

Somerset Council Report for November 2023

Adam Dance and Jo Roundell Greene

The clocks have gone back, the nights are drawing in and we are looking at energy and food prices as winter approaches. Many people are still struggling with household bills. Please let us know of anyone who needs help, and we will do what we can to support them.

As you will have seen in the news Somerset Council has declared a financial emergency. We are working with our colleagues to find savings across the Council and every parish council is being asked to help. We, the Liberal Democrat administration are being open and transparent about the situation and please contact us if you wish to have more information.

With best wishes

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Council taking action to address social care funding blackhole

Latest budget figures which go before Somerset Council's Executive on 8 November are expected to show an estimated £70m increase in expected adult social care costs for 2024/25.

This means the Council cannot rely on reserves to cover the gap for next year and without action will need to issue a S114 notice, or effectively declare the council bankrupt, at the point of setting next year's budget in February.

Several councils nationally have been forced to do this in recent months, including Woking and Birmingham, with many others warning it could be a possibility without Government support.

Cllr Liz Leyshon, Somerset Council's Lead Member for Resources and Deputy Leader said: "The funding model for local Government is clearly broken, with many councils struggling in light of soaring costs and demands on services.

"But while at Woking and Birmingham their finances were also impacted by a policy decision or legal action, here in Somerset we're simply running out of money due to the soaring costs of demand-led services, particularly the costs of residential and nursing care for adults.

"This is not because of poor control of service spend, it is simply an exceptionally large increase in our costs for demand-led services which we have no choice but to manage."

In August, Somerset Council warned that it would need to use reserves to balance the books for this year. Latest figures show the budget gap for the current financial year now stands at £27.3m. Although this figure could be covered by reserves, the projected shortfall for the following year is now £100m, far exceeding levels of reserves.

The main driver of this is an £70m increase in adult social care costs, caused by proposed changes to national policy which aimed to make the cost of care fairer. Although the policy change was later abandoned by Government, in Somerset this has led to significant rises in the costs of residential and nursing care placements. For example, residential care placement costs have risen from around £577 per week in 2022/23 to £900 per week next year.

Officers are now drawing up savings proposals which will be voted on by Executive at its December meeting. These could include selling assets and buildings, including offices; increasing Council Tax, fees and charges as much as possible; reducing staffing levels; and reducing council services to statutory levels.

Cllr Leyshon added: “Our priority will be to maximise all opportunities, work with partners and do everything we can to ensure we can continue to take care of those most in need.

“No-one wants to be in this position, but we are well aware of the implications of a Section 114 notice. It is our intention to take the difficult decisions now and to set a direction for the new Council with the benefit of our local knowledge and commitment to Somerset.

“The alternative is to leave it to Government Commissioners, paid by the people of Somerset, to find a financial answer that does not take into account local factors or experience.”

Gritters at the ready for winter

Somerset Council’s fleet of 23 gritters is ready to be mobilised across 900 miles of road as soon as the temperature drops below zero this winter.

Last year the gritter fleet went out on 67 occasions when freezing temperatures were forecast. There were 2,058 route actions in total, helping to prevent the formation of ice across 83,200 miles of Somerset’s roads.

It’s important road users drive according to conditions – ice can still form on roads that have been gritted and extra care needs to be taken in winter weather. It’s vital too that drivers do not try to overtake gritters while they are treating roads – amazingly, this happens on a regular basis in icy, hazardous conditions.

Last year, Somerset’s farmers were hugely helpful in supporting the Council’s winter services, by taking on snow ploughing duties when conditions became challenging.

Daily gritting updates will be posted on Travel Somerset’s Twitter and Facebook channels throughout winter.

What roads are treated?

Somerset Council treat over a fifth of Somerset’s roads, marked in red on the map here: <https://tinyurl.com/5e45d8tb> The gritting network covers all last year’s routes plus it has been increased slightly this winter.

The main priority is to keep the busiest routes clear whenever ice or snow is expected. The priority is roads that link major towns, villages and communities on high ground and the important routes across the County for long distance travel.

When do the gritters come out?

Somerset Council carry out gritting when road surface temperatures are predicted to drop below 1°C and ice or snow is expected. Precautionary gritting normally takes place before the formation of ice – so that generally means teams are out in the evening or early morning.

