



Somerset Liberal Democrats
Chard South
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Have your say on how new Somerset Council will consult on planning and development

Somerset residents are being invited to have their say on the new Somerset Council's approach to planning matters.

The five current Somerset councils (Mendip District Council, Sedgemoor District Council, Somerset County Council, Somerset West and Taunton Council and South Somerset District Council) are consulting the public on a draft 'Statement of Community Involvement' (SCI) – a single approach to planning which will be formally adopted by the new Somerset Council.

The SCI is designed to set out how Somerset Council, as the Local Planning Authority, will engage and consult with the community and stakeholders on all planning matters. It will cite who the Council will consult with through the various stages of Local Plan preparation and what consultation methods should be used. Notably, it will include how the Council involves people and organisations when assessing and deciding on planning applications for new developments, and any expectations for developers and agents when engaging with those who may be affected. With the formation of the new unitary Somerset Council on 1 April, there is a need to prepare a new, single SCI for Somerset as a whole. This will ensure a consistent approach to how we engage with our communities. We welcome responses from as many members of the public as possible during this consultation period, in which we are actively engaging with a wide range of stakeholders."

Social care like you've never seen it before – bold new recruitment campaign launched in Somerset

Somerset County Council has joined forces with the NHS and Registered Care Providers Association for the new campaign, which aims to empower carers, and show how working in social care in Somerset is a respected, meaningful, and fun career choice.

The campaign emphasises how a career in care in Somerset presents an opportunity to rebel and 'break free from behind a desk', embarking on a career filled with meaningful human interaction and job satisfaction. Each video is specifically tailored to target a different age group that may be interested in a career in care.

The Council has simplified the application process too. Anyone who is interested just has to visit www.proudtocaresomerset.co.uk and leave their details, and the team will get in contact with potential suitable roles.

The recruitment campaign will be promoted on social media, in the local media, and with advertising across Somerset. A recruitment event is set to take place at Somerset County Cricket Club on Tuesday, February 7.

Consultation opens into new single Somerset Council budget. New Council targets support for key services and vulnerable residents

The proposed budget for the new unitary Somerset Council has been published. The proposals will be the first time the services and costs from all four District Councils and the County Council have been brought together. Consultation into the proposed budget runs until 10 February.

Liz Leyshon, Deputy Leader of the Council and Executive Member for Finance and Human Resources, said: "This is an incredibly challenging time for most council budgets in the country but particularly so in Somerset, where we have been bringing together five council budgets into one. However, without the saving and efficiencies a new unitary council will bring, it would have been even more difficult to set a balanced budget for the next financial year."

The Council is proposing to increase Council Tax by just under 5 percent, less than half of the current rate of inflation. This is made up of a basic rise of 2.99 per cent in Council Tax and the 2 per cent social care levy. As a result of these proposals, the council tax proposed for a Band D property will increase by £78.24 each year, or £1.50 per week.

The total budget for new Council will be £491.37 million, a rise of £36 million over the budgets of the five councils the new Somerset Council replaces. The Council agreed a new Council Tax Reduction Scheme last November, and will be bringing forward an Exceptional Hardship Fund to support households in need of further support.

The Council has said it has faced three significant challenges in setting budgets this year: the impact of inflation on the cost of providing services; the rising demand for care services post-pandemic and the need, in a very competitive labour market, to use agency staff to cover statutory services.

Cllr Leyshon said: "Post-Covid, the rise in demand for care services, and the rising cost of meeting that demand, has been striking. The new Somerset Council will, of course, protect the services that touch most lives in Somerset and will continue to prioritise support for our most vulnerable residents. We have rejected options to close some of our household waste recycling centres and all of our libraries will remain open with unchanged hours. That won't be the case elsewhere in the country.

"We have also protected the grants that go to the voluntary sector and will take the opportunity of working more closely with representatives of the sector. But pressure on care services dominates all budget setting in local government this year. We are increasing funding for both Adult Social Care and Children's Services by almost a fifth, but that doesn't really cover the rising costs of those services and we will still need to find savings in these services."

Several of the savings in the new proposed budget relate to the move to a single council, with £2.9million saved from senior manager costs and a £600,000 annual saving from reducing the number of council members.

Cllr Leyshon concluded: "We know that reform of social care services depends on effective forward planning by Government, enabling local councils to also plan further ahead. Until that planning comes forward from the Government in a coherent form, councils, including Somerset Council, will continue to experience huge challenges in setting balanced budgets."

Evening bus services get underway

Somerset County Council is subsidising evening services from Monday to Saturday connecting Taunton with the towns of Minehead, Bridgwater, Wellington and Chard after 8pm and running to at least 10.30pm. Currently most of the services stop between 8-8.30pm.

The evening bus proposals are part of Somerset's Government-funded Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) which aims to increase bus patronage by introducing a number of important initiatives.

From 5 December a £1 fare became effective for any single bus journey in Taunton, and further measures are planned under the BSIP in the coming months.