**SOMERSET COUNCIL REPORT**

**LONG LOAD PARISH COUNCIL 20th February 2024**

**1.0 - Somerset Council matters**

**1.1 - Council seeks to minimise impact while bridging £100m budget gap**

CCTV services and Yeovil Recreation Ground could be protected as Somerset Council explores all options to limit the impact of its financial emergency.

Earlier this month it was announced the Council would need to consider “unprecedented” and “heart-breaking” steps to bridge a £100m funding gap, including reductions to services and an increase in Council Tax.

Papers published ahead of next week’s Executive meeting provides an update, showing important changes to two of the savings proposals. It is now hoped that support from our Town Councils will enable the CCTV service to continue, while Yeovil Recreation Ground could be devolved to Yeovil Town Council. Talks about supporting other services are continuing with our City, Town and Parish Council Partners.

Council Leader Bill Revans said: “We’ve been fully open about our financial emergency and have sought to raise awareness of the broken system of local government funding, where costs for statutory services like social care are rising much faster than our ability to raise income.

“Meanwhile we have been exploring every option and working proactively to find alternative ways to run services which we can no longer afford. I’m pleased to see the updates to proposals around CCTV and Yeovil Rec and hope many other services will be protected by working in partnership with our excellent communities and their City, Town and Parish Councils.”

Somerset Council’s Executive on 7 February will be asked to consider a plan to use reserves, significant savings, a Council Tax increase, and the sale of council assets to set a balanced budget.

This requires the Government to allow Somerset Council to raise Council Tax by 9.99% and approve a capitalisation direction, where the council is allowed 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 through a transformation programme.

The papers also give more details of the approach to create a leaner, more productive organisation and reduce the size of the workforce. 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.

Cllr Revans added: “This is not a position any of us would want to be in but sadly this national problem will have very real impacts on local people, including our hard-working staff. We are having to look at every option and it is clear we need to reduce our budget to ensure the council is sustainable for the long term.

“I do not believe there is an alternative. If both requests are rejected by Government then a S114 notice will be inevitable. This simply means well paid commissioners would come in and cut all non-statutory services, regardless of impact, impose a more drastic reduction in our staff numbers, while raising Council Tax and other fees even more than we are proposing. We are doing everything we can to minimise the impact on our residents by taking the responsibility here in Somerset.”

The public are encouraged to take part in the budget-setting process by attending Scrutiny Committee (2 Feb), Executive (7 Feb) and/or Full Council (20 Feb) either in person or online to gain a deeper knowledge on the issues.

For Scrutiny Committee and Full Council, The Canalside venue in Bridgwater has been booked due the high volume of interest anticipated. Meeting timings have also been extended to ensure a 45-minute Public Question Time can be accommodated. Up to nine people can speak, in person, at the meetings, having three minutes, and a maximum of three questions each. All questions and responses will be published on the Council’s website.

For those unable to attend in person, all three budget meetings will be held live on MS Teams – including Full Council on 20 February, with the recordings available on YouTube shortly afterwards.

The Council’s call for public participation follows the closure of the recent Budget Consultation, which attracted almost 6,000 comments. A report on the public consultation can be found here.

Cllr Revans added: “The public consultation demonstrated there’s real appetite out there for people to come forward and get involved. We want people to keep talking to us so we can hear what they have to say about their priorities and where they think we could make savings. This will help us make the right decisions, no matter how difficult.”

Full details of the budget meetings, agendas and papers can be found on the Council calendar.

The Executive papers can be found here. If you wish to speak or ask a question about any matter on the agenda at our forthcoming events, please contact Democratic Services during office hours (before 5pm) three clear working days before the meeting.  Email democraticservicesteam@somerset.gov.uk or telephone 01823 357628 including your full name, address and contact details.

**1.2 - Children’s Mental Health Week: Empowering young minds with the theme ‘My Voice Matters’**

Childrens Mental Health week, an annual event dedicated to raising awareness of the mental health challenges faced by young people takes place from the 5th to 11th February.

This year’s theme, ‘My Voice Matters,’ aims to shine a spotlight on the importance of empowering children and young people to express their thoughts, feelings, and concerns, helping to provide a supportive environment for their mental well-being.

Somerset Council’s Public Health team are encouraging parents, carers, and anyone who works with children and young people to empower them to recognise the value of their voices and provide them with the tools they need to express themselves.

In 2023, about 1 in 5 children and young people aged 8 to 25 years old had a problem with their mental health. Locally through the Somerset Schools Health and Wellbeing survey, more than 3 in 10 school pupils, across all age groups reported being bullied at school. A further 1 in 4 secondary pupils reported not telling someone when they were being bullied.

Somerset Mental Health Support Team (MHST) have resources to help children and young people have a voice in what matters to them, these resources can be found on the Children and Young People website: Emotion Coaching (cypsomersethealth.org). There are also Lifehacks resources available - Somerset children & young people : Health & Wellbeing : Lifehacks For Looking After Your Mental Health (cypsomersethealth.org)

Adam Dance, Lead Member for Public Health, Equalities and Diversity at Somerset Council, said:

“We believe that every child’s voice is unique and holds immense power in shaping their mental health journey.

