

County Councillor Report
Curry Rivel & Langport Division
FEBRUARY 2023

Consultation opens into new single Somerset Council budget: new council targets support for key services and vulnerable residents

These budget proposals are the first time services and costs from all four District Councils and the County Council have been brought together. Consultation runs until 10 February.

Liz Leyshon, Deputy Leader of the Council and Executive Member for Finance and Human Resources, said: "This is an incredibly challenging time for most council budgets in the country but particularly so in Somerset, where we have been bringing together five council budgets into one. However, without the saving and efficiencies a new unitary council will bring, it would have been even more difficult to set a balanced budget for the next financial year."

The Council proposes to increase Council Tax by 4.99 %, less than half of the current rate of inflation, made up of a basic rise of 2.99 per cent in Council Tax plus the 2 % social care levy. Council tax for a Band D property will increase by £78.24 each year, or £1.50 per week.

The total budget for new Council will be £491.37 million, a rise of £36 million over the budgets of the five councils the new Somerset Council replaces. The Council agreed a new Council Tax Reduction Scheme last November, and will create an Exceptional Hardship Fund to support households in need of further support.

We have faced three significant challenges in setting budgets this year: the impact of inflation on the cost of providing services; the rising demand for care services post-pandemic and the continuing (and frustrating) need, in a very competitive labour market, to use agency staff to cover statutory services.

CLLr Leyshon said: "Post-Covid, the rise in demand for care services, and the rising cost of meeting that demand, has been striking. The new Somerset Council will, of course, protect the services that touch most lives in Somerset and will continue to prioritise support for our most vulnerable residents. We have rejected closing 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.

"We have also protected the grants that go to the voluntary sector and will work more closely with representatives of the sector. But pressure on care services dominates all budget setting in local government this year. We are increasing funding for both Adult Social Care and Children's Services by almost a fifth, but that doesn't really cover the rising costs of those services, so we will still need to find savings in these services."

Several of the savings in the new proposed budget relate to the move to a single council, with £2.9million saved from senior manager costs and a £600,000 annually from reducing the number of council members.

CLLr Leyshon concluded: "We know that reform of social care services depends on effective forward planning by Government, enabling local councils to also plan further ahead. Until that planning comes forward from the Government in a coherent form, councils, including Somerset Council, will continue to experience huge challenges in setting balanced budgets."

Flooding threat on Somerset Levels and Moors is no longer a major incident

The Environment Agency and the local authorities in Somerset have removed the major incident status declared in January as flood risk in the county has reduced. It was a precautionary move to coordinate partners as the threat of flood increased. With enhanced pumping and recent dry weather, water levels have now reduced so we decided the precaution is no longer needed.

Local situation: Thorney & Muchelney did not flood; the causeway to Drayton worked well; flood gates were closed between Muchelney & Langport, but were vandalised by people who thought they knew better. One car has been stuck there for some weeks now. West Moor flooded as planned to store water.

Jim Flory of the Environment Agency said: “We have been seeing an improving picture in Somerset over the last few days, with enough water to fill more than 23 million bathtubs a day being pumped back into rivers. Staff worked day and night on this major pumping operation as there was lots of work to do and water to remove. We are grateful to all involved, including our partners, for their help and support.”

Cllr Bill Revans, Leader of Somerset County Council, said: “The decision to stand up a major incident was not taken lightly, but it was the right move at that time to ensure everyone was ready to take further actions to support our communities. Thankfully, conditions improved; I am grateful to colleagues in the Environment Agency for bringing in additional pumps. We will continue to work closely with both partners and local people to monitor the situation and are well placed to react swiftly should the need arise.”

The A361 between East Lyng and Burrowbridge is now clear of flooding & has now re-opened. Arrangements have been made to ensure that in future it is not closed unnecessarily early.

Environment Agency operations will continue with Currymoor flood reservoir 80% full. Pumping activity is at Currymoor, Saltmoor, Northmoor, West Sedgemoor, Long Load, Westover, Huish Episcopi, and Midelney. In addition there are temporary pumps running at Elson’s Clyce, Haymoor, Fordgate, Kitch Drove and Bridgwater docks. At Dunball, the pumps are operational and running on high tides.

