

Somerset Council Report to Croscombe Parish Council meeting Tuesday 9th January 2024

Yet again I give my apologies that I am not able to attend the Croscombe Parish Council meeting this evening due to a clash with a full council meeting of Shepton Mallet Town Council. I am an elected member of the latter. At Somerset Council I am reminded constantly that my priority has to be in person attendance at meetings where I have a vote!

Financial Emergency

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.

33 Council Leaders of all political parties, including Cllr Bill Revans Leader of Somerset Council, have written to the Secretary of State to say they are in a significantly worse financial position than before the Autumn Statement. A new survey reveals that local authorities are having to plan more severe cuts to services and that seven in ten of the councils responding are no longer confident that they can balance their budget next year.

Recently, Nottingham City Council declared a Section 114 Notice because their finances are unsustainable. In Somerset we are determined to avoid a S114 by working proactively to find ways to set a budget without the intervention of Government Commissioners.

At December's Executive meeting in Shepton Mallet the Executive of Somerset Council set out the plan for dealing with next year's £87m budget gap. The approved actions include requesting what's called a Capitalisation Direction from the Westminster Government. This allows Somerset Council to fund day-to-day spending with proceeds from the sale of assets or borrowing from the Public Works Loan Board. In addition to this, General Fund Reserves are being strengthened and savings are being identified constantly.

The implications of this are that Council Tax in Somerset will have to go up by the maximum allowed by Government. That will still leave our Council Tax rates lower than in other comparable Council areas. For example, if we had Dorset's council tax rate or Wiltshire's council tax base we wouldn't be in this situation. Dorset didn't freeze its council tax for six years and Wiltshire's homes were significantly more expensive and therefore in higher bands in 1991 when Council Tax was put in place.

We acknowledge that many household budgets are already stretched by the high cost of living, so it's important that one of the recommendations at the Executive meeting is to up-rate our Council Tax Reduction Scheme in line with inflation, at the same rate as benefits will rise next year (6.7%). A further recommendation is that the Exceptional Hardship scheme will continue, ensuring that those on the lowest incomes in our communities are protected. The decisions will be taken by Full Council on 20th December.

Consultation on where savings may be made in next year's expenditure will be launched in the coming days, as we are determined that Somerset's voices will be heard at this difficult time and in the early years of the new Somerset Council.

This is a national situation. We are not on our own as a Council, but we will see a very real impact on local services.

This report is "light" on the implications for city, town and parish councils and their budget/precept setting process. The situation is moving fast and parish clerks receive regular update briefings from Somerset Council's s151 officer.

Social care funding

Latest budget figures which go before Somerset Council's Executive on 8 November are expected to show an estimated £70m increase in expected adult social care costs for 2024/25.

This means the Council cannot rely on reserves to cover the gap for next year and without action will need to issue a S114 notice, or effectively declare the council bankrupt, at the point of setting next year's budget in February.

Several councils nationally have been forced to do this in recent months, including Woking and Birmingham, with many others warning it could be a possibility without Government support.

Cllr Liz Leyshon, Somerset Council's Lead Member for Resources and Deputy Leader, said: "The funding model for local Government is clearly broken, with many councils struggling in light of soaring costs and demands on services.

"But while at Woking and Birmingham their finances were also impacted by a policy decision or legal action, here in Somerset we're simply running out of money due to the soaring costs of demand-led services, particularly the costs of residential and nursing care for adults.

"This is not because of poor control of service spend, it is simply an exceptionally large increase in our costs for demand-led services which we have no choice but to manage."

In August, Somerset Council warned that it would need to use reserves to balance the books for this year. Latest figures show the budget gap for the current financial year now stands at £27.3m. Although this figure could be covered by reserves, the projected shortfall for the following year is now £100m, far exceeding levels of reserves.

The main driver of this is an £70m increase in adult social care costs, caused by proposed changes to national policy which aimed to make the cost of care fairer. Although the policy change was later abandoned by Government, in Somerset this has led to significant rises in the costs of residential and nursing care placements. For example, residential care placement costs have risen from around £577 per week in 2022/23 to £900 per week next year.