“This year’s theme, ‘My Voice Matters,’ underscores our commitment to empowering children to speak up, share their experiences, and play an active role in their mental wall-being.

“When we feel empowered, this can have a positive impact on our wellbeing. Children and young people who feel that their voices are heard and can make a difference have a greater sense of community and self-esteem. This year, we want children of all ages, backgrounds, and abilities to be empowered to work together to create a positive change for their mental health and wellbeing.”

For anyone who works in schools, colleges, early years setting and care for young people, the Somerset Children & Young People (CYP) Health & Wellbeing website contain information and resources with ideas on how to hear young people’s voice and views. https://bit.ly/CMHW24.

The CYP website also offers resources and local support for parents and carers. https://bit.ly/ParentCarerToolkit.

There is also a series of free online relationship, health, and wellbeing resources #LearnForLove. These learning resources are available for all Somerset residents.

Here are just a few of the resources available:

- Understanding you child’s mental health and wellbeing

- Understanding your child’s feelings

- Understanding your child: from toddler to teenagers

- Understanding your teenager’s brain

To access the online learning visit: bitly/LearnForLove and enter the code ‘dragon’ to find out more.

**1.3 - 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.

Ellie said: “It’s rare for young people to have a loud and steady voice, but being a member of Somerset Youth Parliament is one of the best opportunities to keep our needs on the agenda.

“I feel privileged to have a platform to represent the Youth Parliament, and hope to work with services and decision-makers to create lasting change in the attitudes of adults towards younger generations.

“In my term as MYP I hope to explore healthy eating and behaviours. I’ll seek to understand what can be done to promote better understanding and choices - in particular surrounding body image and eating a well-balanced diet.”

Cllr Heather Shearer, Executive Lead Member for Children, Families and Education, said: “I am delighted we will have three new MYPs who will build on the fantastic achievements of their predecessors. Democracy is the foundation stone of our society and the fact that young people are getting involved so enthusiastically is good for us all in Somerset.”

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 Phone 07964 699595

Somerset UK Youth Parliament is supported by Somerset Council’s Youth and Community Service.

**1.4 - Flood relief scheme opens for communities hit by Storm Henk**

Residents and businesses affected by January’s Storm Henk flooding may be eligible for Government flood relief money to help towards damage and flood resilience costs.

More than 50 homes and businesses in Somerset suffered flooding during between 2 and 12 January 2024 because of Storm Henk. The Government announced communities impacted by the storm could apply for funding to help them recover.

The support is being made available through a scheme called the Flood Recovery Framework.

Residents and businesses can apply via Somerset Council’s portal available here Grants for Flood Recovery from Storm Henk (somerset.gov.uk)

Householders who suffered flooding inside their home, making it wholly or partly unliveable for a while, may qualify for help. Businesses will be able to apply for rates relief as well as a Business Recovery Grant.

Councillor Dixie Darch, Lead Member for Environment and Climate said: “We’re really pleased the Government has recognised the challenges faced by communities following this latest flood event.

“The reality is that these kinds of events are going to become more frequent and supporting residents and businesses to build resilience is essential.

“We have already experienced several flooding events during 2023, but unfortunately the funding available only applies to this specific date. Hopefully going forward the Government will look at applying this kind of framework to future flood events.”

Help will be available for:

Flooded households in Somerset Council area, who can apply for up to £500 cash to help with immediate costs.

Households and businesses significantly affected, may be eligible for 100% council tax and business rates relief for at least three months

Small-to-medium sized businesses in eligible affected areas, who can apply for up to £2,500 from the Business Recovery Grant to help them return quickly to business as usual.

Eligible flood-hit property owners, who can apply for up to £5,000 to help make their homes and businesses more resilient to future flooding.

Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs will be administering a scheme for farmers who have suffered uninsurable damage to their land, who will be able to apply for grants of up to £25,000 towards repair and reinstatement costs

For full qualifying criteria residents and businesses should visit Grants for Flood Recovery from Storm Henk

[Flood recovery grant - Before you begin - Self Service (achieveservice.com)](https://swt-self.achieveservice.com/service/Flood_recovery_grant)

**2.0 - Local Issues**

**2.1 - Drainage issues** Given the recent events, a discussion with you to update on current knowledge of drainage and floods. Nothing of note at this point.

**2.2 - Repairs to SIS Fence on the footpath and continuation of the permissive path use**

Ongoing discussions with landowner. (email of 17/10/23) JB Updated in email (16/11/23) Awaiting response from Long Load. Way forward to be agree at the PC meeting. (This will remain on the report until progress is made and an update is available)

**2.3 - Levels and Moors LCN** The next meeting will be at Westenzoyland Village Hall on Monday 4th March at 7pm.

**Regards John and Emily**