

SOMERSET COUNCIL

May 2024

Council's innovative new partner to kick off summer surface treatment programme

Somerset Council and new partner Kiely Bros are launching a major programme of road repairs across the County's network this month. Road surface treatment specialists Kiely Bros were awarded a four-year contract from 1 April to carry out a wide range of services, including surface dressing. This year Kiely Bros will be introducing a pioneering new piece of machinery known as the Multipatcher to Somerset's roads, which is a vehicle that can carry out small scale surface dressing works, but also quickly and efficiently repair a range of other defects with just a driver and small team managing traffic.

Following extensive surveys the team did 17,000 m² of pre-patching across the network throughout April. These advance works will tackle visible defects such as potholes, cracks or subsidence. It is essential to fill these defects and cracks to avoid water getting in, otherwise when it freezes and expands further potholes and cracks are formed. Once this preparation work is done, the surface treatments programme, which includes surface dressing, starts in July.

Surface dressing is a nationally recognised maintenance technique for sealing a road, improving skid resistance, and preventing water getting under the surface. This is crucial to help stop potholes forming. It works by coating an existing road surface with bitumen, covering it with stone chippings and then rolling it. It can only be carried out in dry weather, so the programme is flexible, and dates can change at short notice.

Mike Kiely, Managing Director of Kiely Bros Ltd said: "The preparation is time consuming, but this essential programme ensures that once our crews return later in the Summer to start the surface dressing work, we are able to deliver efficient and effective surface treatments, with minimal disruption to the residents and road users of Somerset." As well as surface dressing the team from Kiely will be carrying out footway crack sealing, preparatory drainage, patching and cleaning, as well as post surfacing road markings, studs and high friction surfacing.

If you do spot a problem on the road, you can alert us quickly and easily here: [Report a problem on the road \(somerset.gov.uk\)](https://www.somerset.gov.uk/report-a-problem-on-the-road)

You can see dates of planned works here: www.somerset.gov.uk/roads-travel-and-parking/roadworks-and-travel/, and follow Travel Somerset on X and Facebook for live travel updates and travel news.

Voluntary redundancy Scheme Update

Councillors are recommended to approve 49 redundancies next week as the first part of a programme to save Somerset Council more than £40m a year. Somerset Council is one of many local authorities nationally facing a financial emergency due to the rising costs of providing essential services like social care. In setting a budget for 2024/25, members endorsed a new vision for a leaner, more productive council and agreed to save around £40m from the pay bill by reducing the number of staff and managers, including senior directors, by around 25%. The first step is a voluntary redundancy scheme, which has now concluded with 201 applications accepted.

These redundancies will save the council more than £8m a year. The total cost of all the redundancies will be a one-off sum of £12.842m and will reduce the annual pay bill by £8.204m, meaning a pay back period of less than two years. As the cost will be met from capital funds, as approved by Government, the pay bill reduction will start as soon as the post is removed.

At Full Council on 22 May, Councillors will be recommended to approve redundancy for 49 posts where costs to the council will exceed £100,000 (including pension strain payments). In all cases, staff will receive only the amounts they are contractually entitled to receive. Cllr Bill Revans, Leader of Somerset Council, said: "We had to take the tough choices to ensure our Council is financially viable. The financial cost is in line with the legal terms and conditions of the post holders, no more, no less. This is the first step and we know there will be further changes and reductions in staff numbers coming through over the next 12 months as we look to find over £40m of savings from our pay bill."

Local services secured as Somerset councils agree historic devolution deal

Somerset Council has transferred assets and services to Bridgwater Town Council in a joint deal that will ensure much-valued facilities continue for residents. The landmark move sees services from street-cleaning and road-sweeping to the management of parks and open spaces, transfer from Somerset Council into town hall hands. Also transferring as part of the historic deal with Bridgwater Town Council are responsibilities for fly-tipping, footpath repairs, Market Rights, bedding plant provision and carnival clean-ups.

Somerset Council declared a financial emergency in November 2023. It was following that announcement, the Leader of Somerset Council, Cllr Bill Revans, wrote to all 279 Somerset parishes, highlighting a list of 'at risk' functions that could potentially be devolved to those city, towns, and parishes willing to take them on. As a result of the correspondence, the local authority received dozens of expressions of interest, and conversations are positive and ongoing with many city, town, and parish councils across the county. This includes at Bridgwater, which is the first of many devolution deals anticipated.