Officers are now drawing up savings proposals which will be voted on by Executive at its December meeting. These could include selling assets and buildings, including offices; increasing Council Tax, fees and charges as much as possible; reducing staffing levels; and reducing council services to statutory levels.

Cllr Leyshon added: "Our priority will be to maximise all opportunities, work with partners and do everything we can to ensure we can continue to take care of those most in need.

"No-one wants to be in this position but we are well aware of the implications of a Section 114 notice. It is our intention to take the difficult decisions now and to set a direction for the new Council with the benefit of our local knowledge and commitment to Somerset.

"The alternative is to leave it to Government Commissioners, paid by the people of Somerset, to find a financial answer that does not take into account local factors or experience."

Waste

Recycling and rubbish collection days will be changing for more than 120,000 homes in Somerset in February next year.

The changes come as new collection routes are introduced by Somerset Council's contractor, SUEZ recycling and recovery UK. The new routes will make rounds more efficient, more manageable for crews whilst reducing mileage and carbon emissions.

The changes come at no cost to the council.

In February 2024, recycling and rubbish collection day schedules will change for around 85% of homes in the west of the county, covering the former Sedgemoor and Somerset West and Taunton areas, as well as a small part of South Somerset.

Anyone with a change to their collection day schedule will be written to twice before anything changes, first with a letter in January. Roughly, three weeks after the letter arrives, residents will receive a service guide which includes a collection day calendar for the next 18 months.

It is important that residents know their new collection days – crews will not be able to come back for either recycling or refuse if you miss your new collection day.

Because some towns and villages will be covered by more than one route, days may change for some households but not others.

Residents may have:

- a change to collection day

- a change in week that their rubbish is collected
- a one-off interim rubbish collection

There will be no changes to:

- collection days for garden waste subscribers
- clinical waste collections
- communal property collections with shared collections (such as blocks of flats, houses of multiple occupancy and retirement developments)
- schools waste collections

Changes to routes and collection days for the rest of the county – in the former Mendip and South Somerset areas – are expected to be introduced in June 2024.

Further information can be found online at www.somerset.gov.uk/waste.

Somerset Council is urging businesses to log-on and start planning early for new rules on recycling.

The national ‘Simpler Recycling’ reforms announced in October mean all businesses - and organisations like hospitals and schools - must have separate food waste and recycling collections in place by the end of March 2025.

Businesses have a legal Duty of Care to store waste safely and to dispose of it using a registered waste carrier.

The Somerset Council-supported ‘Business of Recycling’ website has advice on how to prepare for the new regulations, including a tool that lets you check if your waste carrier is registered.

Businesses with fewer than ten full-time employees have until 31 March 2027 to meet these requirements.

Recyclable materials to be separated from general waste include:

- Glass such as drinks bottles and rinsed empty food jars
- Metal such as drinks cans and food tins
- Plastic such as rinsed empty food containers and bottles
- Paper such as old newspapers and envelopes
- Cardboard such as delivery boxes and packaging
- Food waste including tea bags, coffee grounds, leftovers or waste generated by food preparation (NB. There is no minimum amount for food waste)

Businesses will need to have a separate food bin, and a refuse bin, but recyclable materials can be mixed to reduce the number of bins needed.

Plastic, film, and flexibles collections across all premises will also be implemented by 31 March 2027.

Nearly half the content of the average Somerset bin could have been recycled, Somerset Council can reveal.

The 48% figure found this year is an impressive 11% decrease on 2018 - the last time the ‘composition analysis’ was carried out in the county. But there is still much more to do, especially when it comes to food waste.

And as national Recycling Week begins, Somerset Council are asking residents to think twice before throwing something in the bin.

The contents of some 550 households refuse bins were painstakingly emptied, sorted, and weighed, with a representation from across the county.

Of the 48% of contents that should have been recycled:

- 14% recyclable at the kerbside (e.g. cardboard or drinks cans)
- 21% food waste, recyclable in the food waste bin
- 7% garden waste and pet bedding
- 7% recyclable at a recycling site (e.g. wood and metal)

The 11% reduction on 2018 figure is thought to have been driven by the expanded Recycle More collections, with less plastic pots tubs and trays being put in the refuse.

Residents have also reduced the amount of food that's being thrown in the bin, with a 5% drop since 2018.

