

SOMERSET UNITARY ANNUAL REPORT

CLLR SARAH DYKE & CLLR NICOLA CLARK

2023 / 2024

In April 2023 we said thank you to our outgoing Councillors

We took the opportunity to pass on our thanks to Hayward Burt, and William Wallace, who have served the Blackmoor Vale area as Councillors for many years.

Somerset Council vesting day happened on the 1st April 2023

Flags are flying as a new era dawns in Somerset with the official launch of Somerset Council.

The new, single council's logo features on flags that are flying at council offices in Bridgwater, Shepton Mallet, Taunton and Yeovil.

Somerset Council replaces the four district councils, Mendip, Sedgemoor, Somerset West and Taunton, and South Somerset, and Somerset County Council, bringing services, staff, and elected members under one umbrella.

Casework

Throughout the year we have been working through casework that we receive from Parish Councils and from members of the public. Please do continue to send these through to us and do feel free to pass on our details to anyone who needs to get in touch with us.

Coronation events – a thank you!

Last summer, it was amazing to see the transformation of the villages in readiness for the Coronation celebrations – thank you so much to all of the volunteers who were involved in this!

Attendance at Parish Council meetings

Sarah and Nicola continue to try and join as many Parish Council meetings as possible, but sometimes our schedules make this hard! Please do get in touch if you have any specific questions.

If you would like to us to speak about a specific topic at your Parish Council meeting, it would be lovely if you could get in touch beforehand. This will give us a chance to get in touch with the specific member of staff in charge of your area of interest, in order to ensure that we give you a comprehensive and up to date answer.

Local Community Network 10 – 'South East Somerset'

Local Community Networks (LCNs), started rolling out in the summer of 2023. We want you to be ready to play a crucial role in their success.

The South East Somerset LNC has a focus on wellbeing, and has three working groups – Highways, Footpaths and Flooding.

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Sarah Dyke is elected as the MP for Somerton and Frome in July 2023.

Sarah will be continuing in her role as one of your Unitary Councillors for the Blackmoor Vale division, and she and Nicola work together on casework and on covering attendance for Parish Council meetings.

Upcoming planning applications and determinations

Planning is one of the main areas that Sarah and Nicola get contacted about - please do continue to keep us in the loop about your thoughts on planning applications. As we've said in the past, we really do appreciate your emails and the up to date information that you pass onto us. We are aware of several issues locally with traffic and concerns about changes to highway layouts and are in contact with the highways portfolio holder regarding these.

In late 2023, a trial brings hope for phosphate mitigation funding

Somerset Council is hoping to secure Government funding to deliver phosphate mitigation measures which will unlock the delivery of 18,000 new homes across the area and provide for longer term nature recovery.

The Council working in partnership with the Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group (FWAG), Plymouth University, Salinity Solutions, and Dorset Council, has submitted a bid for £10.5m to the Government's Nutrient Mitigation Fund.

The funding would be used to expand the Council's existing phosphate credit scheme and deliver both interim and long-term phosphate mitigation measures including the installation of modular units to provide a secondary treatment process at wastewater treatment works in the catchment area.

The new energy efficient water processing technology, developed by Salinity Solutions, has the potential to assist all the nutrient neutrality catchment areas by providing cost effective bridging measures to 2030 – meeting the Governments Technically Achievable Limit (TAL) proposed under the Levelling and Regeneration Bill. It would also work alongside the delivery of nature-based solutions for nutrient neutrality, which take longer to establish.

Salinity Solutions and Wessex Water have delivered a no-cost trial for Somerset Council to demonstrate the efficacy of their modular water treatment units for phosphate mitigation. A unit has been in place at the Fivehead Wastewater Treatment Works near Taunton for two weeks allowing independent water sampling to be undertaken. Early indications show promising results with the first verified laboratory results showing over 98% of phosphates and 88% of nitrates removed.

For further information, visit: <https://www.somerset.gov.uk/trial-brings-hope-for-phosphates-funding/>

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Traffic, speeding and road accidents.

Over the year there have recently been road traffic accidents that residents have reported to us. We are in touch with the PCSO for the area, as well as Somerset Road Safety. Somerset Road Safety have offered to run some workshops locally, and it would be great if you could get in touch with us if you are interested in hosting one of these in your parish.

In late 2023, the Council leadership started warning us of the upcoming financial emergency: Current level of Care spending could put council viability at risk within two years warns Somerset Council

Somerset Council is warning that it will have to draw on reserves for the second successive year to fund the rising cost of both Adult and Children's social care.

