

SOMERSET COUNTY COUNCIL

LIBERAL DEMOCRAT GROUP

JANUARY 2023

Local Government Reorganisation

Budget

Budget setting work has been ongoing since July 2022 when the Executive agreed the Medium Term Financial Strategy & Plan. The proposed balanced budget will be considered for the first time at Executive on Wednesday 18th January.

It is a requirement for the budget to be balanced with Local Authorities unable to approve a deficit budget. The administration has concentrated on balancing the protection of services previously delivered by District Councils and the greater need for social care services in both Adults and Childrens, due to the lasting effects of Covid-19.

Savings from the move from five to one Council are critical at this time, and are acknowledged as both creating more work and providing a significant part of the solution to the current financial challenge.

Full Council on 22nd Feb will approve the Revenue Budget for 23/24, the Capital Programme and the Treasury Management Strategy for the new Council

The papers will be published

here: <https://democracy.somerset.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?Cid=433&Mid=1736>

Local Community Networks

The latest papers relating to the proposed Local Community Network structure (including geography) are set to be published ahead of the Executive meeting on Wednesday 18th January.

The proposals take into consideration the hundreds of responses received from the formal consultation exercise undertaken last year and will form the starting point for the networks.

The papers will be published

here: <https://democracy.somerset.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?Cid=433&Mid=1736>

Recruitment

Recruitment of senior roles in the new Council is progressing at pace, with the appointments of Tier 2 posts underway.

Three of the Executive Director posts are unchanged and so Director of Adults, Director of Childrens (Acting) and Director of Public Health remain.

Four new posts are being recruited: Director of Resources; Director of Community Services; Director of Climate & Place; Director of Strategy, Workforce & Localities

Tier 3 posts will also be appointed before Vesting Day on 1st April.

Peer Review

A Local Government Association light touch Peer Review was undertaken in December by senior Officers and Members from other Councils including Unitary councils.

The report will be considered by the Executive on Wednesday 18th Jan, it is helpful in giving reassurance where work is progressing well, and shining a light where additional focus and resources are needed. The feedback of the work undertaken to date and planned ahead of Vesting Day was positive.

Strategies and Policies

Strategies for the new Somerset Council will come forward to Full Council in February, including the Asset Strategy and Management Plan. The new Cultural Strategy for Somerset is also well underway and will come to the Executive and Full Council.

Policies are also needed to be aligned across the five Councils and in place for Vesting Day. The employment policies are going through the HR Committee, and then on to Full Council.

New branding for Somerset Council confirmed



The new brand, featuring a version of the Somerset Dragon from the county's coat of arms, has been designed by an in-house team at the council and was developed after testing with staff and residents. Council services will be badged by a white dragon's head placed in a teal five-sided shape, representing the five councils that will be replaced by the new council.

As well as keeping costs down by designing the branding with an in-house team made up of designers from Sedgemoor and South Somerset District Councils, working with colleagues from Somerset County Council, the paper approved by Executive also proposes that the new council should avoid a branding "Big Bang", rolling out the new brand over time and accepting that branding from the existing councils will continue to be seen around the county for some years to come.

The design team has gone to great lengths to make the new brand clear and accessible, with the key colour supporting the highest level of accessibility and using a new typeface, Atkinson Hyper-legible, a font designed with the Braille Institute in the United States.

The new branding will first appear where the council has a legal responsibility to identify itself as providers of services, from council tax statements to parking signs. It will also provide brand new services such as Somerset's Council's single new website.

As well as the dragon's head, the design team has included topographical outlines of 12 Somerset landmarks, from Glastonbury Tor to Knowle Hill, to link the council's publications to the county it serves. The new council plans to add other landmarks over coming years in response to suggestions from residents.

People in Somerset are challenged to ditch the booze and 'Try Dry' this January

Just thirty-one days without alcohol can positively impact on health - improving sleep, boosting energy, reducing anxiety, and saving money, to name just a few of the benefits.

That's why this year, Somerset County Council is encouraging residents and employees to sign up to [Dry January](#) and discover the many benefits of going alcohol-free, including the financial, physical, and medical benefits this can bring.

Drinking alcohol is linked to more than 60 health conditions, including liver disease, high blood pressure, depression, and seven types of cancer. Every day in the UK, 20 people die as a result of their drinking.

Alcohol misuse is the biggest risk factor for death, ill-health and disability among 15-49 year-olds in the UK, and the fifth biggest risk factor across all ages. Annually, it is estimated that alcohol costs the NHS £3.5 billion in England alone.

People can [download an app](#) to track their units, money and calories saved, plus many more features. Or they can sign up at www.dryjanuary.org.uk for regular support emails with tips and tricks from experts and others taking part.

