

SOMERSET COUNCIL
LIBERAL DEMOCRAT GROUP

DECEMBER 2023

An Update on the Financial Emergency

Last month Somerset Council declared a Financial Emergency because the costs of delivering services are rising much faster than the Council's income.

This is mostly due to the rise in social care costs, for instance in residential care placements where the weekly cost has increased from £577 per week in 2022/23 to £850 per week this year. Care home fees are still rising as inflation continues to affect staffing costs, energy and food. Increased interest rates have affected care service providers too, as they have household mortgages and rentals.

Although Council Tax rates are lower in Somerset than in other similar unitary councils in the south west, the annual increase is limited by Government and so the gap between income and expenditure is growing and we have to find more savings.

For the current financial year, the projected overspend has been reduced to £18.7million, an improvement of approximately £8million. However, we need further reductions in spending to better protect our reserves for future years as we know the difficult financial situation will continue. Every payment over £100 now has to be approved by an expenditure board and we are expecting further improvement before the financial year end.

In February, Somerset Council needs to set a budget for the next financial year (2024/5). The Chancellor's Autumn Statement was extremely disappointing for Councils as there was no acknowledgement of the difficult situation for local government, and so we already know that our budget setting will be both more difficult and painful.

33 Council Leaders of all political parties, including Cllr Bill Revans Leader of Somerset Council, have written to the Secretary of State to say they are in a significantly worse financial position than before the Autumn Statement. A new survey reveals that local authorities are having to plan more severe cuts to services and that seven in ten of the councils responding are no longer confident that they can balance their budget next year.

Recently, Nottingham City Council declared a Section 114 Notice because their finances are unsustainable. In Somerset we are determined to avoid a S114 by working proactively to find ways to set a budget without the intervention of Government Commissioners.

At December's Executive meeting in Shepton Mallet the Executive of Somerset Council set out the plan for dealing with next year's £87m budget gap. The approved actions include requesting what's called a Capitalisation Direction from the Westminster Government. This allows Somerset Council to fund day-to-day spending with proceeds from the sale of assets or borrowing from the Public Works Loan Board. In addition to this, General Fund Reserves are being strengthened and savings are being identified constantly.

What does all of this mean?

Council Tax in Somerset will have to go up by the maximum allowed by Government. That will still leave our Council Tax rates lower than in other comparable Council areas. For example, if we had Dorset's council tax rate or Wiltshire's council tax base we wouldn't be in this situation. Dorset didn't freeze its council tax for six years and Wiltshire's homes were significantly more expensive and therefore in higher bands in 1991 when Council Tax was put in place.

We acknowledge that many household budgets are already stretched by the high cost of living, so it's important that one of the recommendations at the Executive meeting is to up-rate our Council Tax Reduction Scheme in line with inflation, at the same rate as benefits will rise next year (6.7%). A further recommendation is that the Exceptional Hardship scheme will continue, ensuring that those on the lowest incomes in our communities are protected. The decisions will be taken by Full Council on 20th December.

Consultation on where savings may be made in next year's expenditure will be launched in the coming days, as we are determined that Somerset's voices will be heard at this difficult time and in the early years of the new Somerset Council.

This is a national situation. We are not on our own as a Council, but we will see a very real impact on local services.

Changes are coming to waste collections next year

Recycling and rubbish collection days will be changing for more than 120,000 homes in Somerset in February next year.

The changes come as new collection routes are introduced by Somerset Council's contractor, SUEZ recycling and recovery UK. The new routes will make rounds more efficient, more manageable for crews whilst reducing mileage and carbon emissions.

The changes come at no cost to the council.

In February 2024, recycling and rubbish collection day schedules will change for around 85% of homes in the west of the county, covering the former Sedgemoor and Somerset West and Taunton areas, as well as a small part of South Somerset.

Anyone with a change to their collection day schedule will be written to twice before anything changes, first with a letter in January. Roughly, three weeks after the letter arrives, residents will receive a service guide which includes a collection day calendar for the next 18 months.

