

5 January 2024

Dear Clerks,

I am writing to give you the heads-up about the publication of some important papers for the 15 January meeting of the Executive Committee.

The Council is mindful of our promise to parishes be open and transparent, and provide you with information at the earliest opportunity.

The papers are due to be published after 5pm today. You will be able to find the papers [here](#) once they've gone live tonight,

Budget Update papers

Central to the papers published later this evening, are Budget Update papers which set out the Council's plan for setting a balanced budget for 2024/25 and bridge a £100m gap (the cause of which we have discussed many times but fundamentally driven by increasing costs, particularly in social care).

The plan to bridge the gap involves use of reserves, raising Council Tax by requesting an additional 5% (to 9.99%), and a capitalisation direction which would allow the council to borrow money or sell assets to fund day-to-day running costs.

Our discussions with Government continue and we hope there could be some movement, but we have to work with what we know now.

Savings options

Inevitably, a key part of the plan is increasing income by raising fees and charges, and importantly reducing or stopping spend in discretionary services across the Council.

Many of these options are extremely difficult, however officers were asked to consider *everything* when producing savings options, and these will be part of the Budget Update papers.

I know you have been asking for more detail around the savings options for some weeks now, so that you can have meaningful conversations with your parishes and set precepts. The publication of papers tonight may provide some guidance.

Please remember, these are options only. No decisions have been made and will not be, until budget-setting at Full Council on 20 February.

Where relevant, the Council will continue discussions with our parishes and partners and hope that in many cases others will be able to pick up some of these services.

If a saving is ultimately agreed, and requires consultation, that consultation will happen in due course.

The savings will generate media coverage this evening and in the coming days. The Council would always want you to get this sort of information directly rather than through the media, so please take a look at the papers later today.

Clearly, just about every saving has an impact on our staff in one way or another and I'd ask that we are all conscious of that in the coming days if you are in contact with our officers. And if savings options have a significant impact on identifiable staff roles, appropriate consultation will be undertaken with those people impacted.

To give you some idea of the territory covered by the savings, below is a summary of some. It is far from comprehensive, but gives an indication of the difficult decisions that lie ahead.

Efficiency savings:

- Reviewing our contracts and use of consultants.
- Reducing the number of council-operated buildings
- Further transformation of IT.
- Removal of all non-essential mobile phones.
- Making best use of grants and external funding.
- Reducing staff benefits including long service awards.

Harmonisation of service standards:

- Reviewing grants paid to Parish Councils to maintain footpaths, playing fields and burial grounds.
- Reviewing legacy grants, established by previous councils for community groups, and charging for emptying bins.

Adult Services:

- Decommissioning properties that are no longer suitable.
- Maximising fees and charges.
- Reducing spend on mental health and substance misuse support.
- Cease funding for employment support for carers and people with mental health needs.

Children's Services:

- Increasing in house foster carers so children can live in a family locally and reduce placement costs.
- Increasing use of Council owned residential homes.
- Reducing the cost of accommodation and support for vulnerable children over 16, through better commissioning.

Highways and public transport:

- Reducing in planned and reactive highway maintenance.
- Reviewing of subsidies for contracted bus services.
- Increasing parking charges in line with inflation.

Waste:

- Closing of five recycling centres.
- Introducing a recycling site permit to stop non-Somerset residents using sites.

Community Services:

- Ceasing council funding for Council owned toilets.
- Ceasing funding for the CCTV service.
- Reducing support to theatres in Somerset.
- Closing tourism visitor centres.
- Increasing fees for harbours, beach parking and cemeteries
- Closing of Council run planting nurseries.

Elected Councillors and Democratic Function:

- Reducing the number of Councillor meetings.
- Reducing the number of Executive Lead Councillors.

Governance and consultation

Once again, please let me remind you that **no decisions have been taken.**

There are lots of conversations to be had before the 20 February budget-setting, as well an important governance timetable to follow, which will include recommendations from our Scrutiny and Audit Committees.

As a reminder, the process regarding budget setting is as follows:

- 15 January. Meeting of Executive Committee will discuss Budget Update report, including savings proposed approach to bridging the funding gap.
- 22 January. Budget consultation closes.
- 25 January. Audit Committee to discuss technical budget papers and make recommendations to the Executive Committee.
- 1 February. Meeting of the Corporate and Resources Scrutiny Committee. Due to discuss Budget Update report, including savings proposals.
- 7 February. Meeting of Executive Committee to consider feedback from Scrutiny Committee and results of budget consultation before recommending budget for decision at Full Council.
- 20 February. Full Council meets to agree final budget for 2024/25.

Last but not least, there is our public [budget consultation](#) to consider. Results from this will inform elected members at Somerset Council when they eventually have to make their decisions.

The budget consultation closes on **22 January** so please take part if you haven't already, and do share the link with your networks, contacts, and communities.

As I said, the conversations will continue with you, our parishes. You will know we have a dedicated asset and service devolution inbox for any enquiries you may have regarding the proposed savings – and any opportunities you may see for your communities.

The email is: devolution@somerset.gov.uk

And the fortnightly Clerks Working Group meetings kick-off again on Teams on Wednesday 10 January 2024 at the regular time of 10.30am where you can question our senior staff directly.

Best wishes

Sent on behalf of

Cllr Bill Revans

Leader, Somerset Council