

## Somerset Council Report to Croscombe Parish Council meeting Tuesday 18<sup>th</sup> June 2024

This report reviews Somerset Council's first year in operation. With this goes the first annual report of the Shepton Mallet Local Community Network (LCN).

### Overview

The 1st of April 2024 was the first anniversary of Somerset Council. It was known that the process of bringing together five councils into one new council would be difficult. Nobody knew however that this would be happening in the context of one of the most challenging times that local government has ever known.

Many of the Council's achievements have been through working in partnership with Somerset's City, Town and Parish council colleagues, the voluntary sector and other parts of the public sector, especially the police and NHS.

The Council's staff, and those of our partners, are working hard to achieve the best for Somerset during these financially challenging times, and it is acknowledged that there is uncertainty for many of the Somerset Council team as the Council works through 2024.

All residents and businesses have an opportunity to reflect on the achievements of the first year of Somerset Council. The Council Plan sets us four strategic priorities:

- A Greener, More Sustainable Somerset
- A Fairer, Ambitious Somerset
- A Flourishing and Resilient Somerset
- A Healthy and Caring Somerset

There is no specific order to these priorities. Many of the success stories of this first year of Somerset Council encompass more than one priority. That is exactly how everybody needs to be working.

Looking back over what the Council has achieved shows us that it is still performing exceptionally well despite the wider challenging context.

Somerset is becoming greener and more sustainable, with increased recycling rates, securing support and investment in bus services, improving active travel routes, supporting communities impacted by flooding, decarbonising our buildings, and building new schools to the highest standards.

Somerset is becoming fairer and more ambitious by working with education partners to encourage higher expectations for our children and young people, ensuring that the most vulnerable looked after children are able to be cared for here in Somerset through the Homes and Horizons project, investing in social and affordable housing throughout the county, and making council tax fairer through the Council Tax Reduction Scheme.

Somerset is becoming more flourishing and resilient by securing massive investments into the county, making it a centre for green energy production and high value manufacturing, securing government funding to invest in communities through Town Deals, Future High Street Funds, UK Shared Prosperity and Levelling Up funds, and starting to mitigate for the phosphate and nitrate pollution on the Somerset levels to lift the moratorium on house building across Somerset.

Somerset is becoming more healthy and caring by working much more closely with the NHS and other partners through the Somerset Board, working to re-able more residents so they can live independently at home, renewing commitment to unpaid carers, encouraging more people to become foster carers, and supporting initiatives in communities like our food pantries.

Officers spend huge amounts of time applying for Government funds for regeneration and other priorities. Funds such as Levelling Up are competitive, yet the criteria are never clear. The Council must continue to work in this way while hoping that the next Government realises that local authorities are very well placed to understand where investment is most needed.

The following is more detail on the Council's achievements, under the four priority headings, plus a summary of how the Council is addressing the financial challenges.

The Council will continue to work hard to navigate the best possible route through the financial challenges for local government, ensuring that it maximises all opportunities whilst taking care of those most in need of support.

### The Financial Challenge

Somerset Council has set a legal, balanced budget for 2024/25 but only by using one-off resources including reserves from the predecessor councils, and use of capital receipts from the sale of land, property and investments.

The Council has agreed approx. £35million of savings, on top of £40million last financial year. The scale of savings is now starting to be painful and, in places, heartbreaking. It will get worse yet unless circumstances change.

Even with the 5% increase this year, Somerset's Council Tax is still lower than other councils in the south west, and much lower than the national average.

Costs have increased considerably above inflation, for instance placements for residential care in Somerset have increased by 47% since 2021/22.

The Government grants listed in income have increased but are still inadequate to cover the increased costs of social care for adults' and children's services.

The £5million extra agreed by the Government early in 2024 is enough to cover the additional cost of the national living wage in adult social care – but no more.

The Council has embarked on a much wider, deeper, and faster transformation programme which will reduce the size of the workforce by at least 1,000 full time equivalents. The current size is near 5,000 full time employees.

