

**Report by Adam Boyden, Somerset County Councillor for Frome North to Rode Parish Council, 6<sup>th</sup> September 2022**

**Local Community Network consultation**

The Somerset County Council consultation on Local Community Networks (LCNs) has just been launched. The new unitary Somerset Council will cover a large geographical area and so needs local committees of the council where voices can be heard, partners brought together, and decisions taken with the benefit of local knowledge and experience. They will enable the Council, partners and communities to work together to address local issues and priorities, and improve outcomes for residents. As Committees of the unitary Council, LCNs will be supported by dedicated officers and managers, with formal decision-making powers and influence. LCNs must also be affordable and have the potential to develop their role alongside the new Somerset Council in the years to come.

Throughout the summer officers of County and District Councils have been working on options and proposals. This consultation now asks for your involvement in guiding the decisions on the following key aspects:

- Name – whether 'Local Community Network' is the right name.
- Function – what roles and responsibilities the LCNs can have in the first and subsequent years of Somerset Council.
- Form – development of options for the LCN boundaries, using existing democratic boundaries, Local Plans and community infrastructure. Three options are included in the consultation – Proposals A, B and C would have 18, 17 or 10 LCNs across Somerset.

In all three geographic options, Rode sits within the Frome LCN:

- In Proposals A (18 LCNs) and B (17) the Frome LCN includes Frome, Rode, Beckington, Norton St Philip, Lullington, Tellisford, and Berkley parishes (within Frome North) as well as Selwood, Hemington, Buckland Dinham, Great Elm, Kilmersdon, Mells, Whatley, Nunney, Wanstrow, Witham Friary, and Trudoxhill parishes.
- In Proposal C (10 LCNs), the Frome LCN is much larger and also includes Downhead, Cranmore, Doultling, Coleford, Holcombe, Leigh-on-Mendip, Stoke St Michael, Ashwick, Chilcompton, Ston Easton, Emborough, Stratton on the Fosse, Binegar, St Cuthbert Out, Chewton Mendip, Litton, and Priddy parishes.

The consultation is now live and will run for 6 weeks until 17<sup>th</sup> October. The views of Parish Councils and partner organisations and individuals are being sought, and the responses will form part of the recommendations for the Somerset County Council Executive (on 16<sup>th</sup> November). Parish councils are being sent a briefing directly by SCC. In-person consultation events are being held, including at Mendip District Council in Shepton Mallet (currently on Thursday 22<sup>nd</sup> September at 10am-4pm, but may change).

The press release is <https://newsomersetcouncil.org.uk/public-invited-to-help-shape-local-democracy-in-somerset-as-consultation-launched/>. To access the consultation please visit <https://somerset.inconsult.uk/LCNs/consultationHome>. For information and updates on the LCNs you can email [LCN@somerset.gov.uk](mailto:LCN@somerset.gov.uk) or call 0300 123 2224.

## Highways update

Recently Cllr Dawn Denton and I had a good online meeting with Sara Davis, the local area Somerset County Council Highways manager, to go through issues arising in all parts of the division. In Rode, the following issues were discussed:

- 20mph speed limit throughout the village, new village gates and associated speed changes on the A361 through the village – were previously agreed:
  - o The location for the gates is agreed, Police have approved, the gates have been designed. It requires a public advertisement of the Traffic Regulation Order for the 20mph zone (with 21 consultation period). SCC are awaiting a date to be confirmed, and signs will then be ordered. This will be implemented his financial year 2022/23, is 'in hand'.
- Multiple 8 accidents at the Bradford Road/Rode Hill junction - subject to a SIS last year which has not improved the situation, as recent accidents show. We have been discussing potential improvements with SCC's Kerry Jones, including the potential for signs with a yellow background and surfacing (rumble strips?) to finish the SIS:
  - o Latest update from KJ: The additional topographic survey that was required to complete the design for additional measures being considered has been undertaken. That is being built into the base plan of the mapping before the additional measures are overlaid and checked. We should have a plan to share in the next few weeks. We were looking at a vehicle activated sign (VAS) on the Bradford Road approach to the crossroads from the north which would flash up to the faster approaching vehicles highlighting the need to slow for the crossroads ahead and in turn reducing the number of overshoots, as well as some additional signing and lining measures. There was some consideration being given to a VAS on Rode Hill too, but this is not yet confirmed in the design yet.
  - o The STOP signs on Bradford Hill arms have been replaced recently.
- Double yellow lines on High Street / Rode Hill – consultation ended in August:
  - o There were no objections from the consultation. An order will be made in the Spring 2023 so it is done in good weather?