The results are shared as national Recycling Week begins. This year's theme - The Big Recycling Hunt - focuses on "missed capture": the items that can be recycled but are commonly missed in the home.

The Council surveys what is in our bins every five years to help understand what is being thrown out and how it can be made it easier to reduce waste and recycle more.

Somerset's highest ever recycling rate was recently published as part of our Recycling Tracker, which 'shows what happens to every tonne of collected recycling. The 2022-23 figures show that 96.6% stayed in the UK to be turned into new products and packaging.

Health

Somerset Council has been awarded £5m over five years by the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) to form a Health Determinants Research Collaboration' (HDRC) - a new research partnership to improve health and reduce health inequalities across the county.

The HDRC will see Somerset Council join forces with Spark Somerset, UWE Bristol and the Institute of Health Equity at University College London to enable the Council to make better decisions to improve health in Somerset, informed by existing evidence and new research and shaped by local people.

The NIHR will provide £1 million per year for the next 5 years to support the creation of a staffed unit within the council that will work to involve communities in research, provide council staff and the public with opportunities to develop their skills, and help the council to use evidence and do research.

The funding of £55m NIHR is investing in 11 new HDRCs across the country to enable local authorities to use evidence and undertake research to improve health in their communities and tackle health inequalities.

Somerset's HDRC, which is expected to launch in January 2024, will focus on the building blocks of good health such as housing, education and the physical environment to tackle the root causes of health inequalities and wider deprivation. Because of this it intends to involve directorates across the Council, such as Transport, Housing, Planning and Education among others, to apply health evidence and to develop research capability.

Through the programme, the council will involve communities in applying evidence about the building blocks of health to local decisions, and in doing new research where there is not enough evidence.

Leaders from the voluntary sector, NHS and Somerset Council, have gathered in Taunton to sign an historic document outlining a shared vision and commitment to work more closely together to achieve better health and wellbeing for the people of Somerset.

The event, attended by over 60 representatives from the county's charities, NHS and Somerset Council, was the first time that leaders have come together at such scale, to demonstrate their shared commitment to working together.

The signing of the agreement formally recognises the voluntary, community, faith and social enterprise (VCFSE) sector as an equal and strategic partner and the important role it plays in providing key services and activities.

Young People

A group of young people in care and care leavers have won an award from a leading advocacy group for their work on homes for children.

Young people from Somerset in Care Councils (SiCC) and Somerset Leaving Care Councils (SLCC) were presented with an award from A National Voice - a leading advocacy group for care leavers and children in care. Winning the 'Collaboration' category, the award recognised the efforts of young people on the Homes and Horizons project, a partnership between Somerset Council, Shaw Trust, and Somerset NHS Foundation Trust to develop 10 homes for children, 2 therapeutic schools and a therapeutic fostering service.

Young people from both SiCC and SLCC have been actively involved on the Homes and Horizons project from the start, helping the Council decide to partner with Shaw Trust. The young people visited children's homes across the UK to see how they were run, interviewing staff and residents to find out what worked well. They also represented young people in decision-making groups, and spoke to neighbours about the project. They even selected furniture and décor and chose the name of this award-winning initiative – Homes and Horizons.

As a result, Somerset's children have homes for children designed with people who have direct experience of the care system, which led to the Homes and Horizons project winning an MJ award for partnership and innovation.

Somerset Council launched a new consultation, asking for the public's views on some of the ways education is funded.

In Somerset, £568m is spent on education each year and supports 70,000 children and young people in the county.

The consultation focuses on three areas:

- Funding for early years settings, which includes day nurseries, pre-schools and nursery schools.
- Early help services that help children and families when they have problems, aiming to prevent the situation from getting worse.

- Funding that helps children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) from their early years to age 25.

A number of ideas on how these services can be improved have been suggested in the consultation. The Council is asking everyone to share their opinions on these options. If any proposals to change SEND funding are accepted, there will be a further consultation and piloting before anything changes for all schools and pupils.

The consultation ran until 10 November and the results will be published once they have been analysed.

