

SOMERSET COUNCIL

BRIEFING SHEET FOR PARISH AND TOWN COUNCILS

JULY 2023

Three-year Council Finances: When the 2023/24 budget was agreed in February 2023 the forecast gap over the next three years was outlined as £100m. However the latest Executive report states that the expected gap for 2024/25 of circa £40m will now be considerably higher. The report also states that it is imperative that action be taken to identify significant savings. The same Executive report also shows an accumulative budget gap of £98.8m in 2026/27.

Waste Services Industrial Action: The council was informed this week that Waste Service members of the Unite union intend to start industrial action on Wednesday 12 July. Though all efforts would be made to limit the impact, industrial action is likely to cause widespread and significant disruption affecting the majority of residents in some way. The staff intend to strike Wednesday to Friday each week in the four weeks from 12 July to 4 August. On the other days of the week staff taking action would not work overtime or be involved in catch-up collections, for example on Saturdays. Three-weekly refuse collections would be prioritised, along with clinical waste collections and collections from communal locations. However, there is no guarantee that these collections will take place on time. Recycling collections would be affected to a much greater extent as their crews are redeployed to support the other collections. The scheduling of the industrial action means some residents could go multiple weeks without recycling collections.

Customer Access Points: Customers who need in-person help or advice from Somerset Council will find support at all Somerset Libraries. From July, they will be able to set up virtual, face-to-face meetings on the spot so people can speak directly to a member of the Customer Service team. Customer Access Points were initially set up in seven libraries in April when Somerset Council, now after a successful trial, it is being extended to all Somerset's libraries. The support will be provided during library opening hours, which, in most cases, includes weekends.

Surface dressing programme: The Highways team have started to surface dress some roads as part of the summer maintenance programme. Surface dressing is a recognised maintenance technique for sealing a road, improving skid resistance, and

preventing water getting under the surface. The work can only be carried out in dry weather, so the Council's surface dressing programme is flexible, and dates can change at short notice. You can check which roads are being surface dressed here: www.somerset.gov.uk/roads-travel-and-parking/surface-dressing/.

Eel recovery project: Endangered eels are getting a helping hand at Chard Reservoir Local Nature Reserve. The Council's Countryside team is working with the Environment Agency (EA) to help increase nationally declining numbers of European Eels (*Anguilla Anguilla*). European eels are critically endangered due to overfishing, disease, and the blocking of waterways with dams and weirs, preventing them from completing their migration and breeding cycle. In May this year an extra 8,000 glass eels were released into the reservoir – these will develop into juvenile eels known as elvers and once mature will begin their journey to the Caribbean to spawn. To aid this, the Council's team will also install eel passes on spillways of the dam to support their movement out to the Bristol Channel.

Summer reading challenge: Youngsters aged 4-11 can join the Summer Reading Challenge by visiting Somerset Libraries. The Challenge themed around the power of play, sport, games, and physical activity offers free materials from Somerset Libraries and online via the Challenge website. The characters – brought to life by children's author and illustrator Loretta Schauer – navigate a fictional summer obstacle course and track their reading as they go, rewarded by free incentives including stickers.

Redetermination of planning decision: Somerset Council will be reconsidering an application for a proposed change of use of the Blue Ball Inn, Triscombe. Planning permission was erroneously granted under delegated powers in December 2022 by Somerset West and Taunton Council but as it is not possible for the Local Planning Authority to withdraw a planning permission once issued, a legal process was initiated by Somerset Council through the High Court to quash the decision. The application is likely to be reconsidered on 18 July 2023.

National award for Children's Services: Somerset Council is celebrating after winning a prestigious Award for a partnership project delivering children's homes across the county. The Council and its partners – care providers Homes2Inspire (part of national charity, Shaw Trust) and Somerset NHS Foundation Trust – won the 'Innovation in Partnerships' category for their trailblazing Homes and Horizons project. The project, which was developed and introduced under the previous Conservative administration is delivering 10 family-sized homes for children as part of a new model of care for Somerset's most vulnerable young people. It will also provide 20 specialist foster carers and a brand-new, therapeutic education service on two sites within the county, designed to increase young people's life chances through better educational results and improved mental health and wellbeing.