With many families put under tremendous strain during Covid-19 and the ongoing challenges with the cost of living crisis, many people have turned to increased drinking. However, as well as the short term benefits, research shows that Dry January can help people to drink more healthily year-round.

If you drink very heavily or regularly Dry January may not be for you, so check with your GP or local alcohol service before you start. Where an individual is experiencing physical symptoms when they stop drinking (which may include but are not limited to: shakes, sweating, restlessness, insomnia, nausea, stomach cramps or hallucinations) they should seek medical help urgently.

The [Somerset Drug and Alcohol Service](#) (SDAS) delivered by the charity Turning Point, provides free and confidential support for people wanting to make changes to their relationship with alcohol. For support speak to your GP, call SDAS 0300 303 8788 or visit www.turning-point.co.uk/sdas

'Bus It' for £2 on single bus journeys across Somerset

Bus users in Somerset will be able to travel on most routes in the county for just £2 from January.

The major fare cut is part of an initiative funded by the Government aimed at boosting bus use while helping passengers to save money 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 from 1 January to 31 March. The initiative will apply to the majority of routes in Somerset. You can check here <https://www.somerset.gov.uk/busit> to see find out more about the scheme.

Somerset County Council and the Somerset Bus Partnership have launched the 'Bus It' campaign to encourage more people to use bus services at a time when many 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.

The six operators involved are:

- Dartline
- Faresaver Buses
- First South West (Buses of Somerset)
- First West of England
- Hatch Green Coaches
- South West Coaches

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

Somerset 'warm welcome' spaces opened across County

Somerset County Council together with District colleagues are supporting the rollout of "Warm Welcome" spaces across the County. As temperatures fall this winter and energy bills skyrocket, these venues will provide places where people can find warmth, company, and support.

Over 70 spaces are now open to anyone who wants somewhere warm and welcoming to go, with many more planning to open their doors in the coming weeks.

The venues include Somerset County Council libraries, village halls, churches and café's, and will provide a warm and friendly environment where people can socialise, stay warm and access information and support for their wellbeing.

The locations have all signed up to the 'Warm Welcome Charter' – a set of five core principles that every warm space adheres to:

1. You'll get a Warm Welcome as well as a warm space
2. Everyone is treated equally, with dignity and respect
3. Our Warm Welcome will be a safe space
4. We will not tell anyone about you visiting a Warm Welcome
5. It doesn't matter why you need a Warm Welcome

Local charity, [Spark Somerset](#), has been providing practical advice and guidance to those wishing to set up and run Warm Welcome spaces. Some Warm Welcome spaces have received financial support from [Somerset Community Foundation](#), thanks to generous donations to their Somerset Cost of Living Crisis Appeal. To find out more about the Warm Welcome spaces, and find a space near you, visit www.warmwelcomesomerset.org.uk

To find out more about the support available throughout the Cost of Living crisis, please visit www.somerset.gov.uk/cost-of-living

Council unveils new proposals for evening bus services

Evening bus services on some key routes are set to be introduced as part of a major shake-up aimed at increasing bus use. Somerset County Council has revealed plans to subsidise evening services connecting Taunton with the towns of Minehead, Bridgwater, Wellington and Chard after 8pm and running to at least 10.30pm. Currently most of the services stop between 8-8.30pm.

The evening bus proposals are part of Somerset's Government-funded Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) which aims to increase bus patronage by radically improving the public transport offer for people in Somerset.

From 5 December a £1 fare becomes effective for any single bus journey in Taunton, and further measures are planned under the BSIP in the coming months.

The proposed evening bus routes, which need to be formally approved by the Council are as follows:

- 21 Bridgwater to Taunton (Musgrove Hospital to Bridgwater Bus station – last bus from Musgrove Park 11.04pm)
- 22 Wellington to Taunton - last bus from Taunton 11.05pm
- 28 Minehead to Taunton - (including Cotford St Luke and Norton Fitzwarren on the route. Last bus from Taunton 10.30pm – 10.15pm from Minehead)
- 30 Chard to Taunton - last bus from Taunton 10.10 (via Gateway Park and Ride)
- 1 service Taunton to Priorswood/Musgrove Park/Silk Mills Park and Ride -last departure from town centre to Silk Mills 10.35pm/last departure to Priorswood at 11pm

It's hoped evening buses will help boost the night-time economies in Taunton and the other towns on this evening network, as well as supporting people who work outside of 9-5 hours or need to attend training and education courses.

Somerset County Council and the Somerset Bus Partnership have launched the 'Bus It' campaign to support the BSIP improvements and encourage more people to use bus services at a time when many routes have been lost or are under threat due to lack of patronage.

Visit <https://www.somerset.gov.uk/busit> to find out about ticket deals and calculate how much you could save. For updates on traffic and travel follow @travelsomerset on Twitter and Facebook.

