

8 November 2023

Dear Colleagues,

Asset and Service Devolution

By now you will be aware of the enormous financial challenge facing Somerset Council. The rising cost of social care, together with inflation, plus a failure by government to bring forward the promised Fair Cost of Care policy, have contributed to the emergency. And then there's the decision by central government to dramatically reduce funding for local authorities over recent years, the decision of the previous administration to freeze council tax for six years in a row, and the limit on how much local authorities can increase this by - all of which has led us to an emergency position.

Since the creation of Somerset Council, we have been committed to working with communities who want greater influence over local assets and services. We know that some city, town and parish councils have clear ambitions for devolution of specific functions and assets in their areas. We also recognise that not everyone is in the same position, and that whilst devolution conversations are seen as opportunities for some, they can be concerning for others.

We have been working on a framework that acknowledges these differences, with a view to working with you to develop a prioritised programme of devolution for the coming months and years. The scale of the financial challenge facing Somerset Council means we are rapidly having to review all of our activities and prioritise where our limited resources are deployed. Therefore, in order to protect many of the services our communities value, we intend to speed up the pace of devolution.

We are asking city, town and parish councils to consider which (if any) of the services we've listed below, they think their communities would like them to support financially. We recognise of course that with Somerset Council recently having taken over from the former district and county councils, service provision is not uniform across Somerset, and that a number of our city, town and parish councils already provide some of those services listed below.

We will not make any decisions lightly; however our city, town and parish councils may want to help our communities continue to enjoy the services they currently have. Unlike Somerset Council, which has strict limits on how much it can raise for local services through Council Tax, our local councils have far more freedom to raise their precepts to protect those services their communities value.

Somerset Council's budget will not be finalised until February, and the first draft will not be ready until the start of December, so we cannot tell you definitively which discretionary services Somerset Council will be able to continue to provide next year. As proposals for the budget develop, we will keep you informed. In the meantime, I hope that the list below gives some indication of those areas you may wish to consider supporting.

There are many ways in which we would welcome city, town and parish councils contributing to the provision of services - these range from providing a financial contribution to enable the continuation of a specific service delivered by Somerset Council (or its contractors), working in partnership with or under delegated authority from Somerset Council, parishes taking full control of assets and services entirely, or working together to support communities in other ways if services have to cease and local devolution is not feasible.

The Local Community Networks (LCNs), set up following the creation of Somerset Council, will also have an important role to play. It has been encouraging to see these networks grow, develop their own priorities and begin to implement actions. While services cannot be devolved to LCNs, they are an essential forum to bring councils and partners together to prioritise and debate options. Neighbouring parishes and other stakeholders may wish to work together, to see how valuable services can be protected and delivered in the future. This could involve groups of parishes working in clusters or across boundaries to take on delegated responsibilities from Somerset Council. Each LCN can work with their constituent organisations as delivery partners to help facilitate those discussions.

By transferring the ownership and management of some assets and services to the local level, your local councils can potentially better tailor them to the specific needs and preferences of your communities. You can also access additional funding sources that are not available to the larger authorities and make use of local networks to mobilise volunteers and partners. Service devolution can also enhance the role of city, town and parish councils, as they become more involved in local decision-making and place-shaping.

If this is something that you wish to consider further, please contact my officers in the first instance via devolution@somerset.gov.uk and they will be get back to you to arrange discussions, which could be one-to-one or as groups of councils.

We are committed to keeping city, town and parish councils informed and consulted over the coming weeks and months as the picture of which services Somerset Council will and will not be able to continue, becomes clearer. In addition, we will carry on engaging with you as a sector, through regular briefings and forums. We are also working with our Society of Local Council Clerks (SLCC) and Somerset Association of Local Councils (SALC) colleagues with the aim of ensuring a true partnership approach in how we support our communities.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Bill Revans', with a long horizontal flourish underneath.

Cllr Bill Revans
Leader of Somerset Council

Somerset services - devolution opportunities

Theme	<p style="text-align: center;">Services & Assets</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Risks & Opportunities</p>
Transport	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community transport • Bus services/funding • Bus shelter cleaning and maintenance • Opportunity: Joint working on community and volunteer transport schemes; local contractor or volunteer work on bus shelters
Highways	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Street Cleaning covered in Street Scene but can include highway channels and litter removal from verges. • Winter Service - filling grit bins/dumpy bags • Roadside verges maintenance including grass cutting • Vegetation clearance and cutting on the Rights of Way network • Drain jetting/Gully cleansing – both ordering works from TMC Contractor and local self-delivery • Ditches and grips clearance • Hedge trimming • Non-illuminated sign cleaning and maintenance • Signage for new or changed speed limits • Weed treatment • Minor Highways functions such as footway and footpath repairs, • Planned path safety inspections • Opportunities: Parish Highway Steward Model (based on one per LCN area); P/T/C Council funding of most local highway services in accordance with community preferences eg on grass cutting regularity • Low tech preventative maintenance functions
Waste services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funding for household waste recycling sites • Opportunity: Funding to support existing opening hours at current sites
Schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School crossing patrols • Opportunity: Funding to schools/Somerset Council to support ongoing or new patrols

Public toilets	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public toilets, provision and opening hours • Opportunities: Asset transfers to Parish/Town/City Councils; contributions to cleaning costs / opening hours through Somerset Council contracts
Street Scene	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fly tipping • Street cleaning • Provision and collection of litter bins and dog waste bins • Carnival clean-up • Bedding planting • Management of allotments • Memorial maintenance • Opportunities: Asset transfers to P/T/C Councils; P/T/C Councils to take on more responsibility either through own provision of service or through contribution to Somerset Council service costs
Open Spaces	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Management and maintenance of open spaces assets - including both green spaces as well as “hard” open spaces • Grass cutting and open space maintenance, closed churchyards • Local parks • Opportunities: Asset transfers to P/T/C Councils; P/T/C Councils to take on more responsibility either through own provision of service or through contribution to Somerset Council service costs • Maintenance of play areas • Installation and maintenance of play equipment • Maintenance of sports grounds
Economic Development /Tourism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local tourism • Local town economic development (incl. e.g. job clubs) • Control of markets • Opportunities: P/T/C Councils support for Visitor information; local Chamber of Commerce; management of markets
Leisure / Arts / Culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funding to support Leisure Centres / Swimming pools • Support to theatres and arts centres • Additional support to libraries • Opportunities: Asset transfers to P/T/C Councils; P/T/C Councils support for existing services; asset transfers of cultural facilities; adoption of play areas; S106 funding for new play areas

Community Wellbeing and Resilience	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Community Centres• Provision of facilities and services for children and young people• Supporting Volunteering/Befriending• Community safety / neighbourhood watch• Local climate change initiatives (for example local green transport schemes while ensuring unitary has strategic overview)• Provision of sandbags/gel bags and some local flood response measures• Opportunities: Local provision of some flood response measures; P/T/C Council grants for community services (including young people) and climate change initiatives; LCN work on combining offers across LCN areas where geography allows; P/T/C Council grants for services for vulnerable people
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