

SOMERSET COUNTY COUNCIL

LIBERAL DEMOCRAT GROUP

Val Keitch Ilminster Division

07850967503

DECEMBER 2022

Lowest income households set to pay no Council Tax under new Somerset Council proposals. Fifty percent discount for foster carers.

A new, unified Council Tax Reduction Scheme targeting help at people on low incomes, care leavers and foster carers is planned for Somerset from 1 April 2023 when the new Somerset Council comes into being. The scheme will be simpler and fairer and means that the lowest income households will pay no Council Tax.

A single person with an income below £95 a week, or a couple with two children on a weekly income below £260, would be entitled to the full 100% council tax reduction. However, some families with an income below £500 a week could also be eligible for some support.

Care leavers up to the age of 25 will continue to be exempt from Council Tax and an entirely new measure, not currently offered by any of the district councils, will give Somerset County Council registered foster carers and qualifying Special Guardians a 50% reduction.

Certain benefits for people with disabilities, war pensioners, families in receipt of child benefit/maintenance and carers will not be considered when income is assessed. The scheme for pension age applicants is set by Government and will continue unchanged.

The simpler scheme will replace four separate systems operated by Somerset's district councils with varying levels of council tax support. The changes will harmonise support for working-age people on low incomes across the county.

While increasing support for the most vulnerable, the Council also agreed fairer charges for second homes and empty properties aimed at bringing empty homes back into use. There will be no discounts for second homes or empty homes while long-term empty properties will attract premiums, for example 100% for properties empty for two years, rising to 300% after ten years.

The Council Tax Reduction Scheme went out to public consultation in July and by the time it closed in September had attracted almost 1,200 responses – the majority supporting the proposals.

The new scheme will be simpler, easier to understand and less complicated to administer than the existing four district-based schemes.

The Council has also developed a new Business Rate Discretionary Relief scheme which aligns the different approaches currently in operation across the four districts into a single scheme. The new approach targets discretionary support at Somerset based charities and many not-for-profit organisations.

Somerset – make sure you get your winter vaccinations

With winter upon us, Somerset residents are being reminded to protect their health and the health of people around them by getting their flu and Covid-19 vaccinations. Covid and flu vaccinations are safe and effective ways to prevent serious illness.

If you're 50 and over, a frontline health or social care worker, pregnant, have a long-term health condition, or are a paid or unpaid carer, you are eligible for the free flu vaccine, and you can likely get the Covid-19 seasonal booster. Children aged 2-15 years old are also eligible for free flu vaccination, which is delivered through either their GP for pre-school and school for school age children – parents need to sign a consent form.

If you are eligible, you can book your seasonal Covid-19 vaccine using:

- the online booking service (<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/coronavirus-vaccination/book-coronavirus-vaccination/>)
- by calling 119, or
- finding a local vaccination walk-in site (<https://www.nhs.uk/service-search/find-a-walk-in-coronavirus-covid-19-vaccination-site>)

If you have not yet had your earlier doses of the Covid-19 vaccine, it's not too late to come forward and you can get these at any time.

Getting both vaccines is important because more people are likely to get the flu this winter, and you're more likely to be seriously ill if you get the flu and COVID-19 at the same time.

A number of clinics across Somerset are also open for walk-ins. More details can be found at <https://nhssomerset.nhs.uk/covid-and-flu-vaccines/>

Could you be a Stepping Stones carer?

Somerset County Council is highlighting the need to recruit more 'Stepping Stones' carers to support young care leavers. Stepping Stones carers support young care leavers aged 16-21, who are making the transition from care to independent living, but are not yet ready to live on their own.

This involves providing them with a safe place to stay, helping them gain important life skills and experience such as managing bills, cooking and shopping, and encouraging them to seek further opportunities in education or employment.

Stepping Stones carers need to be aged 23 or over, have a spare room in their home, and ideally live in a town or area with good transport links, as it's important for our care leavers to have access to amenities and opportunities.

In return, Stepping Stones carers receive a weekly fee, starting at £189.31 plus a little extra for food and utilities (up to £27.50) paid by the young person from their weekly allowance.

To find out more about how you could change a child's story as a Stepping Stones carer, visit www.fosteringinsomerset.org.uk or call 0800 587 9900.

iAero flying high

It opened with a spectacular lift-off and now Somerset's Aerospace Innovation Centre – iAero – is flying high with tenants moving in, significant interest from industry leaders, and new collaborative equipment being installed.

The purpose-built centre, based in Yeovil, is a regional hub for research, design and innovation and was delivered in partnership between Somerset County Council (SCC), the Heart of the South West Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) and Leonardo UK, with funding from HM Government and the European Union.