Swimming Pool Support Fund

Somerset Council has been awarded £211,208 from the government's Swimming Pool Support Fund (Phase 1). The money will be divided across five swimming pool facilities within Somerset at Frome Leisure Centre, Shepton Mallet Lido, Wells Leisure Centre, Brean Splash and Burnham-on-Sea Swim and Sports Academy. The funding is designed to help swimming pool operators with the increased costs of utility bills and swimming pool chemicals.

Somerset Council has also submitted an application to Phase 2 of the Swimming Pool Support Fund which will provide grant funding for capital investments to help swimming pools become more energy efficient. We await the outcome of our application for Phase 2 which is expected in the new year.

Find out more about the Support fund at <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/nearly-200-leisure-centres-supported-by-swimming-pool-support-fund>.

Business

Somerset Council is offering local businesses the opportunity to get mentoring support from some of the best business minds in the county.

Following a highly successful search for mentors it is now time to match them to local business owners who can benefit from six hours of free mentoring. All businesses who have been trading for over a year and employ two or more staff are welcome to apply, although the programme is particularly aimed at businesses who are looking to hire new staff or those planning to introduce new products and services.

Forty Mentors have been selected from executive and senior management level business leaders and successful entrepreneurs. They include a former NASDAQ CEO, a soft drinks manufacturer who supplies major retailers internationally and a multi-million pound NHS equipment supplier. All understand the challenges associated with running and growing a business and the value of an impartial sounding board.

Aside from offering valuable feedback, mentors specialise in a range of subject areas including; growth strategy, finance, marketing, HR, e-commerce, bid writing, acquisition, exit strategy, and much more.

There are 40 spaces for mentees available so businesses are encouraged to visit the website to find out more information <https://www.somerset.gov.uk/business-economy-and-licences/somerset-business-mentoring/>.

Ten start-up businesses have been given a helping hand from Somerset Council's innovative Launch Pad programme.

The businesses have all received a wide range of fully funded help to get them ready to move to the next level. The ten-week programme has included workshops, masterclasses and one-to-one mentoring tailored to businesses' individual needs, and delivered by professionals, entrepreneurs and experts from industry.

A key to the success of the programme has been the collaboration between businesses as they have worked together throughout the months to achieve their entrepreneurial goals.

Business ideas have included an initiative aimed at strengthening communities by gardening in shared gardens, a dance academy, a pop-up online pet shop and the launch of spirit-based drinks which have been inspired by historic recipes.

Domestic abuse

A new campaign aims to raise the profile of lesser-known types of domestic abuse and encourage those who may not realise they are being abused to come forward for support and advice.

Launching on White Ribbon Day and at the beginning of the worldwide campaign 16 Days of Action Somerset Council has commissioned 12 short films to shine the spotlight on non-physical types of domestic abuse.

The films direct anyone who is experiencing these forms of abuse to a new website, somersetdomesticabuse.org.uk, where they can get more information, support and advice or by contacting the service on 0800 69 49 999.

The films, available to view here: <https://bit.ly/12DACF>, will be launched on TV and across a range of social, digital and video sharing platforms.

The new films are part of Somerset Council's ongoing commitment to raise awareness of domestic abuse.

The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 created a legal definition of domestic abuse:

1. Both the person who is carrying out the behaviour and the person to whom the behaviour is directed towards are aged 16 years or over
2. Both persons are "personally connected" (including ex-partners and family members)

You do not have to be living with the person who is being abusive to you.

There are many types of behaviours that can form non-physical domestic abuse, these may include:

- Violent or threatening behaviour
- Controlling or coercive behaviour
- Economic abuse
- Psychological or emotional
- Stalking and harassment - including online or via text message

If you are experiencing any form of domestic abuse, worried about someone you know, or are concerned about the impact of your behaviour towards others, then help is available: somersetdomesticabuse.org.uk or by telephoning 0800 69 49 999 - between 8am – 8pm, 7 days a week.

In an emergency you should always dial 999. If you are worried that an abuser may overhear your call you can remain silent, tap the phone and dial 55 when prompted by the operator who will send help.

If you are deaf, hard of hearing or speech-impaired you can register with emergencySMS.net. Once registered you will be able to send a text to 999 if you require help in an emergency.

