the District Councils cease to exist, is only four weeks away.

Residents will be able to access services from one central telephone number and email address. The new website will be up and running from day one. Please let us know if you have any problems.

We have been working with Highways to get potholes filled and blocked drains cleared with some success. If you have areas that need attention in your village, please let us know and we will do our best to get the team out to look at the problem and get it on the list. As ever money is tight and the worst areas will be prioritised.

Below is our report from the County Council, giving details of recent decisions and news from across the Council. There are five areas giving information where residents can get involved with consultations and volunteering.

We are always happy to hear from you and will do our best to help if you have a problem.

Best wishes

Adam and Jo

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Budget approved for new Somerset Council

The budget for the new Somerset Council has been approved.

Councillor Liz Leyshon, Deputy Leader and Executive Lead Member for Finance and Human Resources, said: "This has been the most difficult budget setting that any of us can remember. Inflation has been a huge pressure on the cost of providing council services and post-Covid we have seen rises in demand from Somerset residents for very complex support from both Adult Social Care and Children's Services."

The budget confirms an overall rise of 4.99% in the council's share of council tax, made up of a basic rise of 2.99 per cent in council tax and the 2 per cent adult social care levy. The increase is in line with Government policy and councils across the UK that have responsibility for Adult Social Care and Children's Services.

The first budget for Somerset Council includes substantial increases in funding for Adult Social Care and Children's Services by £28million and £19 million respectively, to reflect that growth in demand and cost.

The new budget provides start-up support for the Local Community Networks (LCN) and has protected funding for the voluntary and community sector.

Cllr Leyshon continued: “We have had the challenge of bringing five council budgets together into the new unitary Somerset Council. In doing this we’ve been at great pains to defend the frontline services that touch everybody’s lives.

“We are prioritising support for our most vulnerable residents, but we have rejected options to close some of our household waste recycling centres and all of our libraries will remain open with unchanged hours. That won’t be the case elsewhere in the country, but I feel we have a contract with residents, both through council tax and voting, and they expect their council tax to be spent on services available to all. We would have not been able to do this without the savings that have come from the move to a single council.

“Of course, we know a great many residents are struggling to deal with the cost-of-living crisis. We have created a new and simplified Council Tax Reduction Scheme and in creating the new Council we have also expanded the Exceptional Hardship Scheme to the whole of Somerset and increased the funds available for people who need support for the first time, or more support with their household overhead costs.”

The Council dropped a proposal to remove funding for many parish grit bins after the option was criticised during public consultation and through Scrutiny, and will now concentrate on pilot projects to work with local communities to improve gritting of the secondary network of roads in Somerset.

The rise in Somerset Council’s share of Council Tax is made up of basic rise of 2.99 per cent in Council Tax and the 2 per cent adult social care levy. As a result of these proposals the council tax proposed for a Band D property will increase by £78.24 each year, or £1.50 per week.

New Constitution: Strategic with a local focus

The new Constitution for Somerset Council, the legal cornerstone of the new unitary council, has been approved by Somerset County Council. The ten-part document - over 500 pages - sets out the Council’s commitment to public participation in its meetings, makes sure that the council meets all its legal duties and supports decision-making and governance.

The new Constitution sets out how Somerset Council will operate; how it will make decisions and the steps needed to make sure the new authority’s decisions are efficient, transparent and accountable to local people.

Residents’ rights – from voting in elections, submitting petitions and attending council meetings to making a complaint or compliment, and inspecting the council’s accounts – are detailed in one section.

Council Leader, Cllr Bill Revans, said: “This has been a mammoth task. It’s important to say that the Constitution is not set in tablets of stone, nor is it an inflexible blueprint – it will be reviewed and updated as we move forward.

“One of the most important sections of our new Constitution sets out very clearly how our residents can get involved with the council, whether that’s by coming to meetings and speaking, attend their Local Community Network, suggesting topics for our Scrutiny Committees or taking part in consultations on local issues like the annual budget.”

The new constitution details the roles and responsibilities of the 110 elected members, sets out the Code of Conduct and explains the roles and duties of the Chair, Leader and Executive.

It sets out committee structures and procedures, including the planning and licensing and regulatory committees, how the 18 Local Community Networks (LCNs) will operate and the make-up of their membership, how delegated decision-making will work, as well as policies and protocols.

New committees and changes include:

- a Strategic Planning Committee and four area-based Planning Committees
- a statutory Licensing and Regulatory Committee and sub-committees
- 18 Local Community Networks
- 5 Overview and Scrutiny Committees

The Constitution's ten principal sections were developed, debated and scrutinised by members of the Constitution and Governance Committee throughout the past year. Best practice in other Somerset councils was reviewed, as well as other recently established unitary authorities.