The centre was built to support the competitiveness and growth of the aerospace sector and associated high-value design and engineering technology supply chains – all vital to the South West's economy.

Since opening its doors, the centre has had a constant buzz of activity, with events including a West of England Aerospace Forum (WEAF) breakfast networking event; Aerospace Technology Institute (ATI) Innovator Workshop; Leonardo Graduate development workshops; and a Royal Aeronautical Society (South West Region) Lecture by Vertical Aerospace.

The Director General of the British Chamber of Commerce and Somerset Chamber have visited, while a visit by a delegation from the Department for International Trade is planned later in November. 3D printing open days are also in the pipeline.

The strategic partners' summit brought together Somerset County Councillor David Woan, Associate Lead Member for Economic Development & Inward Investment, Paula Hewitt, SCC's Director for Economic and Community Infrastructure; Adam Clarke, Managing Director at Leonardo Helicopter UK; Karl Tucker, Chair of the LEP; and David Ralph, LEP Chief Executive.

£300k boost for Somerset tree planting plans

Ambitious plans to plant thousands of new trees in Somerset have received a £300,000 funding boost. Planting significant numbers of new trees is a key part of Somerset's Climate Emergency Strategy to help the county achieve its ambition of becoming net zero by 2030.

However, this isn't as simple as just finding some spare land and putting saplings in the ground. You need to identify appropriate sites and species, develop planting and design proposals, and consult widely on the plans.

Therefore, Somerset County Council is pleased to announce it has been successful in a joint funding bid with the Exmoor National Park Authority to the Woodland Creation Accelerator Fund (WCAF) and has been awarded £300,000 - the maximum amount possible. The funding will be used to fund a new Tree Project Officer, a Community Empowerment Officer, and a Technical Officer over a three-year period.

They will help accelerate the delivery of tree planting in the winter seasons 2023/24 and 2024/25 and deliver on the actions set out in the Somerset Tree Strategy that is nearing completion.

This latest funding builds on previous success that saw Somerset awarded £189,975 in 2021 from the Local Authority Treescapes Fund. This has funded the planting of 800 standard trees and 2,500 whips through the combined efforts of Somerset County Council, Mendip District Council, Sedgemoor District Council, Somerset West & Taunton Council, and South Somerset District Council.

For more information on work to mitigate the impacts of climate change in Somerset, visit:

<https://www.somerset.gov.uk/climate-emergency/>

Award recognition for Somerset's Leaving Care Team

Somerset County Council's Leaving Care Team has been named as runner up for a prestigious national award.

The team were named runners up in the 'Team of the Year' category at the National Leaving Care Benchmarking Forum (NLCBF) Awards, held at The Studio in Birmingham.

SCC's Leaving Care Team, who were praised in the Council's recent Ofsted inspection, offer support to young people aged 16-25 who have been in the care of the Council as they become adults, living independent lives.

Somerset's Leaving Care team - based in Taunton, Bridgwater, Yeovil and Shepton Mallet - work with care leavers to support them with finding jobs, housing and all the issues young people have as they begin life as an adult.

For more information about support for care leavers in Somerset, visit:

<https://www.somersetcareleavers.org.uk/>

Somerset joins network to offer better support to county's most vulnerable residents

Somerset will be able to offer better support to its residents after joining forces with a national network that offers expertise in providing effective help to people to access our services.

Somerset is one of 10 new areas approved to join the Making Every Adult Matter (MEAM) network, joining the existing 32 locations already taking part.

MEAM offers guidance and training to help transform how services are delivered to vulnerable citizens and is a national initiative funded by the National Lottery Community Fund.

The MEAM network is made up of several national charities that specialise in areas such as mental health (MIND), drug and alcohol treatment (Collective Voice), supporting the homeless (Homeless Link), and the criminal justice system (Clinks).

Over the next two years, Somerset will work with MEAM partners to build on work aligning public health, social care, and housing services when supporting those who most need our services.

The programme will be led by the Somerset Homelessness Reduction Board which includes representatives from local housing providers, adults and children's services, district homelessness and rough sleeper services, health services including the NHS, police, probation, the Department of Work and Pensions, and the voluntary and community sector.

Somerset powering forward as world leaders call for more renewable energy

Community solar projects and a green energy plan for Somerset are among the local actions taking place in response to the global climate emergency.

World leaders attending the COP27 Climate Summit in Egypt were calling for a more urgent drive on delivering greater amounts of renewable energy.

Here in Somerset, this call is being answered in part by plans for a new Local Area Energy Plan (LAEP), along with a number of community-based renewable energy projects.

Starting this month, the five Somerset Councils are commissioning a specialist consultant to carry out an extensive survey of the county for the new LAEP, in which suitable locations for potential renewable energy projects will be identified - and, whether the locations are compatible with connection to the National Grid.