AONB

From 22nd November, all designated Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs) in England and Wales are becoming National Landscapes, including Somerset's Mendip Hills, Quantock Hills, and Blackdown Hills National Landscapes.

The new name reflects their national importance; the vital contribution they make to protect the nation from the threats of climate change, nature depletion and the wellbeing crisis, whilst also creating greater understanding and awareness for the work that they do.

This is a significant milestone for the UK and the next step in fully realising the National Landscapes' vision to be the leading exemplars of how thriving, diverse communities can work with and for nature in the UK: restoring ecosystems, providing food, storing carbon to mitigate the effects of climate change, safeguarding against drought and flooding, whilst also nurturing people's health and wellbeing.

National Landscapes teams have been at the forefront of delivering natural solutions to the main challenges facing the nation for many years. The new brand underscores their commitment to redoubling their efforts and engaging with a wider audience. In 2019, teams set themselves the most ambitious targets for nature in the sector and continue to work to meet them.

By 2030, National Landscapes aim that, within their boundaries: at least 200,000 hectares of the most valuable natural areas (Sites of Special Scientific Interest or SSSIs), which equates to 1 ¼ times the size of London, will be in favourable condition; 100,000 hectares of wildlife-rich habitat outside of SSSIs will be created or restored, which is roughly nine times the size of Manchester; and 36,000 hectares of woodland, which is a little smaller than the Isle of Wight, will have been planted or allowed to regenerate.

National Landscapes Partnerships will also focus on habitat restoration to ensure the protection of some of our most endangered species and increase their work to help more people to enjoy time spent in beautiful places.

Because of their size and scope, National Landscapes are ideally positioned to address the environmental issues the UK is facing. There are 46 National Landscapes in the UK, covering 14% of England, Wales and Northern Ireland including moorland, farmland, coast, forests, including UNESCO World Heritage Sites, Biosphere Reserves, a Geopark and International Dark Sky Reserves. They are the UK's nearby countryside - 66% of people in England (44 million) live within 30 minutes of a National Landscape and at least 170 million people visit them every year.

Climate

Somerset Council has been recognised as a leader in its work to respond to the climate emergency.

The authority achieved a score of A- ("Leadership") from The Carbon Disclosure Project (CDP) for its performance in 2023. This rating compares to a regional average of B and a Global average of C.

CDP is seen as the 'gold standard of environmental' reporting and this is the first time the new Somerset Council has been scored by the not-for-profit charity.

CDP runs the environmental disclosure system and helps organisations make their environmental impact transparent, reduce their impact and act as environmental leaders.

The score is based on the Council's climate-related projects, strategies and activities. These include its plans for expanding the county's electric vehicle charging network, its Tree Strategy and work to encourage the uptake of 'retrofit' home heat efficiency.

The A- score demonstrates that through these documents and climate activities, Somerset Council has demonstrated best practice standards across adaptation and mitigation, set ambitious goals and made progress towards achieving those goals.

Ahead of, and post vesting day of the new unitary authority on 1 April 2023, officers across Somerset Council have been working collaboratively on climate related activities.

Gritters

Since November Somerset Council's fleet of 23 gritters have been ready to be mobilised across 900 miles of road as soon as the temperature drops below zero this winter.

Last year the gritter fleet went out on 67 occasions when freezing temperatures were forecast. There were 2,058 route actions in total, helping to prevent the formation of ice across 83,200 miles of Somerset's roads.

It's important road users drive according to conditions – ice can still form on roads that have been gritted and extra care needs to be taken in winter weather. It's vital too that drivers do not try to overtake gritters while they are treating roads – amazingly, this happens on a regular basis in icy, hazardous conditions.

Last year, Somerset's farmers were hugely helpful in supporting the Council's winter services, by taking on snow ploughing duties when conditions became challenging.

Daily gritting updates will be posted on Travel Somerset's Twitter and Facebook channels throughout winter.

Somerset Council treat over a fifth of Somerset's roads, marked in red on the map here: <https://tinyurl.com/5e45d8tb> The gritting network covers all last year's routes plus it has been increased slightly this winter.

The main priority is to keep the busiest routes clear whenever ice or snow is expected. The priority is roads that link major towns, villages and communities on high ground and the important routes across the County for long distance travel.

