

Councillor Report for Mendip South – Feb-March 2025

Somerset Council Budget Agreed

Somerset Council Leader Bill Revans has reiterated calls for an expedited reform of local government funding by the Government, as councillors voted on a balanced budget for the 2025-26 fiscal year (March 5th).

Despite current challenges, Somerset's Council Tax remains lower than that of Wiltshire, Dorset, and Cornwall. Following a resident consultation, 52% of participants supported an increase in Council Tax to match the national average to protect essential services.

Currently, nearly 70% of Council Tax revenue is allocated to Social Care and Children's Services, sectors that are experiencing increasing demand and rising costs.

Established in April 2023, the new Unitary Authority for Somerset has balanced its budget every year since its formation, while declaring a financial emergency and calling for Local Government finance reform. The Government has authorised Somerset Council to increase Council Tax by 2.5% above the usual 5% cap, acknowledging the Council's unique situation.

Somerset's Council Tax levels are below national average, a situation exacerbated by the previous ruling group's six-year freeze on Council Tax. Furthermore, Somerset is the largest unitary authority in the country, which impacts service delivery costs.

Weekly				
Additional Amount (Approx)				
Band/Charge	Current	4.99%	7.49%	
A	22.16	1.11	1.69	
B	25.85	1.29	1.94	
C	29.54	1.47	2.21	
D	33.23	1.66	2.49	
E	40.62	2.03	3.04	
F	48.01	2.40	3.60	
G	55.39	2.76	4.15	
H	66.47	3.32	4.98	

This graphic (to the left) from the budget documents outlines potential weekly increases in Council Tax if a 7.5% increase. Acknowledging the financial strain many residents face due to rising inflation and utility costs, the Liberal Democrats-run Somerset Council chose, against officer advice, to maintain support for the Council Tax assistance scheme.

If you need help, please see below:

- Apply for a reduction in your Council Tax bill here: [Claim Council Tax Reduction](#)
- Apply to the Council's Hardship Fund here: [Claim a Discretionary Award](#)

Financial documents, including Revenue and Capital Budgets and the Medium Term Financial Strategy from 2025-26 to 2029-30, can be found online at: [Somerset Council Budgets](#)

More information about Council Tax and what it covers can be found here: [Council Tax Explained](#).

Councillor Report for Mendip South – Feb-March 2025

Proposed Changes to Parking Review

Somerset Council's has taken measures to protect free overnight parking in the county's car parks as part of an upcoming parking review. As part of the Budget proposal members voted to agree to provide free parking for up to 30 minutes in newly established on-street limited waiting bays to promote space turnover and support local businesses.

The revised proposals, subject to public consultation, include:

- Standardising charges for Sunday parking across all car parks, currently applicable only in select locations.
- Introducing parking fees at presently free car parks.

With varied rates and charging principles across 200 council-run car parks, the last comprehensive review occurred when Somerset Council was established in 2023. The aim is to foster consistency and ensure the parking service remains self-funded, covering staffing costs, penalty notice management, and maintaining parking facilities.

Post-16 Local Transport Policy Changes

Somerset Council has initiated an online consultation regarding proposed changes to its Post-16 Local Transport Policy Statement. This policy outlines transport arrangements for eligible learners aged 16 to 18 and those over 19 attending further education.

Currently, around 9,000 students receive travel assistance daily, including discretionary support for Post-16 learners with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). Proposed changes focus on SEND learners and include:

- Prioritising Independent Travel Training (ITT) to equip students with skills to use public transportation independently.
- Offering a Personal Travel Payment (PTP) where ITT is unsuitable, considering individual circumstances to assist families with travel costs.
- Allocating available seats on contracted vehicles for school-age students to young adults as an alternative to PTP.

Agreed changes will take effect for students starting further education in September 2025, with no alterations for current Post-16 students unless circumstances change. The online survey can be found on the Council's Post-16 Transport Policy consultation page, open to the public until Sunday, March 30, 2025.

Review of Councillors, Divisions, and Division Names

The Local Government Boundary Commission (LGBCE) is currently conducting an Electoral Review for the Somerset Council area. They have announced a decision to reduce the size of the Council from 110 to 96 Councillors. This review aims to achieve electoral equality by

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ensuring that each Councillor represents approximately 4,867 electors, based on the 2030 electorate forecast data.

Additionally, a public consultation has been launched to examine various aspects of the review, including the number of divisions, division boundaries, names of the divisions, and the number of members per division.

Timetable for the Review:

- **October 22, 2024 - March 4, 2025:** Initial public consultation with communities.
- **June 3, 2025 - August 11, 2025:** Public consultation on the proposed changes.
- **December 2, 2025:** Publication of recommendations.
- **TBC:** Submission of recommendations to Parliament for approval.
- **2027:** Implementation of new arrangements for local elections.

Distress with Dentistry in Somerset (from [clairesully.com](https://www.claresully.com) blog)

The NHS Somerset, part of the Somerset Integrated Care Board (ICB), has reported a crisis in dental services within the region. At a meeting of Somerset Council's Adults and Health Committee on February 27, 2025, NHS Somerset warned that "the gap between patient needs and the availability of [dental] services in Somerset is likely to persist."