Council Plan sets priorities for new Somerset Council

With one month to go until the launch for the new unitary Somerset Council, councillors have published the priorities for the new Council. The new Council Plan was approved unanimously at a meeting of the outgoing Somerset County Council, whose councillors will form the new Somerset Council.

The Somerset Council Plan highlights four key priorities. A further Business Plan, outlining how the Council will deliver services in support of these priorities, will be developed in the coming months.

The key priorities for the new Council are:

- A Greener, More Sustainable Somerset
- A Healthy and Caring Somerset
- A Fairer, Ambitious Somerset, and
- A Flourishing and Resilient Somerset

The text of the Council Plan is available here:

<http://democracy.somerset.gov.uk/documents/s25969/Paper%20B%20-%20Appendix%20B%20-%20Council%20Plan%20Final%20Text.pdf>

Latest Ofsted and Care Quality Commission review shows improvements in Somerset's SEND services

An Ofsted and Care Quality Commission letter has shown improvements in Special Educational Needs and/or Disabilities (SEND) services in Somerset. Inspectors carried out a re-visit of the SEND Local Area Partnership (Somerset County Council, NHS Somerset and schools) in late 2022, and released their letter, detailing progress to the Partnership in February.

The re-visit focused on whether sufficient progress had been made to address each of the nine areas of significant weakness detailed in the initial inspection letter published in May 2020. Inspectors agreed that seven out of the nine former areas of significant weakness have improved.

The Inspectors noted that Somerset's SEND leaders had improved how they work together and had acted to ensure that parents were included in the development of services. Children have benefited from recent improvements such as the development of new specialist schools and bases within schools.

Two areas of weakness remain and the Somerset Local Area Partnership will make it a priority to improve these services for children:

- Too many children and young people not accessing education because of the disproportionate use of exclusion and poor inclusive practices across the area.
- Poor assessment and meeting of need caused by inconsistent practice leading to poor outcomes for children and young people with SEND.

The Partnership acknowledges that some children with SEND still face difficulties with accessing education with the right support to help them learn and reach their full potential.

The partnership's new SEND strategy will be published in the spring, the draft plan can be read here:

<https://beta.somerset.gov.uk/education-and-families/the-local-offer/about-the-local-offer/somerset-plan-for-improving-send-services/#What's%20next:%20the%20SEND%20strategy>

Domestic abuse service supports record numbers of young people

Somerset County Council's domestic abuse service has supported a record number of young people seeking support during 2022/23.

Somerset Integrated Domestic Abuse Service (SIDAS) helpline took 301 calls from people between the age of 16 – 20-year-olds since April last year, compared to 128 in 2021/22 – a nearly three times increase.

Proportionately young people experience the highest rates of domestic abuse of any age group. For many, experiences of domestic abuse begin in their childhood home. It is estimated that 1 in 5 children are exposed to domestic abuse. This means that for many young people, their experience of domestic abuse does not begin in their own relationships, but in the childhood home when witnessing adult relatives in abusive relationships.

Young people experiencing relationships that cause them to feel scared, controlled or who are being harmed can find local, non-judgemental help and support by contacting SIDAS on 0800 69 49 999 or online at www.somersetsurvivors.org.uk.

Young people in abusive relationships often experience partners who:

- Constantly check their phone and/or emails without permission
- Put them down in front of others or to their face
- Try to stop them seeing family and friends
- Have mood swings and explosive temper
- Are Possessive or is extremely jealous
- Makes false accusations
- Asks them to take part in 'sexting'
- Makes them have sex without consent
- Makes them watch pornography or films them having sex
- Tells them what they can/can't wear, where they can/can't go
- Physically hurts them in any way
- Tells them they will hurt themselves/someone else if they don't do something

Any relationship that does not make someone feel good is an unhealthy relationship.

For young people demonstrating harmful behaviour, and for those they are harming, help and support is available - visit www.somersetsurvivors.org.uk or call 0800 69 49 999 to know more.

In an emergency, call the police on 999. If you can't speak, listen to the question and then tap or cough to answer. Press 55 to signal an emergency.

Secondary school places announced for 2023/2024 academic year

Figures show that 4,785 secondary school applications were received this year compared to 4,866 in 2022. In total, 92.8% of children received a place at their first preference school, with 98.12% offered one of their top three choices.

From the applications received this year, figures show:

- 1st preference met – 4,439 (92.8%)
- 2nd preference met – 232 (4.85%)
- 3rd preference met – 24 (0.5%)

Parents and carers of children not offered one of their three secondary school preferences have various options available to them. To find out more visit: <https://beta.somerset.gov.uk/education-and-families/applying-for-a-school/refused-a-place-at-your-preferred-school/>

Parents who applied by the deadline for places for children starting Primary School in September 2023 or moving from infant to junior or first to middle school, will find out which school place they have been offered in April.

