

SOMERSET COUNCIL

CONSERVATIVE GROUP BRIEFING SHEET FOR PARISH AND TOWN COUNCILS DECEMBER 2023

Council's Financial Position: Latest budget papers, published ahead of the Council's Executive on 6 December, show the in-year overspend for 2023/24 has reduced from £27m to £19m, while the budget gap for 2024/25 has reduced from £100m to £87m. However, in order to close the gap and balance the budget next year a series of service reductions, efficiency savings, and increases to fees and charges, including Council Tax are being considered. Proposals include:

- Increases to parking, planning fees, harbour fees, registrations ceremonies and green waste collections
- Reduction in library services, leisure provision, theatres, visitor centres and heritage services
- Reduction or cessation of CCTV provision
- Reduction in maintenance of ditches, grips, drains, gullies, grass and hedge cutting, weed treatment, road markings, signs and paths.
- Reduction in funding for active travel, bus services and highways safety schemes including school crossing patrols
- Reduction in the number of Household Waste Recycling centres

There is also a warning that even that may not be enough to fully close the gap, and a planned transformation programme will need to be accelerated and broadened to reduce the size of the council in future.

Closure of A Block, County Hall: Customers who need to talk to Somerset Council staff face to face about enquiries that cannot be dealt with online or by phone will need to visit Deane House from December. The reception desk at A Block, County Hall, closed on 30 November as the building will be closed off in response to the financial emergency to reduce costs.

Changes to waste collection days: Recycling and rubbish collection days will be changing for more than 120,000 homes in Somerset in February next year. 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. Changes to routes and collection days for the rest of the county are expected to be introduced in June 2024. It is important that residents know their new collection days as crews will not be able to come back for either recycling or refuse for missed collections. Garden Waste collection dates are unaffected.

The M5 Willow Man: A plan to revive the once-iconic Willow Man sculpture has received a funding boost from National Highways, the company responsible for England's motorways and major A roads. The Willow Man, close to Bridgwater, Junction 23 M5 has deteriorated in recent years and is now barely recognisable. Created by artist Serena De la Hay and unveiled in 2000, the sculpture was commissioned by South West Arts to mark the millennium. Somerset Council has been granted £35,000 of funding from National Highways' Designated Funding programme for an initial feasibility looking at the possibility of repairing/enhancing and relocating the Willow Man. A future scheme could see the sculpture rebuilt using more robust materials. Have your say at: <https://somersetcouncil.citizenspace.com/communities/willow-man-feasibility-study/>

National Landscapes: From November all designated Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs) in England and Wales became National Landscapes, including Somerset's Mendip Hills, Quantock Hills, and Blackdown Hills National Landscapes. The new name looks to reflect their national importance whilst also creating greater understanding and awareness for the work that they do.

Bridgwater Town Deal: Residents are invited to have their say on proposals to restore and regenerate Bridgwater Docks, as part of the government's Levelling Up programme to transform Bridgwater Town Centre. The first of a series of public consultations will take place on Wednesday, 13 December at the Bridgwater Sea Cadets Hall, Seaward Drive, Bridgwater, TA6 3FJ, from 3:30pm-6:30pm, and all are welcome to attend. In total £23.2m of government funding has been secured to 'level up' this historical part of the county, through 11 projects which form the Bridgwater Town Deal.

Tone Works and Tone Dale Project: The Government has awarded nearly £20 million for Tone Works and Tone Dale project. The award will provide an opportunity to transform and regenerate the nationally significant heritage site at Tone Works and enhance associated land for community use.

Recycling: Each January the amount of cardboard collected rises as much as an extra 682 tonnes – a staggering 44% increase. This rise not only means more waste to recycle, but it fills the trucks more quickly meaning extra trips to the depot. As the festive season nears, Somerset Council is asking shoppers if they could cut the cardboard by buying gifts that don't need boxes and by shopping on the High Street to cut out the extra packaging that comes with online delivery.

Fight against 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. 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 www.somersetdomesticabuse.org.uk, where they can get more information, support and advice or by contacting the service on 0800 69 49 999.