## Buses update

With the end of the Local Transport Fund funding from Central Government due in early October 2022, bus operators have reviewed their networks in the light of current lower levels of patronage on their bus services in Somerset, which continue to be around 65% to 70% of pre-Covid levels. The D2 bus service between Frome and Bath, which also serves Oldford, Beckington, Rode and Norton St Philip, is facing cuts to services from 9<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> October.

Cllr Sarah Dyke has launched a petition for bus users to sign to help increase the pressure to save the D2 services – see <https://www.facebook.com/Favbug/>

On 19th August the Government announced a further £130 million funding for bus services, to protect bus services and routes for a further 6 months up to March 2023. Following this, SCC's Transport Somerset Service Manager tells me that First have decided to re-instate a

reduced two hourly Sunday service on the D2. However, they do not have plans to re-instate the Monday to Friday evening service, which a FAVBUG survey found is much more important than the Sunday (or Bank Holiday?) service.

We know from recent surveys and previous campaigns to save the evening services in 2016 that many people use the evening services to get home after work, education (school/college/University), health care or leisure trips, and that there is good case for retaining the evening and Sunday services. In 2016/17 when the previous First 267 evening bus service was under threat from cuts at B&NES Council, the FAVBUG group led a cross-party campaign to save it, which I and other councillors helped. We secured temporary financial contributions from Somerset County Council, B&NES Council, Frome Town Council, Rode, Norton St Philip and Beckington Parish Councils. These temporary subsidies helped retain the service until the FAVBUG campaign to increase bus passenger numbers (including printing and distributing bus timetables for village residents, and prominent posters at bus stops) succeeded in increasing passenger numbers so much that First upgraded the 267 to the D2 with new buses. A similar effort may be required again.

At the same time, Somerset County Council and Somerset Bus Partnership are encouraging people to 'BUS IT', in a campaign to highlight the benefits of getting the bus, particularly to households under financial pressure from fuel and vehicle maintenance costs, as well as environmental benefits of reducing traffic, congestion and reducing carbon emissions. Please see <https://www.travelsomerset.co.uk/bus/bus-it-you-know-it-makes-sense/>

### **Somerset Cost-of-Living Crisis Appeal**

Somerset Community Foundation (SCF) has launched their Somerset Cost-of-Living Crisis Appeal and is now inviting local people, businesses and organisations who can and wish to help, to donate to the Appeal to help SCF provide funding to vital local charities supporting local people in poverty through the cost-of-living crisis. Please see [www.somersetcf.org.uk/costofliving](http://www.somersetcf.org.uk/costofliving) or call 01749 344949.

Donations will fund crucial local work such as debt advice organisations, food banks, mental health support, help for people with disabilities or older people, and homelessness organisations. Somerset County Council has contributed an initial £50,000 donation to support the launch of the appeal. When the fund is open, any community group or charitable organisation wishing to apply for a grant should visit the SCF website where they can find guidance on how to make an application: [www.somersetcf.org.uk/apply](http://www.somersetcf.org.uk/apply).

### **Help shape the future of council services in Somerset**

People in Somerset are being encouraged to join Somerset County Council's new Customer Panel to help shape the future of the new unitary council's services, to ensure residents are at the heart of those services. All people need is a willingness to take part in three research topics each year and to provide honest and constructive feedback. Please see <https://playbook.somerset.gov.uk/our-customer-panel/> for details.

