

SOMERSET COUNTY COUNCIL

LIBERAL DEMOCRAT GROUP

SEPTEMBER 2022

Local Community Networks

A consultation regarding the development of the much-anticipated Local Community Networks (LCNs) is soon set to launch. Somerset Council will cover a very large geographical area and so needs local committees of the council where voices can be heard, partners brought together, and decisions taken with the benefit of local knowledge and experience.

Throughout the summer officers of County and District Councils have been working on options for the following aspects of LCNs:

Function – the roles and responsibilities of LCNs in the first and subsequent years of Somerset Council.

Form – options for the boundaries of the LCNs, using existing democratic boundaries and community infrastructure.

Name – does Local Community Network describe the form and function of the committees?

Finance – as inflation impacts on all council budgets, LCNs must be affordable in the first year yet able to develop in future years as savings are realised from the move to one council.

Governance – as Committees of Somerset Council, the LCNs will have a formal role and be supported by Democratic Services at the Council.

The consultation will be launched on 1st September and run to mid-October, and will seek the views of parish, town & city councils, partner organisations and individuals on the function, form and name for LCNs. A comprehensive communications strategy is currently being drawn up ready for the launch of the online consultation. The responses will form an important part of the recommendations for the Somerset County Council Executive and Full Council.

Finance Update

Somerset County Council, like many councils, is experiencing significant financial challenges in the current year. Inflationary factors, as we are all experiencing in our home lives, affect a large Council on a large scale. Energy costs, travel costs, increases in construction materials have all added to our costs and in turn that has affected the pay award for this year. SCC is part of a national negotiation and the latest employers' offer, equivalent to 5.5% increase, has not been accepted.

Other factors are having an adverse effect on Adults and Children's services, with increases in external placements post-Covid and the same inflationary factors impacting on the companies and organisations that provide residential placements. They are also seeing greater challenges in providing the right level of staffing, with a very competitive labour market throughout the country.

The Council's Senior Leadership Team is already working on plans to reduce the projected overspend, and some areas of the Council are now projecting underspends.

Of course, this financial year's projections have an impact on the first-year budget of the new Somerset Council. Savings will be made when the five councils come together as one Unitary Council but those savings won't be in place on day one, so it is essential that different ways of working and other plans are put in place early in the autumn. The Executive will continue to receive monthly budget monitoring reports as well as the ongoing reporting on Local Government Reorganisation.

Council Tax Support Scheme Consultation

A consultation on council tax support for the new unitary Somerset Council has launched. This is the first major consultation for the new Somerset Council and it proposes that the lowest income households across Somerset get 100% council tax relief.

Somerset's four district councils currently offer varying levels of council tax support. The proposed changes would harmonise support for working-age people on low incomes across the county and come into effect on 1 April 2023, with the creation of the new Council.

For more information: <https://somersexnewsroom.com/2022/07/25/consultation-on-council-tax-support-scheme-launched/>

Help shape the future of council services in Somerset

People in Somerset are encouraged to join a new Customer Panel and help shape the future of council services.

From April 2023, the new unitary Somerset Council will deliver all council services to all communities – from waste collection and adult social care to housing, benefits and parks.

The Customer Panel is being established to ensure residents are at the heart of those services. No special skills are required, 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.

For more information: <https://playbook.somerset.gov.uk/our-customer-panel/>

Somerset County Council backs new Cost-of-Living Crisis Appeal

Somerset County Council has welcomed the launch of Somerset Community Foundation's Somerset Cost-of-Living Crisis Appeal.

The Council has contributed an initial £50,000 donation to support the launch of the appeal. The Cost-of-Living Crisis Appeal is an urgent call for donations which will be used to help fund local charities supporting local people living in poverty through the cost-of-living crisis.

Donations will fund crucial local work such as debt advice organisations, food banks, mental health support, help for people with disabilities or older people, and homelessness organisations.

To donate to the Somerset Cost-of-Living Crisis Appeal today visit:
www.somersexctf.org.uk/costofliving or call 01749 344949.

When the fund is open, any community group or charitable organisation wishing to apply for a grant should visit the SCF website where they can find guidance on how to make an application:
www.somersexctf.org.uk/apply.

