

Somerset Council Report to Croscombe Parish Council meeting Tuesday 25th February 2025

Budget

The final budget setting for year 2025-2026 for Somerset Council will come as a knife-edge finish with the Full Council due to set the budget due to take place on Wednesday 5th March 2025, a matter of days before the date that Council Tax bills have to go out, 11th March. One estimate of the budget gap to be filled is just under £54m. It had been hoped that this would have been a great deal less were it not for spiralling costs in social care, in particular children's placements, compounded by the recently announced increase in National Insurance contributions. With respect to the last National Government has said that it will cover these increases for Councils, but it is not clear that that goes for third party contracts that we use.

To meet this gap Somerset Council has requested from the Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) an agreement to increase Council Tax for 2025-2026 more than the standard 4.99% before going to referendum. Indications are that we will be able to do this, by how much to be announced, as long as our Council Tax charge does not exceed that of other local authorities. Starting from a low base, that is unlikely, taken in comparison with neighbouring authorities Dorset and Wiltshire. Somerset has also requested a capitalisation directive, whereby funds raised through the sale of assets can be used to plug a budget deficit. National Government has yet to announce a decision on both of these, hence our delay in setting a budget. We are optimistic...

Council re-structure

The proposed new Council structure to be in place from 1st April 2025 had been announced. Impact assessments have been carried out, especially where services might be affected. Three areas have been highlighted:

- There will be reductions in capacity to investigate and address maintenance on the Rights of Way network. Response times for issues and notices will increase, requiring prioritisation based on duty of care and public safety risks. More bridges and rights of way will face temporary closures, with longer average closure periods.
- Interventions may exceed service level agreements for Waste Services, causing longer response times. Customer demand variations due to changes in the service and external factors like weather, flooding, traffic and staff illness, will affecting our ability to process requests.
- A reorganisation of service provision will impact on teams providing Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and inclusion services.

Parking Policy Changes

Somerset Council has inherited a range of parking policies from the previous District Councils and has the ability to bring consistency to these across the Council area. In doing so it is anticipated that additional income will be received from which the Council is able to reinvest surpluses into the service and its wider ambitions. The recommendations are to Implement/introduce Somerset wide:

- Overnight car park charge, suggested tariff £1.00 evening/overnight
- Sunday parking charge (as has been the case in former Mendip District Council areas for a long time)
- Charging into free to use Car Parks
- On Street charging to limited waiting bays
- Increased resource requirements to deliver and maintain these changes.

No consultation on this has taken place yet. This will follow. The Secretary of State's Statutory Guidance to Local Authorities on the Civil Enforcement of Parking Contraventions recommends that enforcement authorities consult locally on their parking policies and seek the views of businesses and the public. The process to introduce these proposed changes has been factored into the workflow to enable the views of the public to be considered.

Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE)

After some to-ing and fro-ing, Somerset Council is close to having an agreed submission for new division boundaries. The imperative has been to arrive, where possible, at single member divisions of <> 5,000 voters, but not exceeding that by very much. As I have advised before the proposal is that Croscombe Parish will be part "St. Cuthbert Out", with villages on the east and north sides of St. Cuthbert Out, Westbury sub-Mendip and Rodney Stoke, all part of that division. Once submitted a public consultation will follow. It will then be in the hands of the Boundary Commission!

Combined Authority

Somerset Council submitted an expression of interest along with Dorset, Wiltshire, Bournemouth Christchurch and Poole Councils to form a Wessex Combined Authority. National Government has now advised that other proposed combined authorities will take precedence over this. Do not hold breath over developments!

Devolution

I do not have any updates on other devolution matters relating to smaller parish councils. Larger town councils are being considered to be priorities.

Local Community Network (LCN)

The next meeting of the Shepton Local Community Network (LCN) postponed from 27th January 2025 will now take place on Monday 3rd March starting at 7 p.m. in Shape Council Chamber Shepton Mallet.

Martin Lovell 18/02/2025