New recycling regulations coming into force: pilot programme launched to help Somerset businesses comply

New recycling regulations for businesses are coming soon and Somerset is one of five areas nationally to pilot a business support programme, designed to prepare its businesses for the change.

The new regulations will require all businesses, healthcare establishments and academic institutions to separate glass bottles and jars, metal food and drink cans, plastic bottles, pots, tubs and trays, paper, cardboard and food waste from their general waste.

Somerset County Council are working with WRAP, a global sustainability charity, to deliver the pilot, which will take place for 10 weeks between 13 February and 21 April 2023. The pilot will promote the launch of a new Business of Recycling website which will provide a waste calculator tool to help businesses monitor how much waste they generate and how recycling can help them save money, step-by-step guidance to ensure they are compliant with the regulations and free downloadable communication resources to promote recycling in the workplace.

In addition, dedicated face-to-face Business Advisory support will be available in Langport, Ilminster and Chard to help businesses understand how the regulations will affect them, what they need to do and what resources are available to help them.

As this will be a regulatory requirement, it is likely that an enforcement officer will undertake checks in future and ask to see evidence that businesses are complying with the new rules. For more information, please visit: www.businessofrecycling.com

Do you have what it takes to “Step Up” to social work in Somerset?

Somerset County Council is looking for the right people to start a challenging and rewarding career making a real difference to the lives of children and families. Somerset’s ‘Step Up to Social Work’ programme offers a unique opportunity to train for a career in social work and receive a tax-free bursary of almost £20,000 during your studies.

Successful completion of the 14-month training programme leads to a Postgraduate Diploma in Social Work, enabling you to apply to register and practice as a Social Worker. Your placement with Somerset Council will give you hands-on experience of real-life social work.

Our great Social Workers build relationships with families facing difficult times, have lots of patience and are good listeners. You’ll need good observational skills, analytical thinking and sound judgement to make the right decisions to protect children. Social work regularly tests emotional resilience, stamina, maturity and resolve - all of which you’ll need to succeed. Social work can be life changing for those you support.

Recruitment for our programme is open now, with assessments scheduled for June and July 2023, with a January 2024 study start date. The programme runs once every two years, dependent on Government funding so if you are interested, don’t miss out – apply now!

To apply, you’ll have a minimum Level 6 degree – a Graduate Certificate or a BA or BSc Honours at 2:2 or above in any subject, and GCSEs in English or English Language and Mathematics at grade C or above (or an approved equivalent). We encourage applications from a diverse range of candidates and aim to have a workforce that represents the society we serve.

For more information and to sign up for the programme please visit: <https://susw.eu-careers.pocketrecruiter.com/>

Not all heroes wear capes - Somerset’s community stalwarts celebrated in this year’s Chair’s Awards

Gold-hearted community heroes from across Somerset have been recognised at the latest Somerset County Council Chair’s Award for Service to the Community.

The awards-giving has been an annual event for many years and this year’s ceremony at Taunton Rugby Club was attended by 140 people, including 43 nominees from areas right across Somerset.

The award recipients were nominated by their parish and town councils for recognition of their outstanding contribution to their communities, and were presented with a signed certificate and gift by the Chair of Somerset County Council, Cllr Mike Best, followed by a buffet reception to celebrate their achievements.

GET INVOLVED

Have your say on how new Somerset Council will consult on planning and development

Somerset residents are being invited to have their say on the new Somerset Council's approach to planning matters.

The five current Somerset councils (Mendip District Council, Sedgemoor District Council, Somerset County Council, Somerset West and Taunton Council and South Somerset District Council) are consulting the public on a draft 'Statement of Community Involvement' (SCI) – a single approach to planning which will be formally adopted by the new Somerset Council.

The SCI is designed to set out how Somerset Council, as the Local Planning Authority, will engage and consult with the community and stakeholders on all planning matters. It will cite who the Council will consult with through the various stages of Local Plan preparation and what consultation methods should be used. Notably, it will include how the Council involves people and organisations when assessing and deciding on planning applications for new developments, and any expectations for developers and agents when engaging with those who may be affected.

The consultation will run until Thursday 16 March 2023.

To view the current draft of the new Statement of Community Involvement and complete the survey, please visit <https://somerset.inconsult.uk/sci/consultationHome>

Have your say in the School Term Dates and Holidays Consultation

Somerset's residents have been invited to have their say on proposed school holiday, term and staff training dates for Voluntary Controlled and Community Schools for the next two years.