It is important that residents know their new collection days – crews will not be able to come back for either recycling or refuse if you miss your new collection day.

Because some towns and villages will be covered by more than one route, days may change for some households but not others.

Residents may have:

- a change to collection day
- a change in week that their rubbish is collected
- a one-off interim rubbish collection

There will be no changes to:

- collection days for garden waste subscribers
- clinical waste collections
- communal property collections with shared collections (such as blocks of flats, houses of multiple occupancy and retirement developments)
- schools waste collections

Changes to routes and collection days for the rest of the county – in the former Mendip and South Somerset areas – are expected to be introduced in June 2024.

Further information can be found online at www.somerset.gov.uk/waste

Housing regeneration project in Taunton nearing completion

Phase A of the North Taunton Woolaway Project (NTWP) is nearing completion and an opening ceremony with special guests took place, to celebrate the milestone.

To date, Somerset Council's regeneration scheme has replaced 26 Woolaway homes, which the Government designated as defective, with 47 new and more sustainable homes for tenants.

The new homes include a mix of 1 and 2 bedroom flats and bungalows, 3 bedroom chalets and 3 and 4 bedroom houses, including 5 wheelchair adapted properties.

The homes benefit from energy efficiency measures such as solar panels, triple glazed windows and air source heat pumps, which will allow tenants to live in highly insulated buildings, have lower energy bills and produce less carbon emissions.

A ceremony took place with speeches, a tour of one of the new homes as well as a presentation of a bouquet of flowers, to welcome one of the new tenants.

Willow Man receives study funding boost as public engagement starts

A plan to revive the once-iconic Willow Man sculpture has received a funding boost from National Highways, the company responsible for England's motorways and major A roads.

Willow Man, close to Bridgwater, Junction 23 M5 has deteriorated in recent years and is now barely recognisable.

Created by artist Serena De la Hay and unveiled in 2000, the sculpture was commissioned by South West Arts to mark the millennium and celebrates the role of willow in the ecology and craft tradition of the Somerset Levels.

Somerset Council has been granted £35,000 of funding from National Highways' Designated Funding programme for an initial feasibility looking at the possibility of repairing/enhancing and relocating the Willow Man.

A future scheme could see the sculpture rebuilt using more robust materials.

The funding will cover a range of activities including engagement, initial designs and costings, artists impressions, as well as searches and surveys covering land ownership and topography to identify potential sites.

The Council is asking people for their views and is launching an online engagement page where you can have your say.

It will also be liaising with local parish councils and other key stakeholders over the coming weeks to gather their views.

Have your say here: visit <https://somersetcouncil.citizenspace.com> and search 'Willow Man'.

Somerset Council awarded £5m for new health research partnership

Somerset Council has been awarded £5m over five years by the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) to form a Health Determinants Research Collaboration' (HDRC) - a new research partnership to improve health and reduce health inequalities across the county.

The HDRC will see Somerset Council join forces with Spark Somerset, UWE Bristol and the Institute of Health Equity at University College London to enable the Council to make better decisions to improve health in Somerset, informed by existing evidence and new research and shaped by local people.

The NIHR will provide £1 million per year for the next 5 years to support the creation of a staffed unit within the council that will work to involve communities in research, provide council staff and the public with opportunities to develop their skills, and help the council to use evidence and do research.

The funding of £55m NIHR is investing in 11 new HDRCs across the country to enable local authorities to use evidence and undertake research to improve health in their communities and tackle health inequalities.

Somerset's HDRC, which is expected to launch in January 2024, will focus on the building blocks of good health such as housing, education and the physical environment to tackle the root causes of health inequalities and wider deprivation. Because of this it intends to involve directorates across the Council, such as Transport, Housing, Planning and Education among others, to apply health evidence and to develop research capability.

Through the programme, the council will involve communities in applying evidence about the building blocks of health to local decisions, and in doing new research where there is not enough evidence.