For more details about the fund, visit: <https://www.somersexctf.org.uk/somerset-cost-of-living-crisis-appeal-launched>.

Bus it – you know it makes sense

As fuel prices spiral during the ongoing cost-of-living crisis Somerset County Council and Somerset Bus Partnership are joining forces to encourage people to 'BUS IT'.

The campaign aims to highlight that with households under financial pressure buses have never been more relevant, offering a cheaper travel alternative and the chance to save on fuel and vehicle maintenance costs, while at the same time protecting the environment by helping to cut congestion and reducing your carbon footprint.

Following the withdrawal of the government's Bus Recovery Grant, bus operators are currently weighing up the viability of routes in Somerset, and one of the key factors operators will use in assessing viability is the number of passengers on each route.

Bus use in Somerset is slowly climbing again, but is currently at about 70 per cent of levels compared to pre-Covid.

For more information: [Bus it – You know it makes sense – Travel Somerset](#)

Climate Summit to help Somerset businesses increase sustainability

Somerset businesses are being urged to play their part in combating the climate emergency – with a conference offering insight into practical steps they can take to become more sustainable.

The Somerset Business Climate Summit 2022 will take place at Queens College in Taunton on Wednesday 21st September between 10am and 1pm.

The Summit will highlight best practice and raise awareness of the opportunities and challenges for businesses as we shift toward a low carbon economy.

Guest speakers from businesses of different sizes and industries, including My Carbon Coach, The Field Works, and recently certified B Corp New Leaf Design will discuss topics including the easiest ways for businesses to cut carbon, what Net Zero means, the journey to B Corp, and sustainable agriculture and manufacturing. Businesses will be encouraged examine their current business models and make pledges to reduce their carbon footprints.

For more information: <https://www.somerset.gov.uk/climate-emergency/climate-emergency-businesses/climate-summit/>

Successful joint funding bid to tackle violence against women and girls

Somerset County Council and North Somerset Council have jointly secured an additional £317,694 from the Home Office Safer Streets Fund to continue to make public spaces and streets safer for women and girls.

This follows the success of the neighbouring councils' 2021 campaign 'It can stop if we change together'. This raised awareness, tackled sexual harassment and Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) to make public places and streets safer.

For more information: <https://somersetnewsroom.com/2022/07/25/successful-joint-funding-bid-to-tackle-violence-against-women-and-girls/>

Specialists appointed to take Somerset arts and culture strategy forward

Specialist partners have been appointed to help develop a five-year cultural strategy for the new Somerset Council that comes into being in April 2023.

Arts Council England, in partnership with Somerset's five councils – Mendip, Sedgemoor, Somerset West and Taunton, and South Somerset district councils, plus Somerset County Council – have committed to invest in developing the strategy and have procured the services of cultural consultants, The Fifth Sector.

Key aims and objectives of the strategy include:

- To raise awareness and promote the role that culture and creativity can play in enriching communities and improving the quality of life, health, wellbeing and the local economy for Somerset residents, local businesses and visitors.
- To make sure that a cultural identity for arts and culture in Somerset is at the heart of the new authority's strategic plans.
- To identify new job opportunities in culture and the creative industries and raise the profile of the county's vibrant creative sector.

New electric minibuses hit the roads in Somerset

Somerset County Council now has two fully electric, specially adapted wheelchair accessible minibuses available for use.

These vehicles are Maxus EV80 minibuses and are the first of their kind in the county. They have a capacity of ten passengers, and the seats within can be adapted so that three wheelchairs can be safely included.

On one charge, the buses can travel approximately 114 miles currently. They are currently being used in the Bridgwater area, but their use may well be expanded across the county in the future.

£1,500 of vouchers awarded to creative writing winners and Somerset Schools

Three winners of the Fostering In Somerset Creative Writing Competition each scooped £250 in vouchers, as well as £250 in vouchers for their chosen school.

Somerset residents of all ages were encouraged to write a short story of up to 1,000 words for Foster Care Fortnight in May for the chance to win a share of £1,500 of vouchers.

Somerset County Council's fostering and library services received over 100 entries and judges whittled these down to three winners.

All three winning stories can be read at

<https://www.fosteringinsomerset.org.uk/resources/storycomp.htm>