Residents are reminded to:

- Monitor flood risk, sign up for flood warnings and create a flood plan on what action to take. You can find links at <https://check-for-flooding.service.gov.uk>.
- Do not drive through floodwater. It is the number one cause of death during flooding and puts yourself and rescue agencies in jeopardy. Floodwater can contain hidden dangers such as uncovered manholes, obstacles or sewage – so never enter floodwater and be careful around riverbanks and spillways. During a cold snap there is also the risk that floodwater could freeze, so we also remind people to never walk or play on or near ice.
- Call Mindline – Somerset's emotional support and mental health helpline which is open 24/7 on 01823 276892 (local) and 0800 138 1692 (freephone) if they are feeling anxiety, fear or worry about the situation, particularly for those who have been previously affected by flooding.
- Follow @EnvAgencySW on Twitter and Environment Agency Wessex on Facebook for updates on the flood situation.

Trees

Reimagining the Levels are offering grants to support the planting of woodland or hedgerow during this planting season, which runs until March. Individuals and community groups alike can apply, or even just get in contact if you would like to dedicate some time volunteering and supporting others. Email Kate Towers at katetowers.rtl@gmail.com

Local Community Networks

Following the consultation and engagement exercise last autumn, a significant and complex piece of work was undertaken to gather people's views on their form, function, resourcing and geographies. The consultation received a wide range of responses, reflecting many perspectives. These have fed into the final set of recommendations of LCN areas, and include more detail concerning their roles and responsibilities.

These papers are published online here: Executive meeting of 18th January, Item 7 especially Appendix 2-4: <http://democracy.somerset.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=433&MId=1736>

Levels & Moors LCN is the one we are in: 33 parishes stretching from Curry Mallet through Langport, Somerton & Aller/High Ham to Westonzoyland. It covers eight council divisions, so 16 councillors. It is one of the largest, but it allows us to address issues relating to the Levels & Moors in one meeting for the first time.

There is dedicated email for any LCN enquiries LCN@somerset.gov.uk. Don't hesitate to get in touch if you have any questions.

Somerset unitary plan praised by Local Government Association

An expert team from the Local Government Association (LGA) has commended work to create a new unitary council on 1 April this year. The new Somerset Council will replace Somerset County Council and the four district councils (Mendip, Sedgemoor, Somerset West and Taunton and South Somerset).

The team, including leading figures from local government around the country, reviewed the unitary plan and concluded that 'everything is in place to ensure that Somerset Council will be a safe and legally functioning body from day 1, assuming the current progress and leadership is maintained.'

The reviewers had access to programme documents and engaged with more than 70 council members, officers and stakeholders in December. They were encouraged by the commitment of council leadership and impressed by the hard work and collaboration of people across the five existing councils.

'Impressive' levels of programme rigour, governance and assurance were observed, along with clarity of purpose and clear deliverables. Risks were seen to be well understood and managed and the council team, it was said, 'know their stuff'.

The report recommends that the council team begins to focus more on achieving the ambitions of the new council after it is launched. The reviewers advised that it will take time to unlock all the benefits of having a single unitary council and that long-term plans, for the next five years and beyond, should be developed.

Social care recruitment campaign launched

We badly need more carers and social workers – as Associate Lead for Adult Social Care Mike is directly aware of this and working on it with Lead Member Heather Shearer. The 'My Time to Care' campaign was shot entirely in Somerset and stars local carers in six new videos.

Somerset County Council has joined forces with the NHS and Registered Care Providers Association to show how working in social care in Somerset is a respected, meaningful, and fun career choice.

The campaign emphasises how a career in care in Somerset presents an opportunity to rebel and ‘break free from behind a desk’, embarking on a career filled with meaningful human interaction and job satisfaction. Each video is tailored to target a different age group that may be interested in a career in care.

The Council has simplified the application process. Anyone interested just visit www.proudtocaresomerset.co.uk & leave your details: our team will get back with potential suitable roles.

The recruitment campaign will be promoted on social media, in the local media, and with advertising across Somerset. A recruitment event is set to take place at Somerset County Cricket Club on Tuesday, February 7.

Have a look! The six ‘My Time to Care’ videos are available to watch here: <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLbpaA5vdlqbUzDbelwkjNNeTtejzyIYi>

Small business should be at the heart of energy support

Somerset County Council has called for any review of energy price support for businesses to focus on support for small businesses and the adoption of green and renewable energy.

