

### Council Tax Setting

The Feb 26<sup>th</sup> Full council tax was cancelled, and the Full council is set for Wednesday 5<sup>th</sup> March (with a fall back date of March 10<sup>th</sup>) So in the next week we should have a clearer idea of the Council Tax increase this year, and the gradually clearing picture of how staff changes and re organisation, due to cost constraints is having an impact on services. I continue to chase issues raised across all parishes, and there is a delay but I will continue to press for information as requested from Parishioners.

Somerset Council will again be using Exceptional Financial Support (EFS) agreed by the Government to set a balanced budget for 2025/26.

Papers published by Somerset Council show the Council is facing a budget gap of £52.2m for next year, despite finding new savings of £48m which includes £34m of savings by reducing the number of staff and managers employed.

However, cost pressures in Children's and Adults Social Care continue to increase nationally and Somerset Council is facing a gap of around £52.2m for 2025/26.

The Council applied to the Government for financial support and has been allowed to increase Council Tax by 7.5%, more than the usual cap of 5%. If approved at Full Council on 5 March, this would mean a band D property paying an additional £129 a year, or £2.49 a week, and means bills for Council Tax payers in Somerset will remain below the national average.

However, the 7.5% increase would generate an additional £9.1m, meaning the Council will again need a Capitalisation Direction to close the gap of £43m. This is a form of one-off assistance offered by Government last year which allows the Council to sell assets or borrow money and use the proceeds to fund the budget gap and the day-to-day running costs.

### Review of Car Parking Charges.

There are currently different rates and charging principles applied across the county's 200 or so council-run car parks, and the system has not been reviewed since Somerset Council came into being in 2023.

If approved in principle by the Council's Executive on 26 February, the proposals will then go out to public consultation.

The proposals include:

Introducing a new county-wide overnight charge in car parks

- Standardising charges for Sunday parking at all car parks – currently this only applies at some car parks.
- Introducing charges at car parks which are currently free
- Introducing on-street charging to limited waiting bays in town centres – currently this only applies in some areas.

### Update from Heart of Wessex Railway Line

#### **Upcoming engineering work, Monday 10 to Sunday 16 March between Yeovil Pen Mill and Castle Cary stations**

Network Rail engineers will be carrying out vital railway improvement works on the Heart of Wessex Line.

The 7-day closure will allow our team of engineers to replace 850 tonnes of ballast, the stone supporting a 250-metre stretch of track. This work is crucial to prevent the track bed from becoming flooded, which can lead to failures and rough rides.

#### **Changes to train services:**

- From **Monday 10 to Friday 14 March**, buses replace trains between Castle Cary and Yeovil Pen Mill. This will increase journey times by approximately half an hour.
- From **Saturday 15 to Sunday 16 March**, buses replace trains between Castle Cary and Weymouth. This will increase journey times by approximately 75 minutes. Passengers may also travel via Southampton on SWR services to avoid the use of buses.

During this time, engineers will take advantage of the line being closed to complete a range of other important work

#### **More than 100 bikes given a second life thanks to reuse initiative**

Somerset Council and its collections contractor, SUEZ recycling and recovery UK, have passed on more than 100 bikes since their diversion initiative began six months ago.

'My Life, My Future' programme which is also projecting additional recurring savings of over £3 million in 2025/26.

Like all councils, Somerset Council is under pressure financially due to a combination of increasing demand and costs, particularly for vital services looking after older people and adults with disabilities.

In 2023, the Council began working with Newton on the 'My Life, My Future' programme, which aimed to support people with lived experience and their carers to live healthier and more independent lives. This included using new ways of working to support people to regain skills and confidence, helping them to stay at home and supporting people to learn new skills and to do more things for themselves.

'My Life, My Future' has delivered significant operational improvements, and latest reports state the Council has delivered over £10 million in recurring savings. Alongside the benefits to Somerset Council, there has also been a positive impact for the NHS Somerset Integrated Care Board (ICB), by supporting more people to go home after a stay in hospital.

Somerset Council has launched an online consultation on proposed changes to its Post-16 Local Transport Policy Statement.

This policy sets out transport arrangements for eligible Post-16 (age 16 to 18) and Post-19 (aged 19 and over) learners in Somerset to their further education settings.

Currently, Somerset Council provides travel assistance to around 9,000 young people to their education setting each day, including discretionary (non-statutory) assistance for Post-16 learners with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND).

A link to the online consultation is available here: [Post 16 Transport Policy - Somerset Council - Citizen Space](#)