The process of devolution of assets and services to City, Town & Parish Councils has speeded up and many have increased their local precept to allow for the additional costs. That was always part of the One Somerset business case that the Council inherited for Vesting Day.

Voluntary redundancies are being considered first, then compulsory redundancies. The Council understands the pressure this puts on its valued team of officers, whilst expecting them to continue with business as usual.

Changes in inflation and interest rates will be very important in future plans. The Council's Chief Finance Officer (Section 151) will monitor and report on whether progress is being made or whether a Section 114 notice remains possible or probable.

The Council will do everything that it can to avoid that situation, as nobody wishes to pay expensive Government Commissioners to take decisions for Somerset.

Reform of funding for local authorities, especially those with responsibility for adult social care, children's services, housing and homelessness, is essential.

### [A Greener, More Sustainable Somerset](#)

In November 2023, Somerset Council was recognised for its work in response to the climate emergency. A score of A- was achieved from CDP, a charity that is considered the 'gold standard' of environmental reporting. You can read more here [www.cdp.net](http://www.cdp.net). This rating compares with a regional average of B and follows high scores for predecessor councils in Somerset. This work is, and always will be, a top priority for this administration of Somerset Council.

A new Local Nature Recovery Strategy has been launched with full funding from Defra. This will map the locations of Somerset's most precious habitats and wildlife and identify places most suitable for nature restoration work. The survey is open until the end of April 2024 and can be found in [www.somerset.gov.uk/lnrs](http://www.somerset.gov.uk/lnrs).

A ten-year Somerset Tree Strategy has been launched, again funded by Defra, aiming to increase tree cover from current 8% to at least the national average of 13%.

The new Biodiversity Net Gain rules are also being implemented so that planning applications for new developments must leave nature better off than before and create new habitats and green spaces.

On public transport there is a new contractor for the Park & Ride in Taunton, many bus routes across Somerset have been saved using BSIP funds. There is a successful 'Bus It' campaign and the Council has recently seen a massive investment in Somerset by First Bus company to bring the first electric buses to the county.

On recycling Somerset was ranked 28 out of 228 local authorities in the latest available figures, 2021/22. 97.2% was recycled in the UK into new products and packaging, and of the 5,771 tonnes of plastic collected, 99.4% was processed in the UK. Somerset's collection crews make more than 350,000 collections every week.

A focus on repair and reuse as well as recycling has seen the Fixybus celebrate its first anniversary and Community Action Groups launched in Shepton Mallet.

Somerset again saw many parts of the county impacted seriously by flooding. The council has supported residents, successfully applied for Government grants, worked on a Council Tax exemption scheme for those who had to leave their home and delivered flood support and resilience engagement sessions across Somerset with partners.

The Blue Anchor Coastal Defence work has been delivered under budget using rock armour to protect this part of the 60+ mile coastline. The B3191 remains closed to vehicles following a landslip near Watchet but has recently opened again for pedestrians and will open for cyclists.

Additional electric vehicle recharging points have been installed in Taunton and in Dunster to add to those installed by predecessor councils.

More active travel routes have been opened for 'walking and wheeling' and a Government grant of £1.5million has been secured for additional routes in Somerset.

The work on the Strawberry Line has continued with paths built by local contractors joining communities, bringing health benefits and increased safety away from busy roads.

The Council has worked with the Environment Agency to introduce an extra 8,000 glass eels into Chard reservoir to boost the reducing numbers of European eels.

Many existing Council-owned buildings are being de-carbonised including Libraries and office buildings, helping to reduce energy consumption and therefore cost.

School building has moved into a new age of sustainability with the construction of the County's first net zero school, Orchard Grove near Taunton.

### A Fairer, Ambitious Somerset

The Council knows that it needs to be more ambitious for the people of Somerset. The Education for Life strategy is hugely important. Many individuals and families are still seriously affected by the cost of living. Decent housing is one of the main determinants of health and wellbeing.