Somerset County Council gets to work on play at packed Bridgwater conference

A conference exploring the way different environments can help children play has been hosted in Bridgwater, bringing together teachers, childminders, and education professionals specialising in children's early years.

Hosted by Somerset County Council's Early Years team, the 'Environments – Make a Difference' conference took place at Canalside Conference Centre and attracted 140 professionals from across the sector.

The conference focused on how the environment a child learns or plays in has an essential role in supporting their learning and development, and started with a keynote speech from Ben Kingston-Hughes, a multi-award-winning trainer and author of "A Very Unusual Journey Into Play".

Drawing upon his experiences of working with vulnerable children, Ben explained the importance of play for young children, and how those experiences directly affect their development, behaviour, well-being, and creativity. His distinctive blend of humour and passionate delivery engaged the audience and delegates were genuinely inspired.

Attendees were then invited to take part in two different workshops, choosing from the following, led by early years experts:

- Loose parts play – building the future – Ben Kingston-Hughes
- Loving pedagogy – Tamsin Grimmer, Early Education Consultant
- Creating a communication friendly environment for preschool children – Amanda Griffiths, Speech & Language Adviser
- Environments that support children's emotional well-being – Julia Gaskell, Head of Training, Agency and Alumni, Norland College
- Multi-sensory environments, Rebecca Fisk, Somerset Early Years SEND Service
- Musical Play Spaces – creating enabling environments for musical expression – Take Art, Jane Parker and Eliza Wylie
- Physical Active environments – Stuart Kennard, Zing Somerset Children and Families Worker SASP.

The conference was the perfect opportunity for early years' practitioners to meet, network, share good practice and learn from experienced professionals. Delegates had a fantastic time joining in the workshops and learning from them and reported feeling more inspired to create and plan the right learning environments for children to thrive and achieve.

Somerset Early Years and Childcare Service is recruiting more childminders. For more information about becoming a childminder, and for an information pack, please call 0300 123 2224 or visit www.somerset.gov.uk/register

MBE honour for Somerset Libraries manager Sue

A long-serving libraries manager from Bridgwater has been awarded an MBE in the New Year Honours List.

Sue Crowley, Somerset County Council's Strategic Manager for Library and Registration Services, has been honoured for her contribution to public library services.

Sue's connection with Somerset Libraries first began when she volunteered at Yeovil Library while still an A-level student at Yeovil College. After completing her degree in Librarianship at Aberystwyth University, she went on to work in Berkshire, Surrey, Dorset and the London Borough Of Hounslow before returning to Somerset when she got married in 1990.

Sue said: "A member of staff told me then, 'you'll never leave' and how prescient was that, because I never did! I have always tried to make the most of whatever opportunities there have been so since then I have worked in probably every part of the Somerset Libraries Service, before assuming a lead role in 2012.

"When I first received the email informing me that I had been recommended for the MBE I have to confess to double checking that it wasn't a spam message before registering the reality of it. I've just started reading Sheila Hancock's new book, 'Old Rage' and she talks about the time she heard she had been nominated for an OBE – 'It is very nice of them all to have thought of me, but who do they think I am?' It resonates!

"Libraries are a powerful resource that are often underestimated – talk with any member of staff and they will be able to share stories about how a visit to the library has helped make a difference to people's lives, sometimes in very practical ways, such as helping to find a job, sometimes in less obvious ways by providing a place of safety, or even refuge.

"I feel I am accepting this award on behalf of all those who have worked and who will continue to work in our libraries ensuring they remain relevant, welcoming and fun places. They help us make sense of what is an increasingly divisive and chaotic world and as I work towards my own retirement in a few months' time I will look forward to continuing to visit and use libraries once again as a very happy library user."

Cllr Bill Revans, Leader of Somerset County Council, said: "Sue has been at the heart of our library services for many years and we are delighted to hear this news. Huge congratulations on a very well-deserved honour."

GET INVOLVED

Hundreds sign up to help shape council services

More than 300 people have signed up to help shape the future of council services in Somerset.

From April 2023, Somerset's five councils will be replaced by the new unitary Somerset Council which will deliver all council services to all communities – from waste collection and adult social care to housing, benefits and parks.

A new Customer Panel has been established to ensure residents are at the heart of those services.

Since launching in August, more than 300 people have stepped forward – with members already providing valuable feedback on important work like the development of a new council brand.

No special skills are required to join the panel, all you need is a willingness to take part in three research topics each year and provide honest and constructive feedback. Panel members will have the chance to take part in online surveys, one-to-one interviews, usability tests and discussion groups.

You can get involved in a number of different ways. Please find out more via our website (<https://playbook.somerset.gov.uk/our-customer-panel/>), or you can register by calling 0300 123 2224.

Val Keitch

Lead member LGR and prosperity

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