Despite the ICB's mission to enhance health and wellbeing while reducing health inequalities, they face significant challenges in providing dental care. A recent survey indicated that 97% of patients without a connection to an NHS dental practice cannot access services, particularly affecting vulnerable groups, including rural residents, older adults, and low-income individuals and families.

The crisis is particularly severe for pregnant women who struggle to access NHS dentistry, despite government guidelines guaranteeing them free dental care due to potential pregnancy-related complications. Furthermore, children from disadvantaged backgrounds are at increased risk, as dental decay remains a leading cause of hospital admissions among UK children.

The report attributes the issues in Somerset's dental care to broader national challenges. Funding difficulties persist, compounded by the criticized dental contract model, which compensates dentists based on Units of Dental Activity (UDAs) rather than the complexity of cases. This model often leads dentists to reduce their NHS services or transition to private practice, which many Somerset residents cannot afford.

Workforce shortages, exacerbated by Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic, have further limited capacity, hindering the recruitment and retention of dental professionals. Discontent among NHS dentists over workloads, administrative demands, and payment has resulted in early retirements and fewer new dentists entering the NHS. Recruitment efforts for new dentists have not yielded significant results in Somerset.

Councillor Report for Mendip South – Feb-March 2025

NHS Somerset has urged the Council to advocate for essential reforms to the dental contract, with plans to address these issues with government officials and the wider Council.

Call to Action: Do you have a distressing dental story? Your experiences can be shared with NHS Somerset and the ICB. Please get in touch: claire.sully@somerset.gov.uk

Update: I have written to Somerset Council Leader Bill Revans, in my role as acting Chair of Adults and Health Scrutiny Committee to request that the leader of the Council, in collaboration with all political parties at the Council, advocate for meaningful reform of the dental contract by writing to the Government, using the findings in the latest NHS Somerset report.

Links for Reference:

- [NHS Somerset Integrated Care Board Update to Council Scrutiny Committee](#)
- [Experiences of NHS Healthcare Services in England, December 2024](#)

Update on Somerset Council staff “transformation” (cuts) from clairesully.com blog

On February 13, 2025, I attended a Full Council meeting as the Unitary Councillor representing the Mendip South division. This meeting was crucial in the upcoming budget-setting process (March 5th). To address the financial situation, we voted to transform the Council’s workforce, necessitating an approximate 11% reduction in staffing levels to save around £34 million.

Local government is encountering significant challenges, impacting essential services such as waste collection, road maintenance, education, and social care—amounting to around 300 services. The transformation at Somerset Council will necessitate prioritising statutory services, leading to cuts in non-essential services, with repercussions that will be felt across our communities.

Voting for staff transformation today was disheartening. Behind these figures are real people who will be affected. If we do not set a balanced budget next month, the government may intervene, sending in Commissioners to take over the Council. This could lead to substantial increases in Council Tax—potentially by over 20%—and severe cuts to services.

Recent analysis from the Local Government Association (LGA) reveals that service spending in 2022/23 was 42.1% lower than it would have been if it had kept pace with cost and demand pressures since 2010/11. This significant shortfall indicates that councils have implemented a staggering £24.5 billion in service cuts and efficiencies over this period.

This situation leaves us all wondering why the government hasn’t addressed this issue more urgently.

Councillor Report for Mendip South – Feb-March 2025

Report it first: useful Links to share with your communities

Visit Report a problem on the road:

<https://www.somerset.gov.uk/roads-travel-and-parking/report-a-problem-on-the-road/>

For traffic updates and roadworks follow @travelsomerset on X and Facebook.

Sign-up for the latest climate news:

<https://www.somerset.gov.uk/environment-and-food-safety/climate-and-ecological-emergency/newsletter-sign-up/>.

Live travel information

<https://www.travelsomerset.co.uk/>

Potholes and road damage

Somerset Council repair potholes and other road defects, and maintain our roads, for the safe access of all road users:

<https://www.somerset.gov.uk/roads-travel-and-parking/potholes-and-road-damage/>

Report a problem with a street light

We maintain and repair street lights to national standards to provide safe access to all road users:

<https://www.somerset.gov.uk/roads-travel-and-parking/report-a-problem-with-a-street-light/>

Roads, travel and parking, road signs, markings and lighting

Includes information about non-illuminated bollards, pedestrian crossings, requesting a village nameplate and how to apply for a new road sign Speed

limits: <https://www.somerset.gov.uk/roads-travel-and-parking/road-signs-bollards-and-road-markings/>

Speed limits

Request information about new or existing traffic calming measures:

<https://www.somerset.gov.uk/roads-travel-and-parking/speed-limits/>

Traffic lights

We maintain over 200 traffic light locations throughout the county

<https://www.somerset.gov.uk/roads-travel-and-parking/traffic-lights/>

Street and roadworks

We maintain the roads and pavements that are managed at public expense in Somerset

<https://www.somerset.gov.uk/roads-travel-and-parking/street-and-roadworks/>