

Somerset Council Report to Croscombe Parish Council meeting Tuesday 13th February 2024

Unlike the last two parish council meetings all being well I shall be able to attend this one!

Floods

I was pleased to be part of the Croscombe flood de-brief meeting last Thursday 1st February at the George. Residents' respective stories of the 4th January flood were heart breaking. I regretted afterwards, and still regret now, my unceremonious departure from the meeting before the end. I had made clear to Gill Pettitt (chair) that I would only be able to stay for part of the meeting, but my apologies stand nonetheless.

An action on me was to follow with Paul Elliston and Bel Dearing of Somerset Council and to communicate the strong feelings expressed at the meeting, I have written to Paul stressing that they and the Environment Agency need to engage with Croscombe residents to address the village's flooding issues in isolation from those of neighbouring communities.

Financial Emergency

Papers published ahead of Somerset Council's Executive meeting on 15th January give further details of plans and options to bridge a £100m funding gap for the next financial year.

Council Leader, Councillor Bill Revans, said the Council has been left with no option but to consider "unprecedented" and "heart-breaking" steps including reductions to services and a 10% increase in Council Tax.

The Council declared a financial emergency last year, one of many councils facing significant pressures on its finances driven by inflation, spiralling costs - notably in social care - and a "broken" system for funding local government.

The authority's ability to respond has been hampered by a historically low Council Tax rate – 49th lowest out of 63 for unitary councils.

The papers set out a plan to use reserves, significant savings, a Council Tax increase of 10%, and the sale of council assets to set a balanced budget.

There are a range of options to generate income by raising fees such as parking charges in line with inflation, and efficiency savings such as reviewing contracts and IT.

There are also options to spend less by reducing or stopping discretionary services in order to protect its essential statutory services. These include CCTV, public toilets, theatres, leisure services, visitor centres and closing five recycling sites.

Where options are to stop services or greatly reduce funding, discussions will continue with parish, town and city councils, and community groups around options for services to be picked up by others rather than stop completely.

Cllr Revans said: "The funding model of local government is broken and our pleas for assistance have not yet been answered. Councils up and down the country are in a similar position and in Somerset we have been hit extra hard by cost inflation in care.

“This is what a financial emergency looks like. No decisions have been made, but all of these savings and the 10% Council Tax increase are unprecedented actions that have to be considered if we are to steer this authority through a period of extreme pressure.

“Officers have done as we asked and left no stone unturned. The result is a set of options, many of which are very unpalatable – some heart-breaking - that no-one would want to take forward.

“Our Council Tax is one of the lowest among the unitary councils which have responsibility for care and we find ourselves having to consider putting it up by 10%. That equates to an extra £3.15 per week for the average household to limit the impact on core services, many of which support the most vulnerable.”

Cllr Revans urged the public to take part in the Council’s budget consultation which ran until 22 January, the result of which will help influence councillors as they seek to set a balanced budget.

The papers set out £35m of proposals. Of these, £24m are new and will be referred to the Council’s Resources Scrutiny Committee before any decisions are taken. Further consultations will be carried out on specific proposals where necessary.

At the meeting on 15 January, the Executive asked Government for flexibility to increase Council Tax by more than the referendum limit to 10% (including the 2% social care precept). This would generate an extra £17.1m and raise the average band D Council Tax bill to £1,810 – still below the unitary average of £1,815.

Cllr Revans said: “We understand the pressure on everyone’s household budgets and have recently taken steps to ensure that we have a Council Tax Reduction and Hardship scheme in place to protect the most vulnerable in our community from any increase”.

To balance the 2024/25 budget the Council also plans to use £36.8m of reserves (a council’s equivalent of savings – money for emergencies which can only be used once).

The remaining gap of around £20m would need to be covered by asking Government for a ‘capitalisation direction’. This would allow the council to borrow money or sell assets to fund day-to-day running costs.

As reserves and capital funds can only be used once, for future years the Council will need to significantly reduce its budget. This will include a transformation programme to reduce the size of the organisation and its staffing so it can live within its means.

Budget setting

Somerset Council has launched public consultation on its budget, offering residents and businesses the chance to have their say as the authority faces a financial emergency.

The consultation is open to everyone and the results will help influence Councillors as they look to set a balanced budget in February 2024.

The budget consultation closed on 22 January.

Waste

Following a recent change of legislation, from 1 January 2024, charges for disposing of construction and demolition materials including: asbestos, plasterboard, hardcore and rubble from household DIY projects have been removed.

Each calendar month every household will be able to bring up to eight, 50 litre sacks (or equivalent 2m sheets of asbestos or plasterboard) free of charge to a recycling site over a maximum of four visits in a month. For example, two visits bringing four bags each time, or a single visit bringing eight bags.

