

SOMERSET COUNCIL

Adam Dance and Jo Roundell Greene

Report for April 2023

April 1st was Vesting Day, when the new Somerset Council came into being. All the months of hard work preparing for this day were realised and we said goodbye to the old District and County Councils. It was sad after nearly 50 years of South Somerset District Council and out thanks to everyone who has been involved in the council in one way or another over the years.

In the new council Adam continues to lead on Public Health, Equality and Diversity and Jo now has the role of Associate Lead for Children's Services, with an emphasis on schools.

We have both had meetings with leading health workers, in the last few weeks, to try and find ways of improving access to health services for our residents. There is a glimmer of hope that will focus on using our pharmacies to a greater degree, which should help free up GP practices. We will keep you informed of any progress.

We now have responsibility for planning, which will be considered on the old district area, with one planning committee for South Somerset. Applications will be decided against the existing Local Plan. There will be a county wide regulation committee.

Thank you for all your support over the last eleven months as we prepared for our new roles. If you have any questions or concerns please get in touch and we will do what we can to help.

Best wishes

Adam and Jo

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Somerset Council is here – flags fly as new era dawns

Flags are flying as a new era dawns in Somerset with the official launch of Somerset Council.

The new, single council's logo features on flags that are flying at council offices in Bridgwater, Shepton Mallet, Taunton and Yeovil.

Somerset Council replaces the four district councils, Mendip, Sedgemoor, Somerset West and Taunton, and South Somerset, and Somerset County Council, bringing services, staff, and elected members under one umbrella.



This will free up resources, including £18million every year, to protect jobs and services; grow Somerset's voice nationally; help to deliver the investment in business and infrastructure; and drive action to tackle climate change.

The change will make it easier for customers to access the services they need – there will be a single telephone number 0300 123 2224 and a single website www.somerset.gov.uk. The number of Customer Access Points across Somerset is almost doubling from 12 to 19.

Somerset Council, with 110 councillors, will be one of the largest unitary councils in England – with 512 services – and its scale will enable innovative approaches to tackling the big challenges faced today.

Cllr Bill Revans, Leader of Somerset County Council, said: “This is the biggest shake up of local government in Somerset for 50 years. While people will see some immediate benefits, such as simpler ways to get in touch, there won't be a big difference right away.

“In the years ahead, services will be more joined-up and we can use this powerful new council to take on the big challenges such as improving opportunities for young people, managing the impacts of an ageing population, and addressing the cost-of-living and climate crises.”

Cllr Val Keitch, Executive Member for Local Government Reorganisation and Prosperity, added: “The new council will have strong links with local communities built in. The introduction of 18 Local Community Networks (LCNs) across the county will involve a wide range of people and partners with real power to influence the issues that matter to them.

“Creating a new council is a complex project that we've delivered on time and on budget. That is thanks to hardworking council staff working collaboratively for the good of our county. This exemplifies how in Somerset we get the job done.”

Ambitious plans to transform education in Somerset

Ambitious plans to transform education and drive improvements in Somerset schools have been unveiled. Somerset Council's new five-year education strategy was shared with professionals from across schools, local authorities, Ofsted and the Department for Education at the Somerset Education for Life event, held at Fleet Air Arm Museum in Yeovil on 21st March.

The new plans have been developed following reports that Somerset is in the top ten Local Authorities nationally for the proportion of inadequate schools, and recent poor exam results across the board.

Clear 5-year goals were proposed at the event, including:

- Improved access to support in the early years of life so that every child is ready to start school confidently
- Increased inclusion in all schools, educational settings and in our communities so every child is actively involved in their education 100% of the time
- Strong and supportive leadership capacity within and between Somerset schools so that improvement is shared, sustainable and educational outcomes are improved in every key phase
- Ensuring young people have access to further and higher education in the county, so they can develop adaptable skills equipping them to join and progress in the workforce in Somerset.