In the event of snow, there are established plans in place, working alongside the emergency services and partners to clear the network as quickly as possible. Gritters can be quickly equipped with snowploughs and there are arrangements with farmers and snowplough operators who are employed to clear snow on the council's behalf. The primary network is prioritised before moving on to clear secondary and minor networks as resources allow.

Why don't the Council salt every road in Somerset?

Somerset Council can't treat every road, as there aren't enough gritters, drivers and depot staff to make this cost-efficient. However, the Council is carrying on work with parish councils to fill roadside grit bins on request and are continuing to run a community-led snow warden scheme.

Getting about

Rain can wash salt away and in very low temperatures gritting may not be enough to prevent freezing – so drivers are always advised to take extra caution in winter.

Somerset Council announces new contractor to maintain its 4,172 miles of roads

Somerset Council has signed a new eight-year contract with Kier Transportation Ltd to deliver core maintenance across its road network.

The £225m agreement covers key maintenance works (e.g. road repairs, drainage, verge cutting and winter service, such as gritting and other emergency functions in adverse weather.)

Somerset has a 4,172-mile road network and the current contract with Milestone Infrastructure comes to an end at the end of March 2024. Since 2021 the Council has been engaged in a tendering process involving suppliers from across the UK.

In a change to the way it delivers services, the Council has divided up the existing contract into four separate contracts covering different areas of service delivery.

The aim is to increase efficiency, cost effectiveness and innovation whilst being more resilient to climate change with a reduced carbon output.

Kier Transportation Ltd put in a successful bid for the largest contract covering term maintenance. It will deliver services from 1 April 2024.

Bids were tested across a range of criteria including value for money, carbon reduction and bidders' commitment to social value across the county.

Somerset Council's Executive committee approved the award of the contract in October.

Many of the staff currently operating under Milestone Infrastructure will be transferring their employment to the new contractor, ensuring the Council holds on to valuable experience and expertise.

Three other multi-million-pound contracts covering resurfacing, surface dressing, and new assets will also be awarded in due course.

Historic signing heralds the start of a united new approach to support the health and wellbeing of people in Somerset

Leaders from the voluntary sector, NHS and Somerset Council, have gathered in Taunton to sign an historic document outlining a shared vision and commitment to work more closely together to achieve better health and wellbeing for the people of Somerset.

The event, attended by over 60 representatives from the county's charities, NHS and Somerset Council, was the first time that leaders have come together at such scale, to demonstrate their shared commitment to working together.

The signing of the agreement formally recognises the voluntary, community, faith and social enterprise (VCFSE) sector as an equal and strategic partner and the important role it plays in providing key services and activities.

Bus It for 'Less than a latte' and safeguard services

Bus It for 'Less than a latte' is the message from Somerset Council as it kicks-off a campaign to drive up passenger numbers on four key bus routes.

The campaign is being launched with news that the £2 countywide fare for any single journey is set to continue to December 2024.

The latest round of the 'Bus It' campaign - supported by bus passenger group the Somerset Bus Partnership, aims to support four at risk First Bus South routes serving Taunton, Yeovil, Minehead, Dulverton and Wincanton.

Working with the bus operator, Somerset Council will be targeting communities along the at-risk routes, raising awareness of the services and highlighting the affordability of bus travel and the many other upsides of leaving the car at home.

Any single bus fare in the county still costs just £2 thanks to ongoing Government support - less than the price of latte from most high street coffee shops.

The Council has stepped in to subsidise the struggling 54, 58/58a, 25 and 28 services until the end of March 2024.

But, in the face of massive budget pressures, it cannot commit to supporting the service from April. Unless passenger numbers rise significantly and the services become financially viable for First Bus South, which operates Buses of Somerset, the at-risk the services may be reduced or stopped completely.

The following services all require additional financial support, which the Council can only provide temporarily thanks to the Government's Bus Service Improvement Plan Plus funding (BSIP Plus).

- 54 Yeovil to Taunton
- 58/58a Yeovil to Wincanton
- 25 Taunton to Dulverton
- 28 Taunton to Minehead

First Bus South has signalled it will review the routes before the funding ends next year, taking into account new data on passenger uptake.