Households will need to pre-book trips to dispose of this DIY waste, telling the council:

- the amount of material they are disposing (up to 8x50 litre sacks per month)
- the number of times they will need to visit (up to four visits per month)

If residents need to dispose of asbestos, plasterboard, or hardcore/rubble in excess of their free allowance they can pay for this online through the Somerset Council website.

Should residents need to dispose of asbestos and/or plasterboard before 31 December 2023, they can still do so by paying online using the 'Do it online' section. Disposal of hardcore/rubble can be paid for on site until 31 December.

Bookings can be made online from 2 January (through the waste and recycling section of the council's website). Anyone who cannot access the online form can call Customer Services on 0300 123 2224.

Not all sites accept asbestos and/or plasterboard, residents should check online to find what is accepted at each site.

Free disposal is only available to the Somerset householders. Construction and demolition waste from trade is classified as industrial waste and this is not entitled to any free disposal.

Biffa can accept trade construction and demolition waste (excluding trade asbestos) and a charge is payable to Biffa at the site. Please note not all sites accept plasterboard.

Look out for your letter - changes to waste collection days are on the way

'Look out for your letter' is the message from Somerset Council as recycling and rubbish collection days change for more than 120,000 households in western parts of the county in February.

New collection routes are being introduced for many homes in the former Sedgemoor and Somerset West and Taunton areas, as well as a small part of South Somerset.

This means many homes in these areas had a change in collection day from the week beginning Monday 12 February 2024. Changes will be made for the rest of the county later in the year.

Being brought in by the 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.

Residents may have:

- a change to collection day
- a change in the week that their rubbish is collected (it will still be collected once every three weeks)

If a household's collection days are changing, they will receive a letter in early January making this clear. This will be followed by a service guide - including a collection day calendar - arriving near the end of January. Look out for this and save it for future reference as this will show your new collection day.

If a household did not get a letter at the start of January, there will be no change to collection day, but they will still receive a service guide including collections calendar near the end of the month.

There will be no changes to collection days for garden waste subscribers, clinical waste collections, or communal property collections (with shared collections, such as blocks of flats). Crews will still provide assisted collections.

Some residents having a change of collection may also have an additional one-off Saturday collection of their rubbish on either 10, 17 or 24 February. This will be made clear in the letter they receive at the start of January and is to make sure no-one goes more than three weeks between rubbish collections as crews move to the new routes. If there is no mention of an additional one-off collection of rubbish in the letter then household's will not need one.

Residents with questions about the changes can head to Somerset Council's website for further information. The online collection day look-up feature will be updated from Monday 12 February.

If residents have downloaded their collection calendar to a smartphone, they will need to do this again after 12 February.

Phosphates

Somerset Council has secured £9.6m of Government funding to deliver phosphate mitigation measures which will unlock the delivery of new homes across the area and provide for long term nature recovery.

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

The funding will be used to expand the Council's existing phosphate credit scheme and deliver both interim and long-term phosphate mitigation measures including the use of new energy efficient water processing technology trialled at the Fivehead Wastewater Treatment Works near Taunton earlier this year.

Somerset Council has been building on the work begun by the former Somerset County Council and the four district councils (Somerset West and Taunton, Mendip, South Somerset, and Sedgemoor) which had been working together to minimise delay and uncertainty around planning applications since receiving advice from Natural England about the requirement to mitigate against high levels of phosphates in the Somerset Levels and Moors Ramsar Site in 2020, and the River Axe Special Area of Conservation in 2022.

Further information on the requirement and Somerset Council's work can be found here:

<https://www.somerset.gov.uk/planning-buildings-and-land/phosphates-on-the-somerset-levels-and-moors-ramsar-site/#Background%20to%20Phosphates>.

Broadband

Broadband provider Truespeed Communications Ltd has been hit with fines and charges totalling more than £34k after pleading guilty to five offences in Somerset.

Somerset Council prosecuted the firm following works carried out in Frome and Street. Truespeed admitted failing to install proper traffic management and guarding broken and excavated road surfaces to ensure the safety of pedestrians on a number of occasions, in breach of the New Roads and Street Works Act 1991.

The court imposed fines totalling £28,000, costs of £4,277 and a victim surcharge of £2,000.

Volunteering

People in Somerset are being encouraged to think about volunteering and make it their New Year resolution.

Volunteering is a great way to give back to the local community or support a meaningful cause. Somerset Council has around 1,600 volunteers who have found that giving up their time to help others is a way to meet new people, gain new skills and expand their horizons.

The Council can offer a wide range of ways of getting involved. Volunteers can support children and young people with the School Appeals Panel, Route1 and Youth Justice Team; get outdoors with the Rights of Way, National Landscapes and Countryside Teams and even roles supporting the management of Somerset's harbours and getting people to and from appointments. There's plenty of information about roles with Somerset Council at www.volunteering.somerset.gov.uk

Not only are there opportunities with Somerset Council, there are many organisations looking for support across Somerset. There is information about the roles at www.sparkachange.org.uk.

Martin Lovell

07/02/2024