New solar panels and battery storage systems, installed in around 20 community-based renewable energy projects over the past 12 months and funded by Somerset County Council's £1.5 million Climate Emergency Fund, are also contributing to Somerset's climate emergency efforts.

This 'green' energy, generated from community buildings, is cutting carbon footprints and significantly reducing energy bills, simultaneously addressing the global climate and energy crises.

For more information and tips about saving energy in Somerset, visit:

<https://www.somerset.gov.uk/climate-emergency/climate-emergency-individuals-and-communities/>

Employers' toolkit launched to help tackle domestic abuse

To coincide with the international campaign, 'Sixteen Days of Action' against domestic abuse, (25 November - 10 December), Somerset County Council has launched a new toolkit for employers.

The campaign encourages employers to play their part in tackling domestic abuse and learn how to spot signs that an employee may be in an abusive relationship.

The Council is encouraging all employers to check out the online resource at www.somersetsurvivors.org.uk, aimed at guiding them in how to support staff who may be affected by domestic abuse.

Organisations have a legal obligation to provide a safe working environment. Stopping and challenging domestic abuse and workplace support for employees who are experiencing it, is a fundamental part of that duty of care.

The toolkit helps organisations do more to aid their employees through training on the signs to spot, how to help and protect staff whilst securing their safety and where to go for support.

It also offers guidance on how to build an approach that ensures all employees feel supported and empowered by their workplace to deal with domestic abuse. In addition to supporting staff who are experiencing domestic abuse, the toolkit has advice on how to spot if a member of staff is a perpetrator of domestic abuse, how to engage with a perpetrator and the support that is available for them.

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a lasting effect on the way some employees work. Many organisations have continued to embrace the home working or hybrid method of working. Whilst this new way of working has many benefits for employees, for someone experiencing domestic abuse work maybe the only safe place that they go.

The shift to a new way of working means the position of employers tackling domestic abuse and supporting employees who are experiencing it has never been more important.

Domestic abuse: a toolkit for employers can be downloaded from: www.somersetsurvivors.org.uk

Cash incentives for landlords who help house Ukrainian refugees

An appeal for private landlords to come forward with vacant, or soon-to-be vacant, properties for rent, has been launched.

Generous Somerset sponsors have been hosting refugee families under the Government's Homes for Ukraine scheme. Accommodation is now needed as part of a planned pathway across all Councils for moving guests out of sponsor accommodation and into private accommodation.

Somerset Councils are offering a one-off cash incentive of £1,000 per bedroom, with up to a maximum of £4,000 for homes with four bedrooms and above. Landlords will be asked to sign up Ukrainian tenants for a minimum 12-month term on a self-contained assured shorthold tenancy basis. They must also agree to a rent that sits within Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rates.

This housing initiative is only available to households who arrived in the UK via the Homes 4 Ukraine scheme and supports access to the private rented sector for Ukrainian households who may find it difficult to access accommodation without employment references or a guarantor.

Housing Teams at the four District Councils (Mendip, Sedgemoor, Somerset West and Taunton, and South Somerset), are working together with colleagues in Public Health to roll-out the county's pilot initiative.

Government has provided additional money to Local Authorities to invest in homelessness prevention by engaging and incentivising landlords. Funds are limited and will be issued on a first-come-first-served basis.

If you can offer a suitable property in Sedgemoor, Somerset West and Taunton or South Somerset please contact srht@sedgemoor.gov.uk

For those with accommodation in the Mendip area we would ask you contact housing.admin@mendip.gov.uk or call 0300 303 8588.

You'll find full details of the incentive scheme, alongside terms and conditions, on our dedicated website pages www.somerset.gov.uk/Ukraine.

You can calculate your LHA rate here: <https://lha-direct.voa.gov.uk/search.aspx>

GET INVOLVED

Somerset Councils launch countywide Business Survey 2022

Somerset's five Local Authorities are jointly undertaking a survey to better understand and support local businesses, now and in the future.

Businesses are encouraged to take part and share the link with their networks. The more responses there are, the more accurate the data.

Now in its third year, the survey has been developed with input from respected representative business organisations such as the Somerset Chamber of Commerce and the Federation of Small Businesses. It will give valuable insight into current business challenges, such as inflationary pressures, supply chain issues, higher borrowing costs, ongoing recruitment and skills concerns, and the journey to net zero carbon emissions.

In addition to providing much-needed intelligence about the position of the Somerset economy, the responses will be used to inform future targeted business support programmes.

The 2022 launch is a shared initiative between Somerset County Council, Mendip District Council, Sedgemoor District Council, Somerset West & Taunton Council, and South Somerset District Council. On 1st April 2023, a new unitary Somerset Council will replace the County Council and the four district councils. From that date there will be a number of benefits, including greater joint working and consistency across the county to ensure businesses are supported and the local Somerset economy prospers.