The Strategy was shaped and informed by research conducted by think and action-tank the Centre for Education and Youth (CFEY), who attended the event. CFEY's research led to a recommendation that Somerset's schools and the Council should work more closely together to achieve the ambitious targets outlined in the Strategy. As a result, schools from across the county and Council education professionals have committed to join forces to tackle challenges head on, support each other, and deliver much needed improvement.

You can find out more about Somerset Education for Life at: <https://www.somerset.gov.uk/how-the-council-works/education-for-life-strategy/>

'Bus It' bonus as £2 single bus fare in Somerset is extended to the summer

Bus users in Somerset can now travel on most routes in the county and beyond for just £2 until July. The major fare cut is part of a national initiative funded by the Government aimed at boosting bus use while helping passengers to save money. It was introduced in January and was originally due to end on 31 March.

Now thanks to further funding it will continue for an extra three months, until 30 June. It's welcome news for people in Somerset as the cost of living crisis continues to bite, fuelled in part by high petrol and diesel prices. The £2 single fare is available from all participating operators, which includes Somerset Council. The initiative will apply to the majority of routes in Somerset until 30th June. You can check here <https://www.somerset.gov.uk/busit> to see which operators are involved in the scheme.

It's worth remembering that the initiative applies to cross-county services, which means for example you can travel from Street to Bristol for just £2.

Somerset Council and the Somerset Bus Partnership have launched the 'Bus It' campaign to encourage more people to use bus services at a time when some routes are under threat due to lack of use. It's hoped the new £2 fare will provide a major boost to patronage and support these aims.

Visit <https://www.somerset.gov.uk/busit> to find out about ticket deals and calculate how much you could save.

National No Smoking Day: quitting smoking could delay or prevent 40% of dementia cases

National No Smoking Day took place on Wednesday 8th March with Somerset Council's Public Health team encouraging smokers to give quitting a go with a new, free, interactive app for smartphones.

Smoking is linked to numerous health problems such as heart disease, cancer and chronic obstructive pulmonary disorder (COPD), but its links to dementia are less well-publicised. Data from Alzheimer's Research UK shows only a third of UK adults are aware that there are things they can do to help reduce their risk of developing dementia, and stopping smoking is one of them.

Smoking increases a person's likelihood of developing dementia, particularly Alzheimer's disease and vascular dementia. Studies suggest that quitting smoking reduces this risk substantially, and smoking has been identified as one of twelve risk factors that, if eliminated entirely, could collectively prevent, or delay, up to 40% of dementia cases. Giving up smoking has numerous health benefits and can reduce not only a person's risk of developing dementia, but also heart disease, cancer and strokes.

Despite being notoriously difficult for some people, quitting smoking for at least six weeks is also proven to boost mental health and wellbeing by relieving stress, anxiety and depression.

To support people in Somerset to quit, the Council's stop smoking service, Smokefreelife Somerset, is available to provide free, expert support and guidance and has launched a free, interactive smartphone app – the My Quit Route app, a fully personalised, non-judgmental programme, accessible 24/7.

It is easy to sign up with Smokefreelife Somerset – to book an appointment, just call 01823 356222 or fill your details in online: www.healthysomerset.co.uk/smokefree/support-me

Organisations across Somerset unite against Child Exploitation

Organisations in Somerset are encouraging everyone to learn about the signs of child exploitation and help stop abuse in association with National Child Exploitation Awareness Day which took place on the 18th March 2023.

The day aimed to highlight the issues surrounding child exploitation, encouraging people to think, spot, and speak out against abuse, and adopt a zero-tolerance attitude to adults developing inappropriate relationships with children, or children exploiting and abusing their peers.

Child exploitation is abuse that involves the manipulation and/or coercion of young people under the age of 18 into sexual activity, forced labour, money laundering, transporting drugs (known as county lines) or stealing.

People can help by recognising signs that a young person may be being exploited.