Properly affordable housing is a very real ambition for the new Somerset Council, with both Somerset West and North retaining approx. 9,700 social homes for rent.

North Taunton Woolaway Project has delivered 47 new energy efficient and accessible homes, with another 53 homes now underway.

54 homes are being completed in Minehead, the first council homes in West Somerset for more than 30 years.

As the new Council has a Housing Revenue Account, there is greater opportunity for more homes for social rent, with greater security of tenure.

A successful competitive bid for funding an innovative project resulted in a £9.5million grant to deliver a range of nutrient mitigations. This will help unlock the paused developments, including social and affordable housing.

Homes and Horizons is a nationally recognised project to create homes for children in Somerset who are not able to live with their families. Working with the Shaw Trust and the NHS, the Council provides a safe living and learning environment which also saves on the extortionate costs of privately run placements elsewhere.

The Healthy Happy Holiday programme and the Household Support Fund have supported thousands of families including activities and school meal vouchers.

The Council has supported food pantries across Somerset, many of them now celebrating their first years of helping lower income households.

There is a new Council Tax Reduction Scheme, and a further Exceptional Hardship Scheme to help those on the lowest incomes. The reduction for state pension age is mandated by the Government, yet like reductions for working age residents, it is funded by Somerset Council

New school building is being spearheaded by Orchard Grove Primary School, near Taunton, which will be Somerset's first net zero school. Community Infrastructure Levy, from housing development, is a major part of the funding of the school.

Government grants have been received for leisure facilities including swimming pools and tennis courts that are operated for Somerset Council on contracts or are leased to leisure companies.

Devolution of assets and services was a major part of the One Somerset business case, and in the financially challenging times we are experiencing, has been brought forward so that Parish/Town/City Councils can take over running of open spaces, parks, playgrounds and facilities for local people.

18 Local Community Networks have been established, bringing together Somerset and Parish/Town/City councillors, the voluntary sector and partner organisations.

Somerset Council now has four separate Highways contracts giving greater flexibility, a commitment to reducing carbon and no minimum spend allowing for more local working.

Somerset's road network covers 4,172 miles, excluding the M5 and A303 which are maintained by National Highways. As the highway authority the Council is working with 15 villages and towns that have submitted valid requests for 20mph speed limit.

Utility companies working on the highways and pavements have been fined by Somerset Council for roadwork offences including not reinstating surfaces correctly, working without permit or failures of traffic management.

Somerset Council has been granted £3.5m to purchase properties to house refugees from Afghanistan and Ukraine. These properties will become part of the Council's housing stock when no longer needed for the refugees.

### [A Flourishing and Resilient Somerset](#)

The Council needs to be well placed to maximise opportunities, including all the many schemes started under the predecessor Councils. Somerset has an ageing demographic. We are a 'net exporter' of young people. It is essential that every opportunity is taken to change that through economic development and regeneration.

The Agratas plans to build a gigafactory at the Gravity Smart Campus near Puriton have made the national news. The £4billion investment from Tata and Government will employ 4,000 people and is to be supported by infrastructure funded by Somerset Council. Roads for site access, connectivity, skills and more will be funded and the borrowing paid for by business rates until 2052 (an extension of 10 years on other Enterprise Zones).

Somerset Council successfully requested a non-repayable grant of £55million from Government to pay the cost of borrowing until income from business rates commences.

Town Deals in Bridgwater and Glastonbury are now making good progress with contracts signed and work underway. There are 10 projects in Bridgwater and 10 in Glastonbury.

Future High Streets funding in Yeovil is delivering greatly improved public realm projects throughout the town centre.

Future High Streets funding has also delivered access to the Firepool site in Taunton, and work will soon commence on the Boulevard that will link the railway station to the centre of town. The Centre for Digital Innovation is now complete and ready for business.

The architectural and public realm improvements in Chard High Street's Heritage Action Zone are nearing completion and the Grade1 Listed Old Courthouse saved.