Papers published ahead of a meeting of the Council's Executive on 6th September describe the council's financial position as "stark and challenging". The warning comes as other councils in the UK are raising concerns that their budgets are unsustainable. The papers reveal that the Council drew £18 million from reserves last year to fund spending beyond the 2022/23 budgets in Adult and Children's care services. The Council has a legal obligation to fund these services, which have seen an unprecedented rise in both overall demand and complexity of need since the Covid-19 pandemic.

These two social care services are currently projected to overspend by £21 million again in the current financial year. This is despite significant increases in budgets in the two previous years. Other challenges faced by the new unitary Council include the rising cost of processing an increasing amount of household waste and the cost of refinancing loans taken out by five predecessor councils. Cllr Liz Leyshon, Lead Member for Resources and Performance and Deputy Leader of Somerset Council said: "Obviously repeatedly using the Council's reserves to fund day to day care services cannot continue without putting the financial viability of the council at risk.

We were also made aware of local bus services at risk

The Council have had confirmation from transport operator First South that current levels of use on two key bus routes in Blackmoor Vale cannot be sustained. And that they plan to reduce or discontinue those services.

Wonderfully, the 58 bus service has been saved for another year, due to the joined up working of Somerset Council and Buses of Somerset, in negotiation with First Bus.

However, we are not out of the woods yet, and we need to continue to encourage more people to use the bus service.

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Anti-Social behaviour

We are aware of ongoing issues with ASB throughout our communities. As promised, Nicola has spoken with the Police and Crime Commissioner about the lack of response on these issues. If we have any future incidences and you or a member of your community calls the police, please also let Nicola know so that she can flag it with the PCC directly as well.

An update on the Financial Emergency, from March 2024

Last month Somerset Council declared a Financial Emergency because the costs of delivering services are rising much faster than the Council's income.

This is mostly due to the rise in social care costs, for instance in residential care placements where the weekly cost has increased from £577 per week in 2022/23 to £850 per week this year. Care home fees are still rising as inflation continues to affect staffing costs, energy and food. Increased interest rates have affected care service providers too, as they have household mortgages and rentals.

Although Council Tax rates are lower in Somerset than in other similar unitary councils in the south west, the annual increase is limited by Government and so the gap between income and expenditure is growing and we have to find more savings.

For the current financial year, the projected overspend has been reduced to £18.7million, an improvement of approximately £8million. However, we need further reductions in spending to better protect our reserves for future years as we know the difficult financial situation will continue. Every payment over £100 now has to be approved by an expenditure board and we are expecting further improvement before the financial year end.

In February, Somerset Council needs to set a budget for the next financial year (2024/5). The Chancellor's Autumn Statement was extremely disappointing for Councils as there was no acknowledgement of the difficult situation for local government, and so we already know that our budget setting will be both more difficult and painful.

Executive seeks to protect key services with proposed budget

Somerset Council's Executive has agreed plans to bridge a £100m budget gap for 2024/25, welcoming steps that will see several key services protected.

Councillors were, however, given a stark warning that the broken model for funding local government and the Government's refusal to allow a 9.99% Council Tax increase undermines the authority's immediate sustainability after 2024/25.

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In January, it was announced the Council would need to apply to the Government for emergency financial support, while also considering “unprecedented” and “heart-breaking” steps to bridge a £100m funding gap, including reductions to services.

At 7th February’s Executive meeting it was confirmed that some of these services will be protected by working in partnership with City, Town and Parish Councils.

This includes Somerset’s CCTV service, Yeovil Recreation Ground, Taunton Visitor Information Centre, the Ranger Service in the south, and locking parks in Wellington, Minehead and Taunton overnight.

Talks with Somerset’s waste contractor will continue before any savings linked to closing household waste recycling centres are taken forward.

Executive also passed amendments to withdraw or change a number of savings proposals to allow alternative funding models to be explored. These include savings linked to highways maintenance, RNLI lifeguard provision, school crossing patrols, and savings linked to important democratic functions, such as Scrutiny committees.

How you can access our forward plans

We wanted to make sure that you have all of the up-to-date information on what the council is working on, and you can see that here –

<https://democracy.somerset.gov.uk/mgPlansHome.aspx?bcr=1>

The forward plan is a list of the council’s key decisions that will be made by:

- Executive Members or by officers who have been delegated authority by the Executive over the next one to four months.
- The Executive as a Committee over the next 12 months (note - non key decisions which are being considered by the Executive are also included).
- Other committees of the council

The plan is updated regularly.

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