Somerset Council carries out gritting when road surface temperatures are predicted to drop below 1°C and ice or snow is expected. Precautionary gritting normally takes place before the formation of ice – so that generally means teams are out in the evening or early morning.

In the event of snow, there are established plans in place, working alongside the emergency services and partners to clear the network as quickly as possible. Gritters can be quickly equipped with snowploughs and there are arrangements with farmers and snowplough operators who are employed to clear snow on the council's behalf. The primary network is prioritised before moving on to clear secondary and minor networks as resources allow.

Somerset Council can't treat every road, as there aren't enough gritters, drivers and depot staff to make this cost-efficient. However, the Council is carrying on work with parish councils to fill roadside grit bins on request and are continuing to run a community-led snow warden scheme.

Rain can wash salt away and in very low temperatures gritting may not be enough to prevent freezing – so drivers are always advised to take extra caution in winter.

Roads

Somerset Council has signed a new eight-year contract with Kier Transportation Ltd to deliver core maintenance across its road network.

The £225m agreement covers key maintenance works (e.g. road repairs, drainage, verge cutting and winter service, such as gritting and other emergency functions in adverse weather.)

Somerset has a 4,172-mile road network and the current contract with Milestone Infrastructure comes to an end at the end of March 2024. Since 2021 the Council has been engaged in a tendering process involving suppliers from across the UK.

In a change to the way it delivers services, the Council has divided up the existing contract into four separate contracts covering different areas of service delivery.

The aim is to increase efficiency, cost effectiveness and innovation whilst being more resilient to climate change with a reduced carbon output.

Kier Transportation Ltd put in a successful bid for the largest contract covering term maintenance. It will deliver services from 1 April 2024.

Bids were tested across a range of criteria including value for money, carbon reduction and bidders' commitment to social value across the county.

Somerset Council's Executive committee approved the award of the contract in October.

Many of the staff currently operating under Milestone Infrastructure will be transferring their employment to the new contractor, ensuring the Council holds on to valuable experience and expertise.

Three other multi-million-pound contracts covering resurfacing, surface dressing, and new assets will also be awarded in due course.

A developer failed to properly put back a cycle way and footpath it had dug up in Norton Fitzwarren despite repeated requests by Somerset Council over two years.

St Modwen Homes Limited had been authorised to carry out work in the area in 2021 by the Council which involved digging 20m down and connecting a manhole to the storm drain.

The developer pleaded guilty to four offences committed under the New Roads and Street Works Act 1991 (NRSWA 1991) at Taunton Magistrates Court on September 27 and was handed more than £32,000 in fines and costs.

Transport

Bus It for 'Less than a latte' is the message from Somerset Council as it kicks-off a campaign to drive up passenger numbers on four key bus routes.

The campaign is being launched with news that the £2 countywide fare for any single journey is set to continue to December 2024.

The latest round of the 'Bus It' campaign - supported by bus passenger group the Somerset Bus Partnership, aims to support four at risk First Bus South routes serving Taunton, Yeovil, Minehead, Dulverton and Wincanton.

Working with the bus operator, Somerset Council will be targeting communities along the at-risk routes, raising awareness of the services and highlighting the affordability of bus travel and the many other upsides of leaving the car at home.

Any single bus fare in the county still costs just £2 thanks to ongoing Government support - less than the price of latte from most high street coffee shops.

The Council has stepped in to subsidise the struggling 54, 58/58a, 25 and 28 services until the end of March 2024.

But, in the face of massive budget pressures, it cannot commit to supporting the service from April. Unless passenger numbers rise significantly and the services become financially viable for First Bus South, which operates Buses of Somerset, the at-risk the services may be reduced or stopped completely.

The following services all require additional financial support, which the Council can only provide temporarily thanks to the Government's Bus Service Improvement Plan Plus funding (BSIP Plus).

- 54 Yeovil to Taunton
- 58/58a Yeovil to Wincanton
- 25 Taunton to Dulverton
- 28 Taunton to Minehead

First Bus South has signalled it will review the routes before the funding ends next year, taking into account new data on passenger uptake."

South West In Bloom

Towns across Somerset have received numerous awards at the famous gardening competition, South West in Bloom, following the awards ceremony in Cornwall.

