

Together we are delivering your
New Somerset Council



Council Plan

Draft

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. And 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 of our policies and actions over the coming years. Woven through all our plans are four threads: a determination to tackle the impact of 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 in 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 and alongside 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 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 Somerset Council will be our guiding beacon through the next four years.

The new Somerset Council will build a fairer, greener, 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 is 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.



A greener, more sustainable Somerset



A healthy and caring Somerset



A fairer Somerset



A flourishing and resilient Somerset



A Greener, More Sustainable Somerset

An environmentally sustainable and more resilient Somerset.

The Somerset Climate Emergency strategy was developed in partnership and adopted by all councils in 2020. The Somerset Council will build on the work carried out by Districts and County councils and will now address ecological issues alongside the climate emergency.

We will ensure that addressing both climate and ecological emergencies are integrated into all areas of our work, including housing and planning policies, transport, economic development and access.

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, as well as recognised for their economic benefits from tourism, but where we can these will be managed to protect habitats and restore biodiversity. The Council will also use its 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 on green spaces and there is no one-size-fits-all answer to this. Each proposal will be considered on the evidence provided.

Transport is one of the key drivers of our carbon footprint. Active travel options, including walking and cycling, for local journeys and 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 also be treated sensitively to preserve 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 wellbeing is a crucial part of our prevention 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.

A preventative strategy underlies our commitment to the wellbeing of Somerset residents. We know that when people have good information about their health care, can access leisure facilities, open spaces, 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 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 fantastic 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 Somerset

Somerset is a county of diversity. Somerset Council wants to make this a county of opportunity for all. There are massive 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 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 which 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.

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.**

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. 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.

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.

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 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 as a result of our environment. Tourism and culture will play a prominent role. We already offer so much - from Glastonbury Festival, the largest outdoor music 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 diverse existing economy 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



A listening, empowering council



A council with evidence based and open decision making



A collaborative council



An enterprising council

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 hitting 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 the 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. We will have less to spend as our challenges grow and at the same time the challenges our residents face daily also grow. 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 something better. We will challenge the ways that we have historically delivered services and listen carefully in order to understand what works for those that use our services and what doesn't.

Cross Cutting Themes

Bringing together potentially disparate services such as public health and housing into a single council 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.

A key aim for this council is to bring together the needs for society to thrive and the needs for the planet to continue to sustain us into one place 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.