

## **Council Plan for Somerset Council**

### **Introduction from the Leader of the Council**

We launch our plan for the new Somerset Council with huge ambition - love for our beautiful county, faith in its amazing people and excitement that as one council we can achieve so much more for our residents, working closely with our partners and communities.

However, we know that this plan has been prepared in challenging times – tougher than anyone currently working in local government can recall. Fourteen years of austerity has reduced the flexibility of councils to respond to residents' needs. The current economic and political trends suggest that central Government may not have the capacity to tackle our crucial long term strategic challenges, such as effective financial support for our care services or reform of our planning system.

But these circumstances make this plan even more important. It would be far too easy to let this national context define our local outcomes and descend into the blame game. This plan sets a foundation for our council and our ambition for our future.

It sets out clear priorities against which we will measure all our policies and actions over the coming years. Woven through all our plans are four threads: a determination to tackle the climate and ecological emergencies; a commitment to developing a fairer Somerset; the compassion to make Somerset a healthier and more caring place to live; and the ambition to create a flourishing and resilient county.

Our beautiful county is at the front line of climate change and the ecological emergency. Our coastline is vulnerable, and the Somerset levels and moors are at imminent risk. We must play our role in the global solutions to our local challenges.

Developing a fairer Somerset will mean reducing inequality. Too many of our families will struggle to put food on the table and heat their homes over the coming years. We need to increase aspiration and opportunity in our schools and ensure good local jobs when young people move into adulthood.

The wellbeing of our residents is key to our ambition of a healthier Somerset. This is why our leisure and cultural services are so important to us. We also need to provide effective care for Somerset residents when they need it, helping them to maintain their independence for as long as possible, and provide effective support to the family carers who play such a part in providing care.

A properly flourishing Somerset requires an enterprising and resilient economy. We understand that the only real long-term growth will be sustainable growth and we plan to become a leader in low carbon technology and energy.

We are councillors because we love Somerset. I can think of no better place to live and work but we want to make it better still, and better for all the people of Somerset.

SUMORSAETE EALLE!

## **The Opportunities of a new Council**

Bringing together the experience, expertise, assets, and networks from the five predecessor councils into the new Somerset Council has created an organisation that is in a stronger position to advocate for Somerset on regional, national and international platforms, as well as meeting the needs of our local communities.

We will work closely with partners to get Somerset's voice heard. We will demonstrate that this is a county that is aspirational, dynamic and will deliver on our promises.

Our single decision-making system creates a more streamlined council and will make it easier and more efficient for us to deliver services. It will be easier for members, officers and public alike to understand the full range of work that is going on across the council, avoiding duplication and gaps.

We will be more joined up in the way we work with partners. Having a single council to work with will make it easier for partners to understand our priorities and issues, they will have fewer points of contact and will hear one voice.

By bringing together our collective assets and developing our plans to make best use of them, we will be better placed to deliver the things that will make a real difference to our residents and communities, from social housing to active travel.

All of this will take time. It won't happen on day one but over the course of this Plan the new Council will focus closely on developing more unified ways of providing services to residents.

## **Our Vision**

Our vision for the new Somerset Council will be our guiding beacon through the next four years.

**Somerset Council will build a fairer, greener, resilient, more flourishing Somerset that cares for the most vulnerable and listens to you.**

This dynamic vision puts all the people of Somerset at the heart of everything we do; we will be a council that will do our best to be there whenever our residents need us. The way in which we deliver our services may change, but we are committed to making all your interactions with the council easier and build trust over the coming years.

## **Priorities**

We have developed four priorities to make our vision clearer and more meaningful. These priorities are our way of explaining what is important for us to focus on while we are transforming our new Council, while we are delivering our services and while we are planning how to improve those services. In the next section we have also set out the cross-cutting themes which are the threads that will run through everything we do.

*priorities diagram*

## **A Greener, More Sustainable Somerset**

**We recognise the need to take action urgently to tackle the climate emergency. We will integrate environment and sustainability into all our services and at the heart of our decision making. A low carbon future will be hugely beneficial for Somerset, providing a more resilient and equitable society, experiencing better health and wellbeing, a thriving green economy and nature restored.**

The Somerset Climate Emergency strategy was developed in partnership and adopted by all councils in 2020. Somerset Council will build on the work carried out by District and County councils and will now address ecological issues alongside the climate emergency. Our target is to decarbonise the activities of the Council and to support Somerset to become a carbon neutral county by 2030.

The new council presents us with a fantastic opportunity to reset and enhance our journey to carbon zero. We will ensure that addressing both climate and ecological emergencies are integrated into all areas of our work, including housing, flooding, land and planning policies, transport, economic development and access. We will support Somerset to become a leader in green technologies and renewable energy by unlocking opportunities for clean economic growth.

