

Councillors Report

Adam Dance and Jo Roundell Greene

It has been a very busy time, with many budget papers to read and digest and time spent helping residents with flooding and other problems. The endless rain has brought misery for many and we are looking forward to Spring and some warmer dryer weather.

We have spent a lot of time discussing planning applications with residents and trying to get the best results for our villages. This is hard and we have to accept that we cannot always succeed.

If you have any problems or need help and advice, please do get in touch.

With best wishes

Adam and Jo

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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.

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.

Cllr Bill Revans, Leader of Somerset Council, said: “It is clear the current model of funding local government is broken, and this means we have had to consider heart-breaking and unpalatable cuts to services we greatly value but simply cannot afford.

“We vowed to do everything in our power to find alternative ways of funding these and I have to thank our city, town and parish councils for the way they have stepped up. We will continue to explore all options to minimise the impacts on our communities.”

Executive also heard confirmation that the Council’s request to increase Council Tax by more than 5% has been rejected by Government, while they are still considering the request for a capitalisation direction – where the council is allowed to borrow money or sell assets to pay for day-to-day running costs.

Cllr Revans added: “This is a disappointing decision which will impact on the long-term viability of our council. While no-one wanted to raise council tax, it was the only option we had to address a broken system where our costs are rising faster than our income. We have been prepared to take difficult decisions locally to minimise the impact on our communities – however, we are now reliant on the Government granting a capitalisation direction. This would be another short-term measure and is not the long-term solution which is urgently needed.”

Executive voted in support of proposals to balance the budget by making significant savings (with amendments noted), increasing Council Tax by the maximum allowed, selling council assets, and using reserves (a council’s equivalent of savings). It also relies on the Government approving the capitalisation direction.

As reserves and capital funds can only be used once, for future years the Council will need to significantly reduce its budget through a transformation programme to create a leaner, more productive organisation, with fewer staff. The aim will be to keep the number of compulsory redundancies to a minimum by removing vacant posts, reducing the number of agency workers, interims and consultants, and by opening a voluntary redundancy scheme.

The proposals to set a balanced budget will now be considered by Full Council on 20 February.

Flood anniversary: flood resilience and adaptation a key part of Somerset’s future

Somerset Council is marking the ten-year anniversary of the 2014 floods with the message that resilience and adaptation are more important than ever.

This winter marks ten years since the wettest winter for 250 years left large swathes of the county underwater for weeks, devastating communities, businesses and farming.

February 4, 2014, saw the then Prince of Wales escorted through flood waters to the cut-off village Muchelney to meet residents and farmers. The following day, two severe flood warnings were

issued for parts of the Somerset Levels, with residents in several villages advised to evacuate and Royal Marines deployed to help reinforce flood defences at Burrowbridge.

Much flood defence and risk management work has taken place since 2014, at a cost of around £80m as part of a 20-Year Flood Action Plan (FAP) delivered by local authorities, the Environment Agency (EA), the Parrett and Axe Brue Internal Drainage Boards which are all part of the Somerset Rivers Authority (SRA) partnership set up to give Somerset an extra level of flood protection.

Work has included:

- the award-winning raising of a 500-metre section of a road into Muchelney
- dredging stretches of the River Parrett
- enhancements to the River Sowey and King's Sedgemoor Drain system, for example with new river channels under the A372 at Beer Wall near Othery
- development of plans for a Bridgwater Tidal Barrier
- hundreds of natural flood management works to 'Slow the Flow' of water as part of Hills to Levels.

As a result, even though this winter has been the wettest since records began in 1910, the areas devastated in 2014 have not been badly affected. More flood risk management works are planned and the SRA is currently developing a new Strategy and Flood Action Plan for the next ten years.

However, across Somerset, the impacts of climate change mean that resilience and adaptation to flood risk will need to play a bigger part in Somerset's future.

The major flooding incident at the start of 2014 flooded 165 homes, mostly on the Levels and Moors, lasting weeks in many cases. Between May 2023 and the end of January this year, almost double that number of homes across the county flooded as a result of four storm events, the most recent being Storm Henk in January.