Somerset Young People in care win award for their work on homes for children

A group of young people in care and care leavers have won an award from a leading advocacy group for their work on homes for children.

Young people from Somerset in Care Councils (SiCC) and Somerset Leaving Care Councils (SLCC) were presented with an award from A National Voice - a leading advocacy group for care leavers and children in care. Winning the 'Collaboration' category, the award recognised the efforts of young people on the Homes and Horizons project, a partnership between Somerset Council, Shaw Trust, and Somerset NHS Foundation Trust to develop 10 homes for children, 2 therapeutic schools and a therapeutic fostering service.

Young people from both SiCC and SLCC have been actively involved on the Homes and Horizons project from the start, helping the Council decide to partner with Shaw Trust. The young people visited children's homes across the UK to see how they were run, interviewing staff and residents to find out what worked well. They also represented young people in decision-making groups, and spoke to neighbours about the project. They even selected furniture and décor and chose the name of this award-winning initiative – Homes and Horizons.

As a result, Somerset's children have homes for children designed with people who have direct experience of the care system, which led to the Homes and Horizons project winning an MJ award for partnership and innovation.

Swimming Pool Support Fund

Somerset Council has been awarded £211,208 from the government's Swimming Pool Support Fund (Phase 1). The money will be divided across five swimming pool facilities within Somerset at Frome Leisure Centre, Shepton Mallet Lido, Wells Leisure Centre, Brean Splash and Burnham-on-Sea Swim and Sports Academy. The funding is designed to help swimming pool operators with the increased costs of utility bills and swimming pool chemicals.

Somerset Council has also submitted an application to Phase 2 of the Swimming Pool Support Fund which will provide grant funding for capital investments to help swimming pools become more energy efficient. We await the outcome of our application for Phase 2 which is expected in the new year.

Find out more about the Support fund at <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/nearly-200-leisure-centres-supported-by-swimming-pool-support-fund>

Royal Recognition for Somerset Charities

Four Somerset charities are celebrating today (November 14) after winning the coveted King's Award for Voluntary Service (KAVS).

Equivalent to an MBE for individuals, KAVS is the highest award given to voluntary groups in the UK, celebrating outstanding work done by charities.

They are awarded annually and normally only about a third of groups nominated nationally actually receive an award – but in Somerset this year all four charities nominated were successful.

This year's local recipients are:

- **West Somerset Food Cupboard** - Originating in 2007 from the response of a church group to real food deprivation on their doorsteps, the WSFC is now a charity in its own right. It has an approach to delivery quite unlike other food banks.
- **Refugee Aid From Taunton** - Entirely volunteer run and led, it functions with minimal overheads and uncomplicated structures but has improved the lives of thousands of displaced people in Britain and abroad.
- **Crewkerne and District Museum and Heritage Centre** - This is small independent museum in South Somerset entirely run by volunteers and is financially sound so does not rely on public funds.
- **Share and Repair, Bath** - There are other repair charities, but the combination of repairing, lending, training and educating is out of the ordinary. The initiative in providing environmental lessons for schools demonstrates the wide-ranging approach of this charity.

Organisations wanting to be considered for next year's KAVS can get all the information they need here: www.kavs.dcms.gov.uk

Somerset Council offers businesses six hours of expert advice

Somerset Council is offering local businesses the opportunity to get mentoring support from some of the best business minds in the county.

Following a highly successful search for mentors it is now time to match them to local business owners who can benefit from six hours of free mentoring. All businesses who have been trading for over a year and employ two or more staff are welcome to apply, although the programme is particularly aimed at businesses who are looking to hire new staff or those planning to introduce new products and services.

Forty Mentors have been selected from executive and senior management level business leaders and successful entrepreneurs. They include a former NASDAQ CEO, a soft drinks manufacturer who supplies major retailers internationally and a multi-million pound NHS equipment supplier. All understand the challenges associated with running and growing a business and the value of an impartial sounding board.

