

# Parish Update

12 December 2023

*Dear Colleagues*

## **Asset and Service Devolution Update**

Thanks to those of you who responded to the recent letter sent to all parishes from the Leader of Somerset Council, Cllr Bill Revans, (8 November 2023).

The level of engagement has been extremely positive to date. Please be assured that all correspondence is being considered and if we've not written back yet, we will be in touch soon. Thank you for your patience.

## **Addressing the range of responses**

Local councils in Somerset differ in size and character, and we've received a wide range of responses that reflect this. We're addressing these in a number of ways.

**General enquiries:** For the more general requests for information, we've set up dedicated pages on our website, which we will add to, during the coming weeks and months.

You'll find the resource here: [City, Town and Parish Councils \(somerset.gov.uk\)](https://www.somerset.gov.uk/city-town-and-parish-councils) Please bookmark the link, and don't forget to revisit it, as these pages will be frequently updated.

**Specific requests:** We're working with colleagues across the Council to respond to the more specific requests you've sent us, relating to assets and/or services in a particular location. It will take us a little time to answer all those queries.

**Proposals:** Devolution has been under consideration for a while now, and some local councils have already worked up proposals they are keen to progress with us.

You'll understand that in these cases, in the context of the financial emergency, we'll be prioritising these proposals as they're the ones likely to deliver the significant savings we need, and mitigate the impact of service reductions on our communities.

## You asked, we listened

The offer to discuss devolution opportunities isn't time limited. We will continue to welcome all interest and enquiries, and to listen and assist where we can.

For example, take your recent request for an extension to submitting precepting responses. We are delighted to report this has now been agreed. We previously requested information by January 19, 2024. Now we can offer an extension of **5pm on February 2, 2024**.

An email with your 24/25 council tax base and precept demand form was issued to parishes on Friday by our finance colleagues, which confirms all the above. (Please note, February 2 is the final deadline. Local councils responding after this date may not receive funds in April, so please complete the forms when you get to them in your inbox).

## Service costings

Whilst it will take time to collate granular detail of service costs, we are able to provide indicative information about some services in which local councils have expressed the most interest, which may help with your budgeting considerations. We will add to this list, as more costings information becomes available.

**Highways Steward:** Many local councils have been watching the progress of the Highways Steward, piloted in the Exmoor Area. The scheme delivers minor works within the capability of a single fully trained and qualified operative. This has enabled responsive resolution of issues relating to verge maintenance, highway surface water drainage maintenance, weed removal, sign cleaning and vegetation management.

There is potential for local councils across Somerset to buy into this service, which would bring the additional benefit of close links with the Highways Service and would address concerns about taking on health and safety and insurance obligations.

There is flexibility in how the service is commissioned; no minimum number of Stewards - and contracts can start from April 1<sup>st</sup> or at any time during the year. The minimum contract length is one year, and each Steward needs to be fully funded to work in a sensible geographic area.

It is possible for a parish to 'buy' one whole Steward for their individual parish, to pool resources with a local cluster of parishes within an LCN area, to consider a full time or a half time Steward for their parish or cluster, sharing the other half with a neighbouring parish cluster or LCN area.

A single Highways Steward, with a vehicle and all of the tools and equipment, costs £50,000.

We are also considering whether other operational activities could become part of such a model over time. For example, some local councils already have in place a *parish lengthsman scheme*. If this is of interest, we would be happy to signpost you to one or more of those councils.

**Public Toilets:** As you are aware from previous correspondence, Somerset Council's current public toilet provision is a service that is potentially at risk.

Indicative costs to run a block of toilets are estimated between £30K-40K.

**Grass Cutting:** Somerset Council charges £40-£70 per hour for a grass cut. A typical parish recreation ground would take up to two hours.

## Devolution and the financial emergency timetable

- A strategy for addressing the financial emergency, including a new 'vision' for a sustainable Somerset Council, has been agreed.

You'll find the papers here:

[Agenda for Executive on Wednesday, 6th December, 2023, 10.00 am - Modern Council \(somerset.gov.uk\)](#)

Go to Item 11: p222 to p224. Plus, points 81 and 82 on p229 and p230.

- An outline Business Case will come to the January 2024 meeting of the Executive.
- A consultation on next year's budget launched on Monday. Please complete the survey as it will really help Members decide what activities are most important to our communities.

The link is here: [Budget Consultation 2024/2025 - Somerset Council - Citizen Space](#)

***It's important to reiterate that formal decisions about which services may cease or be reduced have not yet been made by Somerset Council.***

- The Executive will consider the 2024/5 budget at its January and February meetings.
- The final decisions on these proposals will be taken by Full Council in February 2024.

## Contact and engagement

We will continue to update you over the coming weeks through our regular fortnightly meetings, and would ask you to continue to engage with us about asset and service devolution within that forum and via the inbox [devolution@somerset.gov.uk](mailto:devolution@somerset.gov.uk)

Thanks again for your positive and collaborative engagement. We're grateful for your continued partnership approach to helping us all to support our communities.

*Alyn Jones*

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Strategy, Workforce and Localities**

*Sara Skirton*

**Service Director  
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ENDS