Cllr Theo Butt Philip, Lead Member for Transformation and Human Resources at Somerset Council, said: "Transferring assets and services to the most local level has the potential to deliver huge benefits. Devolution doesn't just protect some of the services our residents value the most, it also means that these services will be delivered by an organisation which is much closer to the community which uses them. Our city, town and parish councils are better placed to understand and respond to the needs of their local communities. We also know that devolution will strengthen the role of our parish councils, allowing them to play a greater role in leading, shaping deciding the future of their local areas."

David Mears, CEO and Town Clerk of Bridgwater Town Council, in expressing his confidence in the devolution process, said: "As we transition these vital services from Somerset Council to Bridgwater Town Council, we are committed to maintaining and improving high standards. Our focus remains on the well-being of our community, ensuring parks and open spaces thrive under local management."

Cllr Bill Revans concluded: "The Local Government finance model is broken. With no help from government forthcoming, despite all the lobbying and stark warnings, we quickly recognised we needed to seek local solutions, here in Somerset. Working with our city, town and parish councils, and other partners in the public, private and voluntary sectors, we have been finding innovative ways to protect the services our residents value during these financially challenging times. The successful partnership work with Bridgwater Town Council serves to demonstrate this."

Local parishes wishing to explore devolution deals with Somerset Council should email: devolution@somerset.gov.uk.

Mendip South By-election

A by election was held on 2 May for a vacant seat in the two-seat Mendip South division on Somerset Council.

The result is as follows:

- Rob Reed, Liberal Democrat 1,313 (**Elected**)
- Ken Maddock, Conservative Party 1,122
- Michael Smyth, Green Party 200
- David Oakensen, Labour Party 139

The turnout was 36.07%; 14 ballot papers were rejected

Somerset Council will “Leave it longer” to help nature flourish

This summer, Somerset Council will ‘leave it longer’ when it comes to grass cutting in a bid to help boost the county’s biodiversity. From this month (May 2024), where safe to do so, our mowing routines across council managed highway verges, open spaces, country parks and council property grounds will be reduced. These areas will be carefully managed, and safety and visibility around verges and public spaces such as play areas will remain a priority and will be cut more regularly.

Cutting practices along highways have been adjusted to promote grassland species during the growing season, while making sure that safety remains paramount. On wider verges, only a 1-meter swathe is mowed, leaving the rest untouched. We maintain a list of biodiverse verge sites where cutting schedules are modified to protect species like orchids, which are monitored to ensure they thrive and expand.

The aim is to create vibrant grasslands that buzz with life, where wildflowers bloom, and pollinators thrive. These resilient habitats can include wonderful rare plants including orchids, diverse pollinators, and small mammals. Last year’s trials increased the wildflowers by around 30 species at our Brympton Way and County Hall sites. Too frequent cutting regimes had previously stifled their growth.

Lead member for Environment and Climate Change Councillor Dixie Darch said :“Providing larger, higher quality and better-connected grasslands across the county is pivotal to ensuring habitats are of high quality and support a diverse abundance of species. Defra has appointed Somerset Council as the lead for the Local Nature Recovery Strategy for Somerset, and grassland networks that deliver well-connected pollinator-friendly spaces will form part of this. This also includes green spaces and parks that transition to the capable hands of our parish, town, and city councils, and as they take the reins, we will also encourage them to embrace the “leave it longer” spirit and leave space for nature to thrive.”

Residents can join us in nurturing nature and get involved in helping wildlife at home by reducing grass-cutting and creating areas for nature. There are many great websites offering tips on how to rewild gardens, such as the [Royal Horticultural Society](#).

If you are passionate about the environment, [sign up for the council’s climate e-newsletter](#) SEEN for a monthly update on the Council’s climate news, and champions the great environmental work happening in our communities.

The Children and Young People’s Plan for Somerset 2024-2030 survey is now open

The new Children and Young People’s Plan (CYPP) for Somerset is being created by Somerset Council and our Partners in Health and Care Services and will set out the Council’s aims for 2024-2030. The plan will set out how services and communities are accountable for our children and young people and how they will work together to ensure the ambitions of the plan are achieved. By engaging as many children and young people as possible when writing the plan, services will have a better understanding of what children and young people think should happen to improve their lives.