Although the more recent flooding has been shorter-lived, flash flooding, the last year has demonstrated the need for resilience and adaptation as climate change increases the frequency and severity of weather events.

Councillor Dixie Darch, Somerset Council's Lead Member for Environment and Climate Change and SRA Board member, said: "A lot of hard work has gone into reducing flood risk and managing the impacts since the devastating scenes we saw ten years ago.

"We've seen progress, but clearly flooding remains an issue that Somerset will have to live with as the impacts of climate change become apparent.

"All the science tells us that weather events like the storms we have seen in the last 12 months are likely to become more common and more severe.

"That means organisations and communities must work in partnership to build resilience and adapt to the challenges of flooding."

Cllr Mike Stanton, Chair of Somerset Rivers Authority, said: "All the investment that has been made across Somerset over the last decade has reduced the risks and impacts of flooding.

"Through the SRA, more funding will continue to be given for protective maintenance and improvement works that enable more safety, control and useful flexibility in the management of water systems.

“But we have to acknowledge that flood risks can never be completely removed and that places are now being affected in unexpected ways. We will all need to become more resilient and adapt to a changing climate.”

Resilience is about communities understanding the risk of flooding and being well prepared, for example signing up for flood alerts, identifying flood wardens and being ready with practical steps like flood evacuation plans. Adaptation is about making changes that help limit the impacts of flooding if it does happen, for example raising electrical sockets and having water butt storage to help reduce flash flooding.

The Somerset Prepared multi-agency partnership works with communities to provide advice, support and training to help improve local resilience to all kinds of emergencies, including flooding. To find out more visit www.somersetprepared.org.uk

As part of its plans, the SRA is proposing to fund a new project called Adapting Somerset. Run by Somerset Wildlife Trust, it would help adapt and increase resilience to flooding and other risks linked to climate change in Somerset.

For information and guidance about flooding in Somerset, including being prepared, and what to do during and after flooding, visit www.somerset.gov.uk/flooding

For information about the SRA and its work, visit www.somersetdriversauthority.org.uk

Urgent need for Somerset residents to support local children in care

Somerset residents have the potential to make a difference to a vulnerable child's life and future, providing better outcomes for local children in care and long-term cost savings for Somerset Council.

You can change a child's story as a foster carer. This is the powerful and emotive message behind a new short film from Somerset Council's Fostering Service, which aims to highlight the important role of foster carers and encourage families and individuals with room in their homes and hearts to consider fostering.

'Willow's Story' is the third instalment in the 'Change A Child's Story' series from Fostering in Somerset; a 50 second promotional video which shares the positive impact of a foster carer on the lives of four children.

The advert had support and involvement from local sports club and team, Somerton Rugby, who took to social media to share the film and their participation.

With over 580 Somerset children currently in care, and only 152 in-house foster carers, there is an urgent need for more foster homes to provide stability and safety for vulnerable children of all ages, but particularly teenagers. In September 2023, there were almost 300 children aged between 13 – 17 in care across Somerset.

Placing looked after children with a nurturing family and stable foster home provides better outcomes for children and young people in care, ensuring that local children remain in their local communities, surrounded by the faces and places they know. However, recruiting more in-house foster carers will also reduce high-cost external placement numbers, providing significant long-term cost savings for Somerset Council, at a time when finances are under intense pressures and scrutiny.

Foster care is a rewarding paid role, with full training and support provided. No experience is necessary to foster, but you need to be aged over 21 with a spare room in your home, though what

matters most is that you have the compassion, resilience and time to support a young person who may have experienced trauma.

For more information on fostering, visit www.fosteringinsomerset.org.uk or call 0800 587 9900 and speak to our friendly team. You're not committing to anything by getting in touch to find out more, and you could change a child's story.

Council renews successful partnership with lighting contractor

A new contract which will see cheaper and greener lighting on roads around the county has been signed by Somerset Council.

