



## **SOMERSEX COUNCIL CONSERVATIVE GROUP**

### **BLUE NOTE FOR DECEMBER 2024.**

#### **ONLINE PAYMENTS UNAVAILABLE FROM 26 NOVEMBER TO 4 DECEMBER**

An improved 24-hour payment system is on the way for anyone wishing to pay for key Somerset Council services online or over the phone.

From 5 December, residents will be able to pay for the following services over the phone at any time of the day, 7 days a week using the new automated system: Council Tax, Business rates, Housing and garage rents & Parking fines

Once the new system is in place, there will be no need to wait in a queue and customers will use their phone's keypad to enter their payment details.

#### **STORM BERT**

Affected communities right across the county with dozens of roads flooded and over 200 trees downed.

Teams from the Council's contractor Kier dealt with 644 reports of incidents on the roads across Somerset during and after Storm Bert. These included Flooding on the A37 near Ilchester, the A36 in Beckington was blocked by fallen power cables and roads across the Levels were also under water.

By Monday evening (25<sup>th</sup> November) around 300 incidents had been dealt with and crews were continuing to work to clear roads of trees and flood water.

#### **WORK COMPLETE ON GREEN TRANSFORMATION FOR WELLINGTON SPORTS CENTRE**

Thanks to a successful £1.54m Somerset Council bid to the Government's Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme, there has been a major overhaul of Wellington Sports Centre. the project included a dramatic carbon-cutting makeover. The scheme is run by the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero and delivered by Salix.

This included replacing old gas boilers with an Air Source Heat Pump, upgrading the air handling system with improved heat recovery, and a new roof with better insulation and solar panels. With its gas heating system removed and its energy efficiency improved, the centre should save nearly 220 tonnes of carbon per year.

## PLAN TO RESTORE SCHEDULED TRAIN SERVICES FROM TAUNTON TO BISHOPS LYDEARD

Somerset Council and West Somerset Railway PLC have jointly submitted a Strategic Outline Business Case (SOBC) to the Government to restore scheduled train services between Taunton and Bishops Lydeard.

The first step is the funding of a full business case for the scheme which will include local consultation on the final proposals. If the full business case is approved, then reintroduction of scheduled trains between Taunton and Bishops Lydeard would follow with the scope to operate some services to Minehead in the future.

The Government has been asked for a funding package of £137,000 to take the proposals forward to Full Business Case stage.

## SOMERSET BY ELECTION RESULTS

The result of the by election held on 21 November 2024 for the vacant seat in the 2-seat Blackmoor Vale division on Somerset Council is as follows: (only included results top 2)

Hayward Burt (Conservative) – 1,120 (elected); Howard Ellard (Liberal Democrat) – 714; The turnout was 26.07% and there were 4 rejected ballot papers.

The result of the by election held on 21 November 2024 for the vacant seat in the 2-seat Rowbarton and Staplegrove division Somerset Council is as follows:

Nick O'Donnell (Liberal Democrat) – 817 (elected); Pete Prior-Sankey (Conservative) – 396; The turnout was 18.32% and 2 ballot papers were rejected.

## PROPOSED CHANGES TO COUNCIL TAX REDUCTION SCHEME

Somerset Council is bringing forward proposals which protect its 100% Council Tax discount for working age residents on the lowest incomes, while also making savings to help balance its budget for next year.

The initial changes proposed **would have saved the council around £12.1m** a year. However, many of these proposals, such as those which protect carers and disabled residents, were removed by the council's Executive in July this year.

A public consultation was then held to seek views on changes which could have saved up to £6m by reducing the level of discounts on offer. Following feedback from the public and the council's Scrutiny process, **the revised proposals now being considered would help the council save £3.9m a year**. These include:

- Protecting the 100% discount offered to working age adults on the very lowest incomes, while reducing the other discount bands to 50%, 25% and 10%.
- Continuing the current system of exempting certain income, such as that from disability benefits, carers allowance and child benefit, as well as the first £25 of employment income from the income calculations.
- Retaining the policy of providing a discount to care leavers, foster carers and special guardians (but funding it from the Exceptional Hardship scheme).
- Reducing the discount by £10 per week for each non-dependent adult living in a property.
- Limiting the discount available to the maximum available for a band D property.
- Reducing the period of backdating claims to 1 calendar month.

## ROYAL RECOGNITION FOR SOMERSET CHARITIES

3 Somerset charities are celebrating after winning the coveted King's Award for Voluntary Service (KAVS). Equivalent to an MBE for individuals, **KAVS** is the highest award given annually to voluntary groups in the UK, celebrating outstanding work done by charities.

**Art AT Egwood** – is an intergenerational, therapeutic land-based day provision, supporting people of all ages and varying needs to improve their confidence, self-esteem and wellbeing.

**Exmoor Young Voices** – **engages** with young adults in the community, offering support with job opportunities, housing and other issues to help them stay working and living on Exmoor.