The survey is now live and can be accessed here:

<https://somerset.inconsult.uk/AnnualBusinessSurvey2022/answerQuestionnaire?qid=8297763>

If you have questions or wish to provide additional feedback, please email:

somerseteconomicdevelopment@somerset.gov.uk

Volunteers needed for Independent Remuneration Panel

Somerset County Council needs volunteers to join an independent panel, which sets the allowances payable to its elected members.

The Independent Remuneration Panel, a legally required body, makes recommendations to the Council about the different financial allowances elected members can receive. Being a panel member will involve researching the amounts other authorities make available to their elected members and working towards producing the Scheme of Allowances for the new Somerset Council.

There are five places and applications are being accepted throughout December.

All panel members must be independent of the Council. If you have an interest in local government, would like to know more about Council processes or would like some satisfaction in using your existing skills to take part in this democratic process, this could be for you.

Find out more and apply by visiting: <https://dasjobs.co.uk/job/independent-person-to-serve-on-the-new-independent-remuneration-panel-2/>

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.

Have your say on Somerset's SEND strategy

Members of the public in Somerset are invited to have their say on a new draft strategy for children and young people with Special Educational Needs and/or Disabilities (SEND).

The Somerset SEND Partnership, which includes Somerset County Council, NHS Somerset, Somerset Parent Carer Forum and local education providers, have launched a consultation for the public to feedback on their updated SEND Strategy.

The strategy was shaped by extensive engagement with children, young people and families and sets out how services will be delivered and led over the next three years (2023-26).

The Somerset SEND Partnership have four key themes which outline their plan for SEND services, these are:

- Working together
- Getting help as early as possible
- Access to the right support and provision
- Preparing for the future

The consultation is open and will close on Friday 23 December. To read the strategy and provide feedback visit: <https://somerset.inconsult.uk/SENDstrategy/consultationHome>

After the consultation closes, the Somerset SEND Partnership will review all feedback and use this to update the strategy. The final strategy will be published in Spring 2023.

PREPARING FOR WINTER FLOODING

GUIDANCE FOR RESIDENTS AND BUSINESSES

While drought conditions may have dominated headlines this year the focus is back on flooding preparedness as we head into the winter months.

Somerset councils have combined to offer the following advice and guidance to help residents and businesses reduce the impacts of flooding. We hope this can assist you when you are dealing with peoples' concerns and queries over the coming months.

Please feel free to share the information widely.

What can I do?

Thinking ahead and preparing for what the weather may bring especially at this time of year can make a real difference in your home, business and community.

One of the first things to check is whether your property is at risk of flooding (<https://check-for-flooding.service.gov.uk/>)

We also recommend taking precautionary measures and purchasing your own sandbags in case of flooding emergencies. If sandbags are not available, you can use:

- rolled-up mats or carpets
- bags of garden compost
- pillow cases filled with soil (don't overfill them)
- timber boards (possibly screwed to door frames and sealed with mastic)

What to do during a flood

There is information to help you on what to do during a flood on the Somerset Prepared website: <https://www.somersetprepared.org.uk/hazard-advice/flooding/>. The key point is to always stay safe, in an immediate flood emergency or where there is a risk to life, follow the advice of the emergency services.

Protect yourself from future flooding

It is advisable to plan how you'll respond to a flood. Information and plans are available to help you plan ahead (<https://check-for-flooding.service.gov.uk/plan-ahead-for-flooding/>).

We also encourage you to download the 'Prepare. Act. Survive.' flood plan to help reduce the impact of flooding.

You can find up to date information on flood warnings by visiting the flood warnings page on the Government's website (<https://check-for-flooding.service.gov.uk/>)

Flooding and roads – key information

It's important to ensure drains and gullies are clear during the autumn and winter months – Somerset County Council as the Highways authority routinely inspects these but leaves and other debris can accumulate rapidly so members of the public have a key role to play.

If you spot a problem with a drain or gully, or any issue on the highway you can report it easily and quickly here - <https://www.somerset.gov.uk/roads-and-transport/report-a-problem-on-the-road/>

Heavy rain and flooding present a clear and present danger to drivers – road users are urged NOT to attempt to drive across flooded roads as it is not possible to estimate the depth of the water reliably.

A number of Somerset roads have flood gates in place to prevent access in the event of flooding – information can be found here - <https://www.travelsomerset.co.uk/roadclosuregates/>

It's vital to prepare for wet conditions if you have to travel and to proceed with extreme caution if you get caught in flood conditions – you can find information and advice here - <https://somerseroadsafety.org/drivers/weather/>