Levelling Up funds have been awarded to Tone Works and Tonedale Mill projects in Wellington.

Levelling Up funds have also been awarded to convert the old hospital in Bridgwater to a social care academy and we are working with the NHS on the project.

UK Prosperity Funding (post-EU funding) has been agreed by the Government and plans are well advanced to use the £7million+ to fund further investment and regeneration in Somerset.

Somerset has also been successful in gaining £3.4million from the Rural England Prosperity Fund. More details on both funds will follow.

An options appraisal for the upgrading of Yeovil's Octagon Theatre has been completed following huge, unforeseen increases in construction costs and interest rates. Funding from the Department for Culture, Media & Sport is essential to complete the project, and the theatre will then be devolved to Yeovil Town Council.

Enterprise Centre at Chard is now offering quality workspace on an 'easy in, easy out' basis for fledgling and growing companies.

Mentoring and grants are offered to the business community of Somerset, including many that are environmental in nature including 'Go Green' grants.

The Heart of the South West (Devon & Somerset) Local Enterprise Partnership ends in April 2024, as mandated by Government, and the responsibilities will be taken on by Somerset Council.

### [A Healthy and Caring Somerset](#)

Somerset Council will play its part in closer working with the NHS through the Integrated Care Partnership. Ensuring that every resident can lead their best life, at home for as long as possible, together with public health initiatives that can improve residents' quality of life.

Somerset Council's work with Newton Europe is a programme of reablement. The programme is aimed at facilitating and improving re-ablement and so allowing more residents to return from hospital to their own homes, where that is their preferred option and with appropriate support.

The Council appreciates the huge contribution of unpaid carers and has reaffirmed commitment to carers with a refreshed strategy. As an estimate there are at least 50,000 unpaid carers and young carers in Somerset and the Council has a duty and determination to support them.

Foster carers play a vital role in changing a child's story, whether it is a child from a Somerset family, or an unaccompanied asylum-seeking child. Somerset Council supports foster carers in many ways and offers financial packages to make it possible to devote the time necessary to take care of a child or children.

Somerset Council has received a £5million grant over five years from the National Institute for Health and Care Research to improve health and reduce inequalities.

Micro providers are self-employed carers in many parts of Somerset, enabling people to stay in their own homes. As a Council we support this approach and have seen initiatives such as Wiveliscombe's 'Wivey Cares' grow into a remarkable local resource for the community in the west of Somerset.

Connect Somerset is a network of 12 Champions, all experienced leaders in their communities, working to join up public services with the voluntary sector.

Somerset Council receives an annual Public Health grant which funds specific work and focusses on such important themes as HIV testing, blood pressure monitoring, use of Naxolene to combat overdoses, reusable period products and the Purple Chair initiative in Libraries as safe spaces for women and girls.

Pride events in Somerset are an important day in the Council's calendar, demonstrating inclusivity, and the LGBTQ+ flag flies proudly from our Council flagpoles.

Somerset Council reaffirmed its commitment by signing the Armed Forces Covenant, recognising our debt to our Armed Forces community.

We have also supported the Walk for a Life event in Taunton, to raise awareness of suicide prevention. Officers of the Council, and elected members, wear the 'Orange Button' to show they have completed quality assured training in mental health or suicide prevention.

The Homelessness and Rough Sleeper Nursing Service in Somerset has won the prestigious NHS Parliamentary Award in the NHS 75th anniversary year.

The Council has agreed multiple year funding agreements with both Citizens Advice and Spark Somerset, recognising the importance of the organisations in the health and wellbeing of Somerset's people. Libraries have provided space for 'Donate a Coat' in the winter months to support both children and adults to keep warm and dry.



The Council's Environmental Health service has a responsibility on noise pollution and has brought successful prosecutions recently, seizing music equipment that was affecting neighbours' quality of life.

The Public Health team has launched a new website to bring together resources for all ages:  
[www.healthysomerset.co.uk](http://www.healthysomerset.co.uk).

Martin Lovell                      12/06/2024