## **Consultation on council tax support scheme ends soon**

The consultation on council tax support for the new unitary Somerset Council has proposed that the lowest income households across Somerset get 100% council tax relief. Somerset's four district councils currently offer varying levels of council tax support (Mendip's is up to 80%). The proposed changes would harmonise support for working-age people on low incomes across the county from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2023. The consultation runs until 19 September – see <https://www.smartsurvey.co.uk/s/SomersetCTRLIVE/> Paper versions of the consultation are available in libraries.

## **Finance Update**

Somerset County Council, like many councils, is experiencing significant financial challenges in the current year. Inflationary factors, as we are all experiencing in our home lives, affect a large Council on a large scale. Energy costs, travel costs, increases in construction materials have all added to our costs and in turn that has affected the pay award for this year. SCC is part of a national negotiation and the latest employers' offer, equivalent to 5.5% increase, has not been accepted.

Other factors are having an adverse effect on Adults and Children's services, with increases in external placements post-Covid and the same inflationary factors impacting on the companies and organisations that provide residential placements. They are also seeing greater challenges in providing the right level of staffing, with a very competitive labour market throughout the country.

The Council's Senior Leadership Team is already working on plans to reduce the projected overspend, and some areas of the Council are now projecting underspends. Of course, this financial year's projections have an impact on the first-year budget of the new Somerset Council. Savings will be made when the five councils come together as one Unitary Council but those savings won't be in place on day one, so it is essential that different ways of working and other plans are put in place early in the autumn. The Executive will continue to receive monthly budget monitoring reports as well as the ongoing reporting on Local Government Reorganisation.

## **Climate Summit to help Somerset businesses increase sustainability**

Somerset businesses are being urged to play their part in combating the climate emergency – with a conference offering insight into practical steps they can take to become more sustainable. The Somerset Business Climate Summit 2022 will take place at Queens College in Taunton on Wednesday 21st September between 10am and 1pm. The Summit will highlight best practice and raise awareness of the opportunities and challenges for businesses as we shift toward a low carbon economy. Please see:

<https://www.somerset.gov.uk/climate-emergency/climate-emergency-businesses/climate-summit/>

### **More accolades for Recycle More**

Somerset Waste Partnership's award-winning Recycle More service has been shortlisted for another major honour. After winning the LGC Environmental Services award in July, it's now in the running for the Best Communications Campaign of the Year title at the Local Authority Recycling Advisory Committee (LARAC) awards in October. Recycle More has been successfully delivered amid all the pressures of the pandemic and the national driver shortage that followed, and is exceeding its financial and environmental benefits, meaning less rubbish in Somerset's bins and more recycling in the county's boxes and new Bright Blue Bags.

### **Successful joint funding bid to tackle violence against women and girls**

Somerset County Council and North Somerset Council have jointly secured an additional £317,694 from the Home Office Safer Streets Fund to continue to make public spaces and streets safer for women and girls. This follows the success of the neighbouring councils' 2021 campaign 'It can stop if we change together'. This raised awareness, tackled sexual harassment and Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) to make public places and streets safer. Please see <https://somersetnewsroom.com/2022/07/25/successful-joint-funding-bid-to-tackle-violence-against-women-and-girls/>

### **Environment Agency: Drought update in the Wessex area**

The Wessex Area, including Somerset, formally moved into drought status on Tuesday 30 August. Although the past few days have seen some rainfall and slightly cooler temperatures, environmental impacts due to lack of rainfall have become more severe and this is the principal factor influencing the EA's decision. The main impact the EA are experiencing is an increase in incidents relating to low water levels in rivers, which result in low levels of dissolved oxygen, causing fish and other wildlife in the water to struggle to survive. The EA is managing incidents across the Wessex region but cannot rescue all the fish in distress. Drought status also means that the EA takes a stronger stance on abstraction of water and are carrying out additional monitoring of abstraction licences to ensure conditions are not being breached. Water supplies remain secure at this time, so temporary use bans, such as those for hosepipes, are not imminent, but the need for any such measures will be evaluated by the water companies on an ongoing basis.

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