South West in Bloom is part of the Britain in Bloom campaign, established by the Royal Horticultural Society (RHS).

Judging for the competition took place in July when Somerset towns welcomed judges on tours of parks, gardens, green spaces and RHS's 'It's Your Neighbourhood' groups (IYNs) that had entered into the contest.

The results of this year's competition for Somerset include:

- Yeovil in Bloom (funded by the Town Council): GOLD - St. Bridget Cup
- Haselbury Plucknett In Bloom: GOLD - Mary Mortimer Cup
- Cary in Bloom: GOLD - Arye Cup
- Taunton in Bloom: SILVER GILT - Tesco Cup
- Wellington in Bloom: SILVER GILT - Portman Cup
- Minehead In Bloom: SILVER GILT - Sargent Cup

- Burnham-On-Sea In Bloom: SILVER GILT - Pennant Urban Town South Award

The results for the IYNs groups:

- Yeovil achieved nine Level 5 - Outstanding Awards (top award), and two Level 4 - Thriving Awards.
- Wellington achieved two Level 5 - Outstanding Awards and three Level 4 - Thriving Awards.
- Taunton achieved two Level 5 - Outstanding Awards, one Level 4 - Thriving Award, and one Level 2 - Improving Award.

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.

See the full results here: www.southwestinbloom.org.uk.

Food

The Somerset Local Pantry Network (SLPN) has won FareShare South West's Social Impact Award for Community and Sustainability.

Food charity FareShare South West launched their Social Impact Awards this year, and SLPN have won the Community and Sustainability category for the innovative ways the network utilises food for community resilience.

SLPN consists of nine local pantries who buy and collect surplus food and make it available to members for a low weekly fee, which helps reduce food waste, feed families and save them money.

SLPN is a partnership between Somerset Council, local community groups and food charity, FareShare South West.

Somerset Council provides initial grant money to fund the launch of a new pantry, but each pantry is independently run by voluntary sector groups.

Earlier this year, Action Against Hunger, another food charity, made a film about the Somerset pantries, highlighting the positive impact they make in communities. Watch it here: www.youtube.com/watch?v=sJBij7bepKs.

Full details of SLPN can be found here: www.somerset.gov.uk/localpantry.

Community heroes

Unsung community heroes from across Somerset have been recognised at Somerset Council's Chair's Awards for their unstinting service to their communities.

The awards ceremony had been an annual event for many years for Somerset County Council. This latest event was a first for Somerset Council since it came into being on 1 April this year.

The awards were presented by Council Chair Cllr Mike Best at Taunton Rugby Club and the event was attended by 120 people, including the nominees from across Somerset, their guests, Leader of Somerset Council Cllr Bill Revans, and Deputy Leader Cllr Liz Leyshon.

The award recipients were nominated by their city, town and parish councils for recognition of their outstanding contribution to their communities. They were presented with a signed certificate and gift by Cllr Best, followed by a buffet reception to celebrate their achievements.

This year the awards were opened up to groups and couples to recognise their contribution, as well as individuals

Among those on the list of honours was the Severalls Memorial Gardens Group in Crewkerne. The citation included: "These gardens are a beautiful and peaceful place to sit and enjoy the surroundings. Their continued care and voluntary hard work of keeping the town's memorial grounds so beautifully should be recognised."

Among the many individuals to be nominated was Julie Fowler from Ilminster who has raised considerable sums for national and local good causes. "Julie can organise and enlist many people on board to make any fundraising event the most successful it could be and she always ensures everyone receives a thank you card," said the citation.

Some 35 awards were presented on the night, including two posthumous honours that were accepted by relatives. Six award winners were unable to attend and will be visited personally by Cllr Best who will present their awards.

Cllr Best said: "It is so rewarding and humbling to read the citations for these awards. Our community heroes do so much for others, never expecting to be rewarded for their efforts.

"In Somerset we are so fortunate to have so many people who work hard on behalf of others in their town, village or hamlet. The awards ceremony is a small way of saying thank-you on behalf of Somerset.

"Every recipient has made a real difference to their communities. It is a privilege to thank them on behalf of the Council."

E-Newsletters

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

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Martin Lovell

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