Somerset is a largely rural county with invaluable diverse landscapes which include Exmoor National Park, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, woodlands, the Somerset levels and moors and the West Somerset coast. These should be celebrated and accessible to everyone. We are fortunate to have food production as part of our local economy and we will continue to aspire to an environment which promotes healthy and sustainable food and drink. As well as recognising these for the economic benefits they bring, we also appreciate the significant opportunities by creating and protecting ambitious regenerative and nature-friendly farming systems which also produce food and sustainable livelihoods. Agriculture in Somerset is uniquely placed to be part of the solution to tackling climate change by both reducing emissions and acting as a carbon sink, we will support this sector to realise the opportunities. Where we have control, we will manage landscapes to protect habitats and restore biodiversity, and we will use our policies and voice to support and encourage others to do the same.

Working with partners and residents, the Council is one of a number of custodians of the environment. However, it is also our duty to enable provision of homes, economic development, and services for current and future residents. There is frequently tension around what is appropriate development and there is no one-size-fits-all answer to this. As we develop our Local Plan, we will consider introducing local policies and will work with developers to support responsible, sustainable development to deliver the best environmental standards possible. Ultimately, each

proposal will be considered on the evidence provided. Our commitment to restoring biodiversity will be reflected in affordable carbon neutral homes and green jobs and services.

Transport is one of the key drivers of our carbon footprint. Active and sustainable travel options, including walking and cycling and encouraging modes of transport that use renewable energy will help reduce air pollution and green-house gas emissions and give a wider choice of options for local journeys. Alongside this an effective public transport system that meets the needs of more of our residents will be an integral part of our climate change strategy.

Somerset is also home to a range of nationally and regionally significant historic buildings and artefacts. These will be treated sensitively to preserve and celebrate our cultural heritage for present and future generations, with an integrated approach to achieving our climate change goals.

## **A Healthy and Caring Somerset**

**We want all our residents to stay as healthy as possible, for as long as possible. Promoting health and wellbeing is a crucial part of our strategy to help people live full and healthy lives for as long as they are able. Those that need help will look to Somerset Council and its partners to support them.**

We are committed to improving the health and wellbeing of Somerset residents. We know that when people have the right information and support about their health, and what they can do to prevent poor health themselves, many will take the opportunities to build a healthier lifestyle. We will do what we can to make sure we have an environment that supports healthier lifestyles including access to active travel, leisure facilities, open spaces, good housing, meaningful employment, cultural experiences and social opportunities, our residents' mental and physical health will thrive.

Whenever Somerset residents need support, we will make sure that they can access what they need. That might be directly from the council or in partnership with local communities or the private sector. Often the help that is provided by people from the local community is most effective, so in many cases the role of the Council is to influence the type of services that are available in each community so that they best match local needs.

We are committed to work in partnership with our partners in local health services to help improve and maintain the health of people who already have some diagnosed long term conditions.

We recognise and value our unpaid carers and are committed to supporting them to maintain their health and wellbeing so that they can continue to care for those who need them.

Somerset is a county of amazingly caring and committed communities. Through the covid pandemic we saw hundreds of volunteers eager to help people in their local community. Our role is to assist those people who want to help their community and to encourage those who struggle with time or commitments to do what they can.

The development of Local Community Networks is key to making sure that we understand local needs and truly represent communities to give them the ability to influence the work of the council and make sure the right services are in the right places.

## **A Fairer, Ambitious Somerset**

**Somerset is a county of diversity. Somerset Council wants to make this a county of opportunity for all. There are significant differences in the quality of our residents' lives depending on their backgrounds. Those on the lowest incomes are more likely to struggle to pay their energy and food bills, more likely to have housing that is harder to heat, more likely to be victims of crime, and have less access to essential services. Life in these circumstances is harder and more challenging.**

A priority for this Council is to do whatever we can to reduce the inequalities that cause these disparities, so that everyone in Somerset can live their lives as they choose.

To change this, we will have to make a greater effort in the parts of Somerset and with particular groups of the population who are struggling the most. We'll work with communities, and through the Somerset Integrated Care Partnership, to get a detailed understanding of what the issues that cause such disparities are and how we will work together to make a difference.

We need our children to get an excellent education and to aspire to achieve their goals in life. Education outcomes in Somerset are not good enough, especially for children from lower income homes or those with additional needs. All children need access to good schools, colleges, further education, and higher education. We want our young people to stay in, or return to, Somerset because they have the option of a well-paid, rewarding job.