In a letter to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, signed by Councillor Val Keitch, Executive Lead Member for Local Government Reorganisation and Prosperity, and Councillor Sarah Dyke, Lead Member for Environment and Climate Change, the council argues: “Small businesses have been disproportionately hit by energy costs, with 44 per cent saying their energy costs have at least doubled. Such businesses lack the buying power to secure preferential tariffs from energy suppliers as well as the financial capacity to effectively hedge against movement in the energy market.”

The council acknowledges that the “Energy Bill Relief scheme is providing a lifeline for small firms across the UK. However, with an ongoing cost of doing business crisis, a continuation of the EBRs for the smallest firms is going to be critical for the UK economy overall and rural economies, in particular. An extended programme of support whilst energy prices remain so high should not, in our view, simply be targeted at individual sectors, but also at vulnerability due to business size. For rural businesses, a continuation of the support for those not on the grid too for their supplies is also important.”

Planning Approval Granted to Somerset’s First Net Zero School

Last month, planning permission was granted for the new primary school at the Orchard Grove development in Taunton. The school will serve the new community, with capacity for 420 pupils and 52 nursery places, and room to expand to accommodate an additional 210 children.

An investment of £11.3 million has been secured to build the new school, which will address the shortfall in school places in the local area. The super energy efficient Passivhaus design of the school and added solar panels will ensure the building is Net Zero so it doesn’t contribute to climate change. In addition to environmental benefits, this will also lower the school’s running costs meaning funds can be concentrated on education.

The new school – which will have three sports pitches, a range of play equipment, and parking provision for electric vehicles - shows a clear commitment by Somerset County Council to ensure new builds are in line with its Climate Emergency Strategy, reducing carbon emissions and making Somerset more resilient to climate change.

The school building will open in September 2024, but from September 2023, pupils will attend Isambard Kingdom Brunel school in Wellington, and home to school transport will be provided. Orchard Grove children will wear their new school uniforms, have the same classes, subjects and teachers.

The Castle Partnership Trust has been approved by the Secretary of State for Education as the Academy sponsor who will run the school. Applications for a place in reception this September have already been received.

Business mentors needed to help Somerset thrive

An ambitious mentoring programme is being launched to make the expertise of the county's most knowledgeable business-people available to businesses across Somerset.

Twenty mentors are being recruited to join the programme in its initial stage, where they will receive free mentor training. Executive and senior management level business leaders, successful entrepreneurs or business consultants, who understand the challenges associated with running and growing a business and the value of impartial advice, are being encouraged to get in touch.

Potential mentors might offer sector experience or a specialism such as finance, marketing, HR or e-commerce; and above all, have a desire to make a difference.

The project has been funded by Somerset's five councils and a proportion of the Business Rates Retention Pilot programme. This allows councils in Somerset to retain a proportion of the business rates income locally to invest in developing the economy and improving the way local authority services are delivered. Those trained and funded under the Somerset Business Mentoring Programme will need to deliver 12 hours of mentoring support in Somerset to businesses, social enterprises and/or charities. They will also be identified on the SCC Business Mentoring website.

Mentors will be:

- Great listeners - confidential, supportive and able to ask challenging questions.
- Strategic thinkers - able to identify, analyse and work through risk and opportunities to develop an achievable plan for success.
- Curious to understand their mentees' motivation and drivers.
- A good sounding board - objective and able to highlight alternative approaches and solutions.
- Individually matched with a mentee, reflecting personality type and sector experience.

What's the commitment?

Mentors are typically very busy people but must be able to set aside a couple of hours per month, either in person or online, to meet with their mentee. The minimum requirement is 12 hours per mentee over a three-month period, commencing April 2023. Mentors must also attend a two-day training workshop in March 2023 (dates TBC) in preparation for delivering the programme.

Being a Somerset Business Mentor is an unpaid position, but brings many rewards:

- Training – both in the form of a two-day mentoring workshop, and ongoing support.
- Career development - adding mentorship to your skillset.
- Networking - be part of the start of a significant new chapter for the Somerset business community and benefit from peer-to-peer support.
- Personal fulfilment - the reward of seeing a mentee's businesses thrive.

Apply to be a mentor

If you are interested in becoming a Somerset Business Mentor, please fill in the form at www.somerset.gov.uk/business-mentoring to be contacted for a chat and an invitation to meet with the Programme Managers. References will be required.

For further information, please see the website or contact richard.swift@somerset.gov.uk

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.