The majority of these young adults, aged 18 to 35, are still living at home although **EYV** is steadily improving the conditions for a number of them to be independent and is also gradually improving the prospects of owning their own sustainable homes through self-build initiatives.

**Somer Valley FM** - Somer Valley FM is an Ofcom licensed community radio station in Midsomer Norton and Radstock, broadcasting local content including news, entertainment, music, heritage, and sports.

## CONTRACT AWARDED FOR CHARD RESERVOIR WORKS

A major scheme that will strengthen Chard Reservoir's barrier and help protect local communities from its potential to flood is due to get underway.

The Council is budgeting up to £831,000 for the work with a further £160,000 held for contingencies, having awarded the contract to Kier.

The project involves building a low wall along one section of the reservoir to reduce the risk of the reservoir failing. In the worst-case scenario this could lead to severe flooding downstream, potential loss of life and multi-million pound damages.

Currently the chance of flood waters overflowing and leading to failure of the dam in any given year is approximately 1 in 5,000. With the wall in place, this chance reduces to about 1 in 400,000.

The scheme will be phased with work on culverts taking place before Christmas with the wall and stabilisation works likely to start in the New Year.

## People living in Somerset are being reminded they have access to a demand responsive transport service known as Slinky.

Demand responsive transport is a bookable, flexible service which residents can use if there is no public transport alternative. All users need to do is [register online](#) to start using the Slinky bus to get to the shops, to visit friends and family, get to college or social clubs, or access medical appointments.

You can also call:

- [01749 880482](tel:01749880482) for Mendip area
- [01823 331266](tel:01823331266) for Sedgemoor, Taunton and Wellington area
- [01643 707090](tel:01643707090) for West Somerset area
- [01935 477399](tel:01935477399) for South Somerset area

The service is available to anyone in Somerset who does not have access to a regular bus service, which is especially helpful to those in more rural locations.

Previously having your own transport precluded you from using the service but from 1 September, that has changed – car owners can use Slinky.

## SOMERSET COUNCIL SEEKS PUBLIC OPINION ON THE FUTURE OF LOCAL PHARMACY SERVICES

Somerset Council is conducting a Pharmaceutical Needs Assessment (PNA) consultation for the public to share their thoughts and contribute to the Pharmaceutical Needs Assessment statutory report produced by the Somerset Health and Wellbeing Board.

The PNA is a comprehensive assessment of the current and future pharmaceutical needs of the local population and is used to review local community pharmaceutical services and evaluate whether they adequately meet the county's needs.

NHS commissioners use the results of the PNA to work out if any changes might be needed in local pharmacy services.

The Council is encouraging the people of Somerset to share their thoughts and experiences by completing the online survey before **1 January 2025**.

To take part, visit: the Council's [Pharmaceutical Needs Assessment 2024](#) consultation page

## COUNCIL TO PRESS FOR ALTERNATIVES AFTER NEW GOVERNMENTS DISAPPOINTING DECISION TO DROP THE A358 DUELLING

A decision by THE Labour Government to drop a major scheme to dual one of Somerset's key transport arteries is a 'big disappointment' for the county but 'not the end of the road'.

The decision to shelve a £328 million National Highways upgrade of the A358 between Ilminster and Junction 25 of the M5 at Taunton came on 30 October as the Chancellor Rachel Reeves announced a series of measures to balance the Government's books which included cancelling a number of rail and road infrastructure projects.

The Council will lobby hard for Government support and funding to deliver smaller scale improvements on the route.

A scheme to build a tunnel on a section of the A303 under Stonehenge was shelved in the summer.

## HAVE YOUR SAY ON A NEW POLITICAL MAP FOR SOMERSET COUNCIL.

The Boundary Commission has launched a consultation on new division boundaries in Somerset - <https://www.lgbce.org.uk/all-reviews/somerset>

A public consultation has been launched to help shape new council divisions for Somerset Council. The Local Government Boundary Commission for England wants to hear people's views on where they live, to help make sure that the new divisions reflect the size and shape of local communities.

An electoral review is being carried out to make sure that each local councillor represents about the same number of electors, and that the divisions they represent reflect community identities.

The Local Government Boundary Commission has decided that the number of councillors in Somerset Council should be **96**. This is a change from the current council, which has **110** members.

This stage of the consultation last for 10 weeks and closes on 20 January

Boundary Commission Timetable:-

22 October 2024 - 20 January 2025  
3 June 2025 - 11 August 2025  
2 December 2025  
TBC  
2027

carry out an initial public consultation with communities  
carry out a public consultation on our proposals  
publish our recommendations  
ask Parliament to approve our recommendations  
New arrangements apply to local elections

**OTHER OPEN CONSULTATIONS - <https://somersetcouncil.citizenspace.com/>**

Otterhampton Primary – School Streets 2 – closes 3 December

Pharmaceutical Needs Assessment 2024 – closes 1 Jan 2025