Aside from offering valuable feedback, mentors specialise in a range of subject areas including; growth strategy, finance, marketing, HR, e-commerce, bid writing, acquisition, exit strategy, and much more.

There are 40 spaces for mentees available so businesses are encouraged to visit the website to find out more information <https://www.somerset.gov.uk/business-economy-and-licences/somerset-business-mentoring/>

A vision for Tonedale

Somerset Council is delighted to hear that the Government has awarded nearly £20 million for ToneWorks and Tone Dale project.

Somerset West and Taunton Council previously submitted bids to Round 1 and 2 of the Levelling Up Fund, from the Department of Housing, Local Government and Communities. This recent announcement has been awarded based on the Round 2 submission.

The £19,987,663 will provide an opportunity for Somerset Council working in partnership with stakeholders and the community, to transform and sustainably regenerate the nationally significant heritage site at Toneworks and enhance associated land for community use.

The Toneworks site, which is in Somerset Council ownership has already received funding from DCMS/Historic England from the Heritage Stimulus and Covid Cultural Recovery Fund for repairs since its acquisition in 2020. This has allowed decontamination, structural repairs, and vital stabilisation to the most vulnerable parts of the site.

Over summer and autumn of 2023, Somerset Council has welcomed over three hundred local people into the site on guided tours which have allowed a glimpse at the works that have been achieved to date. The tours were also an excellent opportunity together knowledge, memories and understanding about the history of the site from the community in and around Wellington.

The ambitious plan for Tonedale will restore and save a nationally important heritage site and a much-loved historic landmark.

This funding has been awarded by the government and does not affect Somerset Councils' financial emergency. The money can only be spent on this specific project and cannot be used for services that Somerset Council delivers. Somerset Council will not be making a financial contribution to this project.

Beyond the bruises – Somerset’s new fight against non-physical domestic abuse

A new campaign aims to raise the profile of lesser-known types of domestic abuse and encourage those who may not realise they are being abused to come forward for support and advice.

Launching on White Ribbon Day and at the beginning of the worldwide campaign 16 Days of Action Somerset Council has commissioned 12 short films to shine the spotlight on non-physical types of domestic abuse.

The films direct anyone who is experiencing these forms of abuse to a new website, somersetdomesticabuse.org.uk, where they can get more information, support and advice or by contacting the service on 0800 69 49 999.

The films, available to view here: <https://bit.ly/12DACF>, will be launched on TV and across a range of social, digital and video sharing platforms.

The new films are part of Somerset Council’s ongoing commitment to raise awareness of domestic abuse.

The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 created a legal definition of domestic abuse:

1. Both the person who is carrying out the behaviour and the person to whom the behaviour is directed towards are aged 16 years or over
2. Both persons are “personally connected” (including ex-partners and family members)

You do not have to be living with the person who is being abusive to you.

There are many types of behaviours that can form non-physical domestic abuse, these may include:

- Violent or threatening behaviour
- Controlling or coercive behaviour
- Economic abuse
- Psychological or emotional
- Stalking and harassment - including online or via text message

If you are experiencing any form of domestic abuse, worried about someone you know, or are concerned about the impact of your behaviour towards others, then help is available: somersetdomesticabuse.org.uk or by telephoning 0800 69 49 999 - between 8am – 8pm, 7 days a week.

In an emergency you should always dial 999. If you are worried that an abuser may overhear your call you can remain silent, tap the phone and dial 55 when prompted by the operator who will send help.

If you are deaf, hard of hearing or speech-impaired you can register with emergencySMS.net. Once registered you will be able to send a text to 999 if you require help in an emergency.

Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty Renamed National Landscapes

From 22nd November, all designated Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs) in England and Wales are becoming National Landscapes, including Somerset's Mendip Hills, Quantock Hills, and Blackdown Hills National Landscapes.

The new name reflects their national importance; the vital contribution they make to protect the nation from the threats of climate change, nature depletion and the wellbeing crisis, whilst also creating greater understanding and awareness for the work that they do.