Somerset shines at the South West In Bloom Awards

Towns across Somerset have received numerous awards at the famous gardening competition, South West in Bloom, following the awards ceremony in Cornwall.

South West in Bloom is part of the Britain in Bloom campaign, established by the Royal Horticultural Society (RHS).

Judging for the competition took place in July when Somerset towns welcomed judges on tours of parks, gardens, green spaces and RHS's 'It's Your Neighbourhood' groups (YNGs) that had entered into the contest.

The results of this year's competition for Somerset include:

- Yeovil in Bloom (funded by the Town Council): GOLD - St. Bridget Cup
- Haselbury Plucknett In Bloom: GOLD - Mary Mortimer Cup
- Cary in Bloom: GOLD - Arye Cup
- Taunton in Bloom: SILVER GILT - Tesco Cup
- Wellington in Bloom: SILVER GILT - Portman Cup
- Minehead In Bloom: SILVER GILT - Sargent Cup
- Burnham-On-Sea In Bloom: SILVER GILT - Pennant Urban Town South Award

The results for the YNGs groups:

- Yeovil achieved nine Level 5 - Outstanding Awards (top award), and two Level 4 - Thriving Awards.
- Wellington achieved two Level 5 - Outstanding Awards and three Level 4 - Thriving Awards.
- Taunton achieved two Level 5 - Outstanding Awards, one Level 4 - Thriving Award, and one Level 2 - Improving Award.

In Somerset, the Bloom initiatives are jointly managed by the town councils and Somerset Council respectively, whilst local community groups and individuals support with the design and maintenance of the floral displays and green spaces.

See the full results here: www.southwestinbloom.org.uk.

The Somerset Local Pantry Network wins food resilience award

The Somerset Local Pantry Network (SLPN) has won FareShare South West's Social Impact Award for Community and Sustainability.

Food charity FareShare South West launched their Social Impact Awards this year, and SLPN have won the Community and Sustainability category for the innovative ways the network utilises food for community resilience.

SLPN consists of nine local pantries who buy and collect surplus food and make it available to members for a low weekly fee, which helps reduce food waste, feed families and save them money.

SLPN is a partnership between Somerset Council, local community groups and food charity, FareShare South West.

Somerset Council provides initial grant money to fund the launch of a new pantry, but each pantry is independently run by voluntary sector groups.

Earlier this year, Action Against Hunger, another food charity, made a film about the Somerset pantries, highlighting the positive impact they make in communities. Watch it here: www.youtube.com/watch?v=sJBij7bepKs.

Full details of SLPN can be found here: www.somerset.gov.uk/localpantry.

Local start-up businesses get ready to launch

Ten start-up businesses have been given a helping hand from Somerset Council's innovative Launch Pad programme.

The businesses have all received a wide range of fully funded help to get them ready to move to the next level. The ten-week programme has included workshops, masterclasses and one-to-one mentoring tailored to businesses' individual needs, and delivered by professionals, entrepreneurs and experts from industry.

A key to the success of the programme has been the collaboration between businesses as they have worked together throughout the months to achieve their entrepreneurial goals.

Business ideas have included an initiative aimed at strengthening communities by gardening in shared gardens, a dance academy, a pop-up online pet shop and the launch of spirit-based drinks which have been inspired by historic recipes.

Housing developer fined £32k for failing to restore cycle way and footpath

A developer failed to properly put back a cycle way and footpath it had dug up in Norton Fitzwarren despite repeated requests by Somerset Council over two years.

St Modwen Homes Limited had been authorised to carry out work in the area in 2021 by the Council which involved digging 20m down and connecting a manhole to the storm drain.

The developer pleaded guilty to four offences committed under the New Roads and Street Works Act 1991 (NRSWA 1991) at Taunton Magistrates Court on September 27 and was handed more than £32,000 in fines and costs.

Don't chuck it, recycle it! Half of what's in our bins could have been recycled.

Nearly half the content of the average Somerset bin could have been recycled, Somerset Council can reveal.

The 48% figure found this year is an impressive 11% decrease on 2018 - the last time the 'composition analysis' was carried out in the county. But there is still much more to do, especially when it comes to food waste.

And as national Recycling Week begins, Somerset Council are asking residents to think twice before throwing something in the bin.