Somerset County Council has published two separate consultations: one for the 2024/25 academic year and one for the 2025/26 academic year. Both consultations are open to the general public, but are particularly relevant to all school staff, parents and caregivers with responsibility for school age children. Academies and other school types set their own dates, but may choose to align their dates with neighbouring schools.

The consultations include proposed school holiday dates, term dates and 'inset days' (school staff training days when pupils stay at home) run from 13th February until the 17th March, with results being published in April this year.

Inset days are set by individual schools and can vary considerably. The consultation seeks feedback on the idea that schools co-ordinate their inset days. This could help parents plan childcare and holiday arrangements, help schools work together which may save money and have more impact.

To complete the consultation for the 2024 to 2025 academic year visit:
<https://somerset.inconsult.uk/Termdates2425/consultationHome>

To complete the consultation for the 2025 to 2026 academic year visit:
<https://somerset.inconsult.uk/Termdates2526/consultationHome>

The consultation runs from Monday 13th February until the 17th March with results being published in April.

Could you support a child in care in Somerset? Route1 Advocacy in need of new volunteers

More volunteers are needed to help children in care and act as a significant someone in their lives.

For many children in care, everyone who features in their day-to-day lives is part of the care system. Somerset County Council's Route1 Advocacy service is seeking Advocates and Independent Visitors in both short and long term roles to spend quality time with these children and transform their lives.

The independent visitor role involves taking a long-term interest in the life of a young person in care – something which many of them have never experienced. Trained volunteers are matched with a child in care and provide an invaluable service, one which is potentially life-changing for the young person involved, and even for the volunteer themselves.

Volunteers are asked to commit to visiting their young person in care twice a month for two years. Visits are intended to be fun, supportive and to allow the child in question time to spend with someone they look forward to seeing and trust.

Those who are unable to commit to a long-term role may be interested in becoming a Route1 volunteer advocate instead. This opportunity is about assisting children and young people with having a voice at meetings about their wellbeing, where their own wishes and feelings are made clear.

Advocacy is a short-term commitment, in which new advocates attend an additional 2 days of training before being added to a 'bank' of volunteer advocates, to be contacted when needed.

Full training is provided by Route 1 Advocacy. To find out more about the roles and apply, please visit: <https://volunteering.somerset.gov.uk/route1>

You can also visit the Facebook page at: www.facebook.com/volunteeringatsomersetcountycouncil

Alternatively, email Volunteers@somerset.gov.uk or call 01823 359200 to make a difference to young people in your community.

Council wants your feedback on transport in rural communities

Somerset County Council is joining forces with About Community Engagement (ACE), to see how engagement on transport in rural areas can be improved.

The aim is to make it easier for rural communities to talk the Council about transport and reach solutions that work for everyone.

The Council is also in the early stages of writing a new Local Transport Plan (LTP), which will set out the strategy for improving and maintaining the transport network across the County.

Somerset County Council and ACE are also attending the Watchet Street Fair on Sunday 5 March (10am to 4pm), which is a fantastic opportunity to come and have your say on rural engagement and transport. We have also worked with community leaders in Exmoor to organise a drop-in coffee morning at Dulverton Town Hall on Saturday 4 March (9 to 11am).

Your comments will be used to inform the development of our Local Transport Plan, making sure Somerset's streets are a welcoming place for everyone.

You can find more information and get involved on our Commonplace site: [Have Your Say Today - Somerset Sustainable Transport - Commonplace](#).

Could you help get people to crucial medical appointments? Volunteer drivers needed urgently across Somerset

People across Somerset with no transport of their own need help to get to important medical appointments.

From routine checks to cardiology and cancer-related care, these Somerset residents benefit enormously from reliable volunteer drivers to get them there.

Somerset County Council's current volunteer drivers are in need of new recruits, to support the NHS and the Council in ensuring patients get the care and treatment that they need.

The team also support adults and children with journeys relating to social care.

It is an ideal opportunity for anybody over 18 with a full UK driving licence and four-door car to do something for their community; especially those who enjoy driving and meeting new people. Patients appreciate the opportunity to chat to their drivers, since some live in socially or geographically isolated situations.

Pat Ryan, who has been one of Somerset County Council's volunteer drivers for 10 years, said:

"I feel I'm doing something useful for the community in which I live. I've been lucky with my health throughout my life, and I want to help people who have not had the same luck.

"I've been a volunteer driver for 10 years now and thoroughly enjoy taking passengers to hospital for their routine appointments.

"Driving around beautiful Somerset is not really a hardship!"

For each journey carried out by a volunteer driver, a mileage reimbursement rate of 45p per mile or 50p per mile loaded is applied.

To find out more about the role and apply, please visit: <https://volunteering.somerset.gov.uk/drive/>

Alternatively, you can email Volunteers@somerset.gov.uk or call 01823 359200 to make a difference in your community.