This is a significant milestone for the UK and the next step in fully realising the National Landscapes' vision to be the leading exemplars of how thriving, diverse communities can work with and for nature in the UK: restoring ecosystems, providing food, storing carbon to mitigate the effects of climate change, safeguarding against drought and flooding, whilst also nurturing people's health and wellbeing.

National Landscapes teams have been at the forefront of delivering natural solutions to the main challenges facing the nation for many years. The new brand underscores their commitment to redoubling their efforts and engaging with a wider audience. In 2019, teams set themselves the most ambitious targets for nature in the sector and continue to work to meet them.

By 2030, National Landscapes aim that, within their boundaries: at least 200,000 hectares of the most valuable natural areas (Sites of Special Scientific Interest or SSSIs), which equates to 1 ¼ times the size of London, will be in favourable condition; 100,000 hectares of wildlife-rich habitat outside of SSSIs will be created or restored, which is roughly nine times the size of Manchester; and 36,000 hectares of woodland, which is a little smaller than the Isle of Wight, will have been planted or allowed to regenerate.

National Landscapes Partnerships will also focus on habitat restoration to ensure the protection of some of our most endangered species and increase their work to help more people to enjoy time spent in beautiful places.

Because of their size and scope, National Landscapes are ideally positioned to address the environmental issues the UK is facing. There are 46 National Landscapes in the UK, covering 14% of England, Wales and Northern Ireland including moorland, farmland, coast, forests, including UNESCO World Heritage Sites, Biosphere Reserves, a Geopark and International Dark Sky Reserves. They are the UK's nearby countryside - 66% of people in England (44 million) live within 30 minutes of a National Landscape and at least 170 million people visit them every year.

Somerset Council scores A- for climate work

Somerset Council has been recognised as a leader in its work to respond to the climate emergency.

The authority achieved a score of A- (“Leadership”) from CDP for its performance in 2023. This rating compares to a regional average of B and a Global average of C.

CDP is seen as the ‘gold standard of environmental’ reporting and this is the first time the new Somerset Council has been scored by the not-for-profit charity.

CDP runs the environmental disclosure system and helps organisations make their environmental impact transparent, reduce their impact and act as environmental leaders.

The score is based on the Council’s climate-related projects, strategies and activities. These include its plans for expanding the county’s electric vehicle charging network, its Tree Strategy and work to encourage the uptake of ‘retrofit’ home heat efficiency.

The A- score demonstrates that through these documents and climate activities, Somerset Council has demonstrated best practice standards across adaptation and mitigation, set ambitious goals and made progress towards achieving those goals.

Ahead of, and post vesting day of the new unitary authority on 1 April 2023, officers across Somerset Council have been working collaboratively on climate related activities.

New waste reforms for businesses in England – Simpler Recycling

Somerset Council is urging businesses to log-on and start planning early for new rules on recycling.

The national ‘Simpler Recycling’ reforms announced in October mean all businesses - and organisations like hospitals and schools - must have separate food waste and recycling collections in place by the end of March 2025.

Businesses have a legal Duty of Care to store waste safely and to dispose of it using a registered waste carrier.

The Somerset Council-supported ‘Business of Recycling’ website has advice on how to prepare for the new regulations, including a tool that lets you check if your waste carrier is registered.

Businesses with fewer than ten full-time employees have until 31 March 2027 to meet these requirements.

Recyclable materials to be separated from general waste include:

- Glass such as drinks bottles and rinsed empty food jars
- Metal such as drinks cans and food tins
- Plastic such as rinsed empty food containers and bottles
- Paper such as old newspapers and envelopes
- Cardboard such as delivery boxes and packaging
- Food waste including tea bags, coffee grounds, leftovers or waste generated by food preparation (NB. There is no minimum amount for food waste)

Businesses will need to have a separate food bin, and a refuse bin, but recyclable materials can be mixed to reduce the number of bins needed.

Plastic, film, and flexibles collections across all premises will also be implemented by 31 March 2027.