

SOMERSET COUNCIL

SEPTEMBER 2023

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.

"The national problems we warned about last year have not improved, if anything they are worse. The demand on social care continues to grow and inflation and interest rates have continued to rise. We now have a clear picture of the financial legacies of the five predecessor Councils, although there is much work still to be completed by the external auditors.

"The current and next two years will be particularly challenging until the benefits of transformation of services at the new Council can be realised. After a decade of neglect, the Government has to address the future of council funding and how pressures, particularly on councils with social care responsibilities, are pushing many well-run Councils towards to a Section 114 notice.

"Having already taken savings from the move from five councils to one council, we now have a transformation programme that will start to produce saving in two to three years. We are working well with the local NHS on integrating our care services.

"Somerset looks poised to become Britain's green energy powerhouse with Hinkley Point C coming on stream and the proposed new gigafactory, but the next two years will be very, very difficult. The Council's challenge will be to make sure we are in a the right place to make the most of these opportunities, while taking care of those most in need."

Cllr Leyshon added: "We know that we will have to reduce some of our services to a statutory level and no more, yet we know that when residents pay their council tax, they rightly expect their Council to support such services as sport and leisure, arts, parks, and open spaces. We also need to maximise opportunities in economic development and look after our town centres. We will review our whole capital programme to ensure that we create a Somerset Council that is sustainable in the longer term.

"This is a difficult task but one that we are committed to for the people of Somerset."

More than four tonnes of plastic saved as Frome residents back the move to recycle bags and wrapping

More than four tonnes of plastic bags and wrapping have been collected for recycling as part of Somerset Council's role in a national project to expand recycling collections.

The small-scale pilot involving 3,600 homes across two locations in Frome started at the end of May and is already proving a success.

Residents in the trial areas are asked to put their flexible plastics, such as bread bags and confectionary packets, into a recyclable blue plastic bag for collection on their usual weekly recycling day.

Somerset Council put itself forward to be part of the £2.9m FlexCollect project which involves nine local authorities across England and is being managed in partnership with SUEZ Recycling and Recovery UK.

The trial aims to inform government and industry on how plastic bags and wrapping should be added to existing household collection services. The full cost of the pilot service is funded by the Flexible Plastic Fund and the government. The only costs to the council are time and resources.

Only those who were written to directly can take part. It is expected it will be expanded to more Somerset homes next year, following further monitoring of the trial.

County's prime ethical ad spots can help fund highway maintenance

Local businesses can now take advantage of some of the busiest spots on Somerset's road network to advertise socially responsible goods and services.

Somerset Council is one of the first local authorities in the UK to develop an ethical advertising policy in line with the county's climate emergency strategy and public health concerns.

The space is available for advertising a wide range of goods and services which do not need to be specifically promoting sustainability or wellbeing, but the ethical advertising policy means that the Council will not sanction certain adverts such as those promoting junk food, fossil fuels, gambling or consumption of alcoholic drinks.* A full list of the criteria is available here: <https://www.somerset.gov.uk/roads-travel-and-parking/advertising-on-roundabouts/>

The money generated by the initiative will go back into the Council's highways maintenance budget.

Signage and positioning on the roundabouts is subject to a strict safety audit and will at the same time help to prevent unofficial 'fly notices' which are put up without permission.

The plan has the potential to reach thousands of people every day, and businesses can visit here to find out more or book on the link above.

*Whilst producers of alcoholic products are not excluded, particularly local based industries, advertisements of the alcoholic products themselves will not be permitted.

#LearnForLove – new family health and wellbeing resources worth £100 for every Somerset resident

A new series of online relationship, health and wellbeing resources worth £100 per person have been launched in Somerset.

The learning resources are available to all Somerset residents, and span topics such as pregnancy, labour and birth, parenting, mental health and wellbeing, and relationships.

Residents can access the online learning by:

- Visiting bit.ly/LearnForLove or scanning a QR code with their phone
- Entering the code 'dragon'

They can then choose the subjects they are most interested in learning about – there is no limit on the number of resources residents can access. An email address is needed for those signing up, but no other personal information is needed.