The contract with Enerveo Ltd will see essential maintenance services delivered on all the council's illuminated and non-illuminated electrical equipment across the county.

Following a procurement process and approval by Somerset Council's Executive, the tender for the new eight-year contract (which has the potential to be extended by four years) was awarded to current service provider, Enerveo Ltd. The contract covers the County's highways lights, illuminated signs, bollards and electrical equipment.

- Somerset Council has 59,593 illuminated assets to look after, consisting of lights, illuminated signs and bollards
- 65.9 per cent of these have already been changed to LED, helping towards Somerset's 2030 carbon neutral target
- Part of the new contract includes the provision of new EV charging stations

Need to report a problem on the road, including lighting issues?

Visit Report a problem on the road: <https://www.somerset.gov.uk/roads-travel-and-parking/report-a-problem-on-the-road/>

For traffic updates and roadworks follow @travelsomerset on X and Facebook.

Trio prepares to become the voice of young people in Somerset

Three Somerset teenagers are about to be passed the torch of young democracy in action as they prepare to take up their roles as members of the county's Youth Parliament.

James Lawson, 14, Ellie Bealing, (re-elected) 16, and Emma Brown, 14, have been elected as the three new representatives and will formally take up the posts in March, taking over from Jas Fowler, who campaigned on youth crime and safety, and Joel Fowler who championed mental health and wellbeing. Ellie focused on equality, respect and inclusion and will be launching a new campaign.

Members of the Youth Parliament (MYPs) are elected through schools, colleges and youth clubs across Somerset every two years and represent Somerset at the national UK Youth Parliament. They are supported by an advisory group of self-selected young people aged 10 to 25 from all backgrounds. More members are needed to make sure young people across Somerset have a voice and make the democratic process relevant.

Their experiences, opinions and abilities makes the group interesting, strong, fun and better able to represent others. Group members take part in consultations, decision making, commissioning and grant giving, as well as campaigning on their chosen manifestos.

The age range for the advisory group has been widened to give younger people the chance to take part and to give those in their late teens and early 20s the opportunity to share their experiences and become mentors and role models.

To find out more, please get in touch with Kate Darlington - email kate.darlington@somerset.gov.uk or phone 07964 699595. Somerset UK Youth Parliament is supported by Somerset Council's Youth and Community Service.

Make sure you are ready to vote in 2024

Residents in Somerset are being encouraged to get 2024 off to a good start by making sure they are ready to vote in elections – both local and Parliamentary.

The next scheduled elections in Somerset are for the Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) for Avon and Somerset on Thursday 2 May 2024. More details will be published nearer the time.

The PCC is responsible for holding the Chief Constable and police force to account on the public's behalf. They oversee how crime is tackled in their area and aim to make sure that the police are providing a good service.

Voter registration is at the top of the list as everyone who votes must be on the electoral register. For those unsure if they are registered, Somerset Council's Electoral Services team on 0300 123 2224 will be able to help.

Voters may need to update their details if they have moved house or changed their name. This can be done by re-registering. It's a quick and simple process:

<https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/i-am-a/voter/register-vote-and-update-your-details>

People planning to vote in person at a polling station must provide photo ID to make sure they can cast their ballot.

Accepted forms of ID include a passport, driving licence and older person's concessionary travel pass. Documents must be original, not a photocopy – check out the information from the Electoral Commission.

Those without suitable ID can apply for a Voter Authority Certificate. Applicants need to provide their name, address, date of birth and National Insurance number.

The process is available online via <https://www.gov.uk/apply-for-photo-id-voter-authority-certificate>

Somerset Council can provide a paper form or it can be downloaded here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/apply-for-a-voter-authority-certificate-by-post-if-youre-living-in-the-uk>

People can apply for a postal vote if they are away on holiday or because their work schedule means they can't get to polling station. They may also choose to vote by post simply because it would be more convenient.

Applications can be completed online, and applicants have to reapply every three years. Full details on how to apply can be found here: <https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/i-am-a/voter/apply-vote-post>