It's vital that we listen to those who are the future of Somerset, our Children and Young People's Plan has been co-produced with children and young people and strategic partners. It sets out a shared vision to keep them safe and ensure they can grow up in a child friendly county that supports them to be happy, healthy and prepared for adulthood.

The current cost of living crisis means that more of Somerset's children will grow up in homes that struggle to feed, clothe, and keep them warm. The differences between the lowest and average income homes are stark. We know that those who don't have a good start are more likely to continue to face difficulties throughout their lives and we are committed to working to help significantly reduce number of children who experience poverty.

The lack of affordable housing contributes to the challenges of keeping younger people within Somerset. We will continue to demonstrate leadership around the whole range of housing issues and use the skills and knowledge from a wide range of partners to be innovative in our approach to housing and supporting people who



are struggling. The provision of decent quality, low-carbon social housing will be integral to us in delivering a fairer county.

The rural nature of our county exacerbates the difficulties of getting access to services and jobs. Where access is possible it can take a lot longer, particularly if travelling on foot, by bike or by bus. Our aim is to find ways which improve access to local jobs and services, and to the beautiful Somerset countryside. This will require us to think differently and work with partners to consider the access implications of our plans.

We know that many people want to access the council using their smartphone or computer but for others this is not an option. We will increasingly provide 24-hour digital access to interact with us, but we will still be here if you need to have a conversation with someone. We will work hard to make sure that all contacts with the council are user friendly, promoting a culture of trust and reliability.

Somerset residents who are LGBTQ+, live with disabilities, or come from ethnic minority backgrounds often feel they are not included in our society. Somerset Council will strive to develop an inclusive culture for all our residents.

## **A Flourishing and Resilient Somerset**

**Now, more than ever, we need to promote Somerset at a regional, national and international level, promoting the wealth of opportunities to bring investment and highly skilled, well-paid jobs for Somerset people. We will need to be strategic and dynamic to ensure the skilled workforce is available to support the innovative industries that call Somerset their home.**

For Somerset to be flourishing and resilient we need to have well balanced communities. Somerset has an older and aging population, we know we need to work hard to attract and keep young people, young families and working age adults in the County.

The need for a thriving education sector will be paramount to making sure that Somerset flourishes economically. Somerset Council will be a strategic leader in improving the education, skills, and vocational training offer at all levels, working closely with partners to raise aspiration and boost local opportunities. We are acutely aware that, without a university, the higher education offer in Somerset holds us back economically. We will work with the sector and industry to bring innovation and investment into Somerset.

A stable and flourishing economy in Somerset will have a unique range of opportunities. We are already home to world leading business at iAero, Hinkley Point, and the Gravity Smart Campus, we will continue to work with these, other business and as part of the Great South West Partnership to unlock opportunities for clean and green growth that will play a prominent role alongside tourism and culture. We already offer so much - from Glastonbury Festival, the largest greenfield music and performing arts festival in the world, Bridgwater Carnival's spectacular procession to the tranquillity of the Exmoor Dark Skies festival. Promoting Somerset as a destination on the national and global stage will support the existing economy, enable regeneration and encourage development of new, creative attractions. This will help us to deal with any future challenges and be resilient to sudden changes.

Businesses need excellent transport and digital connections to access markets, distribute their goods and services and have access to their workforce. We will influence and drive support for improving connectivity to those parts of our county that need it the most.

Remote working and learning are providing more opportunities for people to live in different parts of the country to where they work or attend education, but this doesn't remove the need to strive for better physical connections. We will work to improve the equity of access to opportunities, both physically and digitally, across the county.

## **Principles**

The priorities are underpinned by a set of core principles that guide all our work and daily interactions. We will be:

- A responsible council that acts with integrity
- A listening, empowering council
- A council with evidence based and open decision making
- A collaborative council; and
- An enterprising council.

## **Somerset Today - In Numbers**

*Page of graphical representations of Somerset in numbers and statistics*

## **Current Context**

The new council comes into existence at the most challenging time for local government in a generation. Fourteen years of austerity and growing demand has reduced the spending power and financial flexibility of all councils. The national cost-of-living crisis is impacting the council and partner organisations just as it is residents. The cost of delivering our services has dramatically increased due to rising energy costs, rising interest rates and increasing numbers of people who need our support.

The council is legally required to balance its budget: there is no overdraft facility that we can use. In recent years Somerset's councils have built up financial reserves but we cannot spend these monies all at once and risk leaving the savings account empty when there will undoubtedly be new challenges ahead.

This means that we are going to have to be incredibly careful with taxpayers' money. The council will have less to spend on a growing range of challenges, while at the same time the challenges our residents face grow too. This means we face a period of difficult decisions to ensure we can keep supporting the Somerset people in greatest need.