Signs can include:

- Children missing from home or education - not knowing where a child is or who they are with
- Discovering a child has been going to new places with no obvious connections
- Children spending more time online and distancing themselves from family, friends and usual activities
- Any child with unexplained bruises, cuts, burns, marks and a reluctance to seek medical attention
- Children who have increased alcohol use, drug use or self-harm

- Children with unexplained items in their possession, such as new clothing, money, phones or drugs
- Sudden changes in who a child spends time with
- Unusually secretive, fearful, withdrawn or aggressive behaviour
- Changes in clothing personal hygiene and vocabulary

Somerset Council has joined forces with its partners, Avon and Somerset Police and the NHS, to take part in community action days to raise awareness of the signs of exploitation with the public, community groups and local businesses.

If you suspect a child or young person is being abused, report it. In an emergency, always contact the police on 999. You can also contact the Police directly by dialling 101.

You can contact Children's Services on 0300 123 2224 and email at childrens@somerset.gov.uk

You can contact the NSPCC Helpline 7 days a week, via the website or by emailing help@nspcc.org.uk or calling 0808 800 5000.

If you are on a train and notice something suspicious you can contact the British Transport Police on 61016.

Council's transport lead voices frustration over disruption to bus services in Somerset

Cancellations and disruption to timetables hitting bus routes across Somerset have been flagged with the region's main operator by the Council's lead for transport.

Councillor Mike Rigby has written to First South's Managing Director Simon Goff asking for an "urgent explanation" for the number of cancellations in the last year and an action plan for improvement. He has also criticised cleanliness of some buses which he said creates a "bad image for existing and potential passengers".

The Lead Member for Transport and Digital has underlined his concerns that the unreliability of timetables will undermine efforts to get more people on buses, despite money from Somerset's Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) supporting a £1 fare for Taunton, Government funding making possible a £2 single fare across the county, and the Council investing significantly in a sustained 'Bus It' campaign.

Mr Goff has responded citing a national shortage of drivers which has hit the industry since the pandemic, as well as an unusually high level of absenteeism, and said he is "determined to restore passenger confidence" and to ensure disruption is short term.

He has underlined measures to increase the number of drivers and new trainees coming through.

Buses of Somerset currently have vacancies for trainee bus drivers visit www.careers.firstbus.co.uk to find out more.

Councils celebrate shared history at Wells Cathedral

A special service of Thanksgiving took place at Wells Cathedral on Sunday 12 March to mark an historic milestone in Somerset's history.

The service celebrated the contribution and coming together of Somerset's five councils before Somerset Council coming into effect this month.

Councillors and staff from the councils – Mendip, Sedgemoor, Somerset West and Taunton and South Somerset District Councils, and Somerset County Council, took part in the Choral Evensong at the Cathedral.

Cllr Mike Best, Chair of Somerset Council, said: "It was wonderful to see so many attend this very special service giving thanks for what we have collectively achieved over the decades.

"We now look forward to serving the people of Somerset as we turn open a new chapter in our history, working together as a single council, bringing the very best of the past with us as we embark on our shared future."

The five councils' chairs – Cllr Best, Cllr Hazel Prior-Sankey (Somerset West and Taunton), Cllr Helen Sprawson-White (Mendip), Cllr Alan Bradford (Sedgemoor) and Cllr Paul Maxwell (South Somerset) – left their chains of office on the Cathedral's altar to signify the transition from five councils to one.

The chains, including the insignia of the former West Somerset Council, will be put on display at the Museum of Somerset.

Council extends online support for carers with new digital service

Many Somerset residents who provide unpaid care do not access the support available to them. This could be because they do not see themselves as carers because they are simply supporting a relative, friend or neighbour who needs them to due to disability or illness.

Somerset Council has recently launched a three-month pilot project with Mobilise, an online business created by carers to help unpaid carers get the support they are entitled to. The new pilot will use social media and digital marketing to help find and identify 'unpaid carers' in Somerset and link them with the support that is available to them.

Mobilise will work directly with the existing commissioned Carers Service, including the Community Council for Somerset Agents, to ensure that targeted information will be given to carers and their families.