To find out more about Connect Somerset, contact ConnectSomerset@somerset.gov.uk

Welcome Hubs: Supporting a caring and diverse Somerset

Somerset is committed to supporting displaced people in the county as they seek to resettle and navigate a new life in the UK; from learning a new language, integrating into the local community, becoming independent and settling into a new and often very different daily life to previously. More and more, mutual benefit is being experienced as refugees share their knowledge and talents within their communities, creating a richness of culture and diversity.

In partnership with local services, charities and the generosity and kindness of communities, many individuals and families have been able to resettle safely and happily, with Somerset's 'Welcome Hubs' playing a key role for many during the earliest days of resettlement.

Offering vital assistance in finding a home, accessing public services and healthcare, seeking childcare and education services, as well as in finding work, the hubs are a first – and increasingly ongoing - port of call for anyone seeking guidance, support and connection.

Somerset has a long history of supporting people in need, no matter the circumstances. There are a number of ways to support displaced people in Somerset and more information can be found at: <https://www.somerset.gov.uk/health-safety-and-wellbeing/refugee-resettlement-in-somerset/>

Single-Use Plastic Ban in England

Trading Standards is reminding businesses, such as takeaways, sandwich bars, care homes and retailers who supply certain single use plastic items, that a ban comes into force this October and they should start thinking now about alternatives and where to source them from.

The Government has announced a ban on a wide range of plastic items that is expected to come into effect from 1 October 2023.

It means that from October, businesses across England will not be able to supply certain single use plastic items to the end user.

The ban includes all single use plastic cutlery, trays, plates, bowls, and balloon sticks, as well as banning the use of certain types of polystyrene cups and food containers used to supply food which is ready to consume.

It is estimated that England uses 2.7 billion items of single use cutlery each year, and 721 million single use plates. Only 10% of these items are recycled.

Local pantries in Somerset celebrate six-month milestone

Local pantries in Bridgwater (Victoria Park), Yeovil (Westfield) and Chard opened their doors in the spring and are now celebrating six months of supporting their communities.

The Local Pantry Network consists of nine pantries which collect surplus food and make it available to its members at a low weekly rate, to help reduce food waste, feed families and save them money.

Members of the scheme can sign up to a membership, which can last from six weeks to six months, and the local pantry in Westfield is now operating a mini pantry for members to move on to following the end of their membership.

The initiative is a partnership between Somerset Council, local community groups and food charities, FareShare South West and Action Against Hunger.

Pantries are always on the lookout for volunteers, so if you would like to get involved with one in your area, please email TheLocalPantry@somerset.gov.uk or call 07557 481418.

Full details of The Local Pantry Network can be found here: www.somerset.gov.uk/localpantry

Somerset County Youth Ensembles celebrate 50 years of music-making

Somerset celebrated half a century of music-making when the current members of the County Youth Orchestra and the Concert Band joined forces with former members to present a varied programme of music to mark the milestone anniversary.

More than 100 performers gathered at the Johnson Hall, Millfield School in Street to celebrate 50 years since the formation of both ensembles, proving that that music-making still flourishes in Somerset five decades on.

The large and enthusiastic audience was treated to a mix of popular and standard classical pieces. Both the Orchestra, conducted by Andrew Sherwood and the Concert Band, conducted by Paul Denegri, showed that the players were equally at home in the 'lighter' music as in the 'serious' pieces. Both conducted the mass ensemble pieces.

Good luck to Somerset's Britain in Bloom entrants

Minehead, Taunton, Wellington and Yeovil have yet again entered the famous gardening competition, South West in Bloom, part of the Britain in Bloom campaign established by the Royal Horticultural Society (RHS).

In July, the Somerset towns welcomed judges of the awards on tours of the many parks, gardens, green spaces and RHS's 'It's Your Neighbourhood' groups (IYNs) that have entered the contest.

In Somerset, the Bloom initiatives are jointly managed by the town councils and Somerset Council respectively, whilst local community groups and individuals support with the design and maintenance of the floral displays and green spaces.

This year, Minehead In Bloom has entered the Sargent Cup, Taunton in Bloom has entered the Tesco Cup, Wellington in Bloom has entered the Portman Cup and Yeovil in Bloom has entered the St. Bridget Cup.

Yeovil in Bloom has won gold for the past 12 years and it is the 27th time entering the competition. Minehead is relatively new to the competition, whereas Wellington and Taunton have been entering for over 25 years, with Taunton winning the National Finals in 2008.