The contents of some 550 households refuse bins were painstakingly emptied, sorted, and weighed, with a representation from across the county.

Of the 48% of contents that should have been recycled:

- 14% recyclable at the kerbside (e.g. cardboard or drinks cans)
- 21% food waste, recyclable in the food waste bin
- 7% garden waste and pet bedding
- 7% recyclable at a recycling site (e.g. wood and metal)

The 11% reduction on 2018 figure is thought to have been driven by the expanded Recycle More collections, with less plastic pots tubs and trays being put in the refuse.

Residents have also reduced the amount of food that's being thrown in the bin, with a 5% drop since 2018.

The results are shared as national Recycling Week begins. This year's theme - The Big Recycling Hunt - focuses on "missed capture": the items that can be recycled but are commonly missed in the home.

The Council surveys what is in our bins every five years to help understand what is being thrown out and how it can be made it easier to reduce waste and recycle more.

Somerset's highest ever recycling rate was recently published as part of our Recycling Tracker, which shows what happens to every tonne of collected recycling. The 2022-23 figures show that 96.6% stayed in the UK to be turned into new products and packaging.

Unsung heroes honoured for making Somerset an even better place

Unsung community heroes from across Somerset have been recognised at Somerset Council's Chair's Awards for their unstinting service to their communities.

The awards ceremony had been an annual event for many years for Somerset County Council. This latest event was a first for Somerset Council since it came into being on 1 April this year.

The awards were presented by Council Chair Cllr Mike Best at Taunton Rugby Club and the event was attended by 120 people, including the nominees from across Somerset, their guests, Leader of Somerset Council Cllr Bill Revans, and Deputy Leader Cllr Liz Leyshon.

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

This year the awards were opened up to groups and couples to recognise their contribution, as well as individuals

Among those on the list of honours was the Severalls Memorial Gardens Group in Crewkerne. The citation included: "These gardens are a beautiful and peaceful place to sit and enjoy the surroundings. Their continued care and voluntary hard work of keeping the town's memorial grounds so beautifully should be recognised."

Among the many individuals to be nominated was Julie Fowler from Ilminster who has raised considerable sums for national and local good causes. "Julie can organise and enlist many people on board to make any fundraising event the most successful it could be and she always ensures everyone receives a thank you card," said the citation.

Some 35 awards were presented on the night, including two posthumous honours that were accepted by relatives. Six award winners were unable to attend and will be visited personally by Cllr Best who will present their awards.

Cllr Best said: "It is so rewarding and humbling to read the citations for these awards. Our community heroes do so much for others, never expecting to be rewarded for their efforts.

"In Somerset we are so fortunate to have so many people who work hard on behalf of others in their town, village or hamlet. The awards ceremony is a small way of saying thank-you on behalf of Somerset.

“Every recipient has made a real difference to their communities. It is a privilege to thank them on behalf of the Council.”

GET INVOLVED

E-Newsletters – how to sign up

Somerset Council produces a number of e-newsletters covering many topics including business, the environment, waste and recycling, transport, news and events.

To receive these important updates directly into your email inbox and to choose which emails are most relevant to you, visit: <https://public.govdelivery.com/accounts/UKSC/subscriber/new>

Somerset Council launches new consultation on Education funding

Somerset Council launched a new consultation, asking for the public’s views on some of the ways education is funded.

In Somerset, £568m is spent on education each year and supports 70,000 children and young people in the county.

The consultation focuses on three areas:

- Funding for early years settings, which includes day nurseries, pre-schools and nursery schools.
- Early help services that help children and families when they have problems, aiming to prevent the situation from getting worse.
- Funding that helps children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) from their early years to age 25.

A number of ideas on how these services can be improved have been suggested in the consultation. The Council is asking everyone to share their opinions on these options. If any proposals to change SEND funding are accepted, there will be a further consultation and piloting before anything changes for all schools and pupils.

The consultation runs until 10 November and the results will be published once they have been analysed.

A link to the consultation can be found here: <https://somersetcouncil.citizenspace.com/childrens-services/education-funding>

A paper copy of the consultation can be viewed, or printed on request, at Bridgwater, Taunton, Shepton Mallet and Yeovil Libraries.