This will include a range of online support, from website guides, regular contact through emails, guide to caring e-course to 'virtual cuppas' and even individual support calls - seven days a week.

The Mobilise service is free for residents of Somerset and can be accessed via:

<https://support.mobiliseonline.co.uk/somerset>

Council urges young drivers to 'Think!' before taking risks on country roads

Somerset Council is backing a major new campaign aimed at younger drivers to raise awareness of the dangers of excessive speed on rural roads.

The Department for Transport launched its Think! campaign earlier this month on video and radio and the Council is set to roll out its own radio version of the campaign this week.

The ads focus on a young driver eager to meet up with friends and will underline key messages around taking care, reducing speed and respecting the road layout, particularly on rural roads.

A quarter of incidents involving fatalities or serious injuries on Somerset's rural roads involve younger drivers.

The Council's Road Safety and Travel Somerset social media channels will be supporting the campaign which will go out on local radio stations in the county including Tone FM, Glastonbury FM and Radio Nine Springs.

You can view the national video advertisement here <https://youtu.be/Hjbt-Lmv21g>

Visit Somerset Road Safety to find out more about initiatives and courses.

Keep up to date with Travel Somerset on Twitter and Facebook - @travelsomerset.

If you spot a problem on the road you can report it quickly and easily by visiting www.somerset.gov.uk/roads-and-transport/report-a-problem-on-the-road/

For updates on traffic and travel follow @travelsomerset on Twitter and Facebook.

Ten start-up businesses to take off with the Somerset Launch Pad programme

Ten Somerset start-up businesses will be able to benefit from a fully-funded Launch Pad programme provided by the new unitary Somerset Council.

The programme includes workshops, masterclasses and one-to-one mentoring, tailored to businesses' individual needs, and delivered by professionals, entrepreneurs and experts from industry.

Successful applicants will be given the skills and a roadmap to create their start-up, the mindset and self-confidence to achieve, and tailored business support to help their new business grow.

Ten weeks of workshops and masterclasses covering the key aspects of running a business will be supported by one-to-one mentoring, focussing on the individual requirements of each start-up. This will be complemented by a peer support group, industry experts and business and marketing plan support.

According to the Federation of Small Business, "70% of new businesses that are mentored are twice as likely to succeed and thrive beyond 5 years as those who are not mentored."

Delivered over ten weeks from May 2023, the Somerset Launch Pad programme includes:

- Workshops on core business fundamentals from creating a business plan, to devising a marketing strategy and implementing sustainability goals.
- Masterclasses covering social media and branding, funding and finances, networking and more.
- Four hours of individual support with an experienced business coach to guide participants on their business journey.

- Personal business mentors offering one-to-one support throughout the programme in ten weekly sessions.
- Peer-to-peer networking and support as the successful start-ups work together throughout the programme to accomplish their entrepreneurial goals.

Applications are now open, and the window closes on **Friday 21st April 2023**. For more information and details on how to apply, please visit: https://www.stepupsomerset.org.uk/business_support/starting-a-business.htm

For further information, contact: sally.raynes@somerset.gov.uk

GET INVOLVED

Young people urged to have their say on Somerset's transport future

Somerset Council has launched a survey to capture the views of young people across the county on the future of transport.

The survey was compiled with the help of the Somerset Youth Parliament and their deputies who belong to the UK-wide group representing the voices of young people.

The survey is on Somerset's Commonplace website which informs and collects the views of people in the county on sustainable travel provision and planning.

The survey gives young people in the county the chance to have a say on how they want transport to work in the future. Their views will help inform policy, shape sustainable transport solutions and in turn help to combat climate change and improve health.

You can take part in the survey and comment on Somerset's Local Cycling and Walking Plans here: <https://sometersustainabletransport.commonplace.is/>

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 Council's Route1 Advocacy service is seeking Advocates and Independent Visitors in both short and long term roles to spend quality time with them 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.

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 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 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.