The Horticultural Team at Somerset Council are looking to expand the scheme across other towns and to work more closely with individual City, Town and Parish Councils to improve their sustainability, conservation efforts and partnership working with residents and groups.

GET INVOLVED

E-Newsletters – how to sign up

Somerset Council produces a number of e-newsletters covering many topics including business, the environment, waste and recycling, transport, news and events.

To receive these important updates directly into your email inbox and to choose which emails are most relevant to you, visit: <https://public.govdelivery.com/accounts/UKSC/subscriber/new>

Creating Places for People

Residents and businesses in Somerset are being urged to help shape the future of their county and have their say on how best to create places that put people at the heart of their design.

Somerset Council is launching a public consultation to seek opinions on a set of outline “principles” that are designed to steer new development in Somerset. These should guide developers towards creating attractive and high-quality environments, but also inclusive and accessible places for all, regardless of age, gender, mobility, or background, where people enjoy living.

The principles should offer substantial benefit to people in Somerset by improving air quality; reducing carbon footprints; creating safe and easy access to schools; and places that are more resilient to the impacts of climate change while protecting and enhancing nature and wildlife.

Creating connected, safe and healthy places will also help to improve quality of life and wellbeing. The Council is proposing to prioritise active travel – cycling, walking and wheeling - along with public transport to reduce reliance on using private cars.

Places should be designed to allow easy access to shops, services and facilities that meet residents’ needs, with streets linking to existing communities and services. Most new development comes forward in or on the edge of our towns, and for those there would be more emphasis on enabling active travel - bike and e-scooter hire, car clubs and public transport - with less on parking provision.

While Somerset is a largely rural county, at present rural roads are the most hazardous for users, per mile travelled, so the principles would aim to provide safer streets and lanes for rural communities and the opportunity for sustainable travel. The principles are intended to make it easier for those able to walk, wheel, cycle or take public transport to do so, leaving space for those less able to make active travel trips or journeys by public transport, to continue to drive.

The consultation launches on 4 September and will run for six weeks until 16 October. People can take part via Citizen Space <https://somersetcouncil.citizenspace.com/planning/creating-places-for-people>

Paper copies containing further information and the online survey questions will also be available to the public at the following locations:

- Bridgwater House, Bridgwater, TA6 3AR (Monday – Friday 8.45am to 5.00pm)

- Council Offices, Cannard's Grave Road, Shepton Mallet, BA4 5BT (Monday – Friday 8.30am to 5.00pm)
- Petters Way Council Offices, Yeovil, BA20 1AS (Monday – Tuesday and Thursday – Friday 9.00am to 4.00pm, first Wednesday of the month 11.00am to 4.00pm and every other Wednesday 9.00am to 4.00pm)
- Deane House, Belvedere Road, Taunton, TA1 1HE (Monday – Friday 8.30am to 5.00pm)
- West Somerset House, 20 Fore Street, Williton, TA4 4QA (Monday to Friday 8.30am to 5.00pm)
- County Hall, Taunton, TA1 4DY (Monday – Friday 8.00am to 6.00pm, Saturday 09:00am to 4.00pm)
- Libraries including: Taunton, Minehead, Frome, Bridgwater, Yeovil and Glastonbury

Responses can be emailed to localplanningpolicy@somerset.gov.uk, or posted to Planning Policy, Somerset Council, County Hall, Taunton, Somerset, TA1 4DY. The principles agreed post-consultation will be considered as a material planning consideration subject to consultation and taking feedback into account.

The Council is keen to hear from as many people as possible – individuals, community and voluntary groups, businesses, transport providers, landowners, and city, town and parish councils as well as developers and their agents. This will help the Council to understand whether it is on the right track.

Gambling Policy Consultation

Somerset Council has to review its Gambling Policy every three years. The Policy document sets out our approach to the Council's licensing functions in accordance with the Gambling Act 2005.

The policy will ensure:

- Activities are conducted fairly and openly
- Prevention of crime and disorder
- Children and vulnerable people are protected from harm or exploitation

Comments are invited on the draft revised Gambling Policy from all interested parties including residents and those running businesses in the County, the consultation documents can be found at: <https://sومersetcouncil.citizenspace.com/licensing/gambling-policy-consultation/> The consultation will close on 22nd September 2023. and responses will be considered, and any appropriate amendments will be made.