This will require us to be more creative about the way we support people. We will need to work with partners in a wide range of organisations with similar goals to look broadly at the ways we currently use our expertise and money to see if, in collaboration with our communities, we can do things better. We will challenge the

way that we have historically delivered services and will listen carefully to understand what works, and what doesn't.

## **Cross Cutting Themes**

Bringing together potentially disparate services, such as public health and housing, into a single organisation will let the new council better co-ordinate the services residents receive. Several of our priorities, such as responding to the climate and ecological crises or reducing health inequalities, will require action from a range of services. There are other cross-cutting themes which will be less visible, but equally important to the way we will work.

In July 2022 the new Health and Care Bill brought Integrated Care Systems (ICSs) into law. This formalised the arrangements for NHS organisations, local councils and other partners in a geographical area to work together to deliver better joined up services, to tackle inequalities and to improve the health of the population.

Somerset Council is a partner organisation within this system because we have a key role to play in Public Health, Adults' and Children's Social Care and Housing. We can also influence the broader factors which contribute to an individual's health and well-being, such as parks or transport or planning. The more we work together with other public services to tackle the complex problems that are facing our communities, the better the services our residents receive will be.

No one wants to be ill and most people don't want to have to rely on the NHS, the Council or community organisation for support. But often they are in this position because of something that could have been prevented if they'd had the knowledge and the help to do something differently. We believe that prevention is the key to a healthier, happier life. That is why this theme will run through everything that we do.

The development of Local Community Networks (LCNs) is fundamental to the commitment to give local residents a voice and more influence over decisions that impact them and their communities. We have already invested significant amounts of energy to understand how LCNs might work and will continue their development through the life of this plan because we see them as fundamental to the future of the county. Their reach will continue to expand as we understand more about the possibilities that they present, and we see them as key to shaping communities.

A key aim for this council is to reconcile into one place the needs for society to thrive and the needs for the planet to continue to sustain us, so that we might understand and manage our impacts on all aspects at the same time. This means that we are able to make decisions with holistic understanding of the implications and adjust our approach, where needed, to ensure we have minimised the impact on the environment and maximised the benefits to society. To make this meaningful for the Council the approach needs to be embedded in all the work that we do. This will

take time as the New Council evolves, but we will start to lay the foundation for this work from day one.

## **The Role of the Council Plan**

The Council Plan is part of our Corporate Planning Framework, which is a suite of documents which guide the way Somerset Council functions. Together, these documents are a resource to help everyone - customers, officers, councillors, partner organisations - understand our ambitions for the new council, how we will fulfil those ambitions, as well as how we can be held accountable.

Somerset Council will continually change, whether it be in response to the changing needs of our residents, such as our work on the Cost-of-Living Emergency, or because of developments in Government policy, the Levelling Up agenda for example, or prevailing social, economic and environmental conditions, like the climate and ecological emergency.

The **Council Plan** sets out the clear vision of how we want our services to develop over the next four years, and the priorities that will underpin the actions of the Council over this time. The priorities are high level to support flexibility; as we have seen, like with the COVID-19 pandemic, there may be events and factors beyond our control which will require us to be flexible. Emerging technology may also enable us to be more creative in the way we deliver services, with greater flexibility allowing us to adopt innovative new models of service, but always with the vision and priorities in mind.

**The Business Plan** will provide the detail of how the Council Plan will be delivered and monitored. It will set out the priorities for service change and improvement; what is achievable and how we will ensure that we understand whether we are achieving our planned outcomes. The Business Plan will also set out the Council's performance monitoring approach. Annual service plans will flow from the Business Plan. These are working documents where services set out their planned activity and are used as a reference to guide service development and delivery. They are flexible and agile to enable services to react to changing situations.

The **Operating Model** will provide the aspiration for our methods of working to ensure we deliver good value, high quality services. This will include our approach to commissioning – how we address the needs of residents and develop the services to support the best possible outcome for them. The Operating Model will evolve over time as we transform the Council.

**The Corporate Governance Framework** sets out how the decision-making process works and who is empowered to make which decisions.

## **The Strategy Framework**

A number of strategies for Somerset exist and will continue to guide the work of services until they are replaced. These strategies have been developed in partnership with partner organisations with whom we will continue to work alongside.

The Council is required to have a new Local Plan in place by 2028. This Local Plan is one of a suite of strategic documents we will need to produce that support and complement each other. Using the vision and priorities set out in this plan provides a starting point for developing agreed goals and ambitions in partnership with the community, businesses and the environment at the centre.