

SOMERSET COUNCIL

February 2025

Council to map out Bus Service Improvement Plan for 2025-26

Somerset Council is considering a range of new proposals to improve bus provision in the county under a major government funded initiative.

The Council has already trialled initiatives such as evening bus services and capped fares in Taunton along with plans for transport hubs in the county and bus priority measures following an initial £12 million in funding from government for the Somerset Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) in 2022.

Just over £6 million of further funding for this year (2025/26) was announced by the government at the end of last year and the Council is now considering how this money should be spent.

Potential investment themes discussed with bus user groups and bus operators at last week's Bus Advisory included:

- A new package of proposals for both Yeovil and Bridgwater, including evening bus services, feasibility studies for transport hubs in both towns, bus priority signal measures and other service improvements and trials.
- In Taunton evening services are to be reviewed with a view to continued funding for the best used routes.
- Maintaining the £1 Park and Ride fare in Taunton and supporting the development of Taunton's Transport hub
- A review of current BSIP Plus funded services across the county. These were services that were no longer commercially viable. BSIP Plus was extra money provided by Government