Members of Somerset Youth Forum have suggested that the most important priorities are:

- Having a better experience in education
- Leading healthier lives
- Help to improve your mental health
- Living in safer communities
- Building better relationships
- Being prepared for adulthood

The Council encourages all individuals under the age of 25 to share their thoughts on these priorities via the online survey: <https://forms.office.com/e/dNHR44HCfn>

Councillor Heather Shearer, Lead Member for Children, Families and Education, said:

At Somerset Council, we want every young person living in the county to be safe, happy, healthy and prepared for adulthood. The Children and Young People’s Plan helps us, and our partners, create a nurturing environment to allow this. It is vital that young people of Somerset have the opportunity to share their voice, shape the policies that support them and hold our performance to account.”

Practitioners, teachers, youth workers and anyone who works with children can support young people to have a voice and make a difference by sharing this survey.

The survey is open to all young people under the age of 25 and closes on Friday 7th June at 5pm.

For those people working with groups, a session plan and evidence form for group activity can be downloaded here: <https://tinyurl.com/CYPPSessionPlanAndEvaluation>

Engagement with children and young people is strengthened by working with the Somerset Youth Work Alliance, a partnership of voluntary, community, faith and social enterprise (VCFSE) youth work organisations across Somerset. Facilitated by Spark Somerset, the alliance is made up of 21 members (and growing) who are working with young people and with each other to achieve high quality, co-produced and inclusive youth work in Somerset. More information can be found at www.sparksomerset.org.uk/projects/somerset-youth-work-alliance

Council keeps fares low as bus use continues to rise

Somerset Council this week announced revised bus fares for the Taunton Town Zone which are staying low to ensure bus use keeps growing in popularity. Since the introduction of the Government-funded £1 fare 18 months ago there has been a nearly 30 per cent rise in bus use in Taunton and the Council wants to keep supporting this. Following a recent Council review into fares and revenue it was clear a slight increase was needed to keep services in Taunton sustainable. From 1 June this will be £1.50 for any adult single fare and 80p for a child. The new fares will be reviewed at the end of this year. Across the county the cost for any single fare stays at £2 until December 2024, part of the national Government-funded initiative. The fare for the Park and Ride service in Taunton remains £1 for a single fare.

Somerset Council's Lead Member for Transport and Digital, Councillor Richard Wilkins said: "The Council has been able to use ring-fenced funding from the Government's Bus Service Improvement Plan grant to subsidise capped fares but this money only goes so far. However, despite growing financial demands and the need to support other bus services we are pleased to still be able to offer significantly capped fares for Taunton. The new fare is still less than half the cost of a single journey five years ago."

Somerset's Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) aims to make bus travel more attractive by working with operators to ensure reliable and affordable bus services. Council received nearly £13 million in funding from Government after submitting an ambitious bid through its BSIP in 2021.

As well as capping fares money has helped support vital bus services in the county, funded evening bus services, and could help fund a range of other proposals to improve reliability such as bus lanes.

Council to upgrade ageing pedestrian crossing outside Taunton's Vivary Park

Somerset Council is replacing traffic lights and a pedestrian crossing on Taunton's Upper High Street. The pedestrian crossing which connects High Street with the north entrance to Vivary Park will be improved with new traffic signals and realigned markings to position it more directly with the park entrance. Work starts on Monday 13 May, and is expected to be completed in August.

Temporary traffic lights will be in place while work is being done, along with a temporary pedestrian crossing. There will be evening/overnight road closures towards the end of the scheme for final resurfacing – advanced notice will be provided of these.

The work is part of Somerset Council's Future High Streets Fund programme which includes improved pedestrian and cycling facilities for the town. The work also ensures the traffic lights which have reached the end of their working life are replaced.

Somerset Council's Lead Member for Transport and Digital, Councillor Richard Wilkins said:

"We are pleased to see this much-needed improvement work taking place on this very busy crossing. We are aware there could be some disruption at peak traffic times – the team will do their best to minimise this. Ultimately we will have a much better positioned pedestrian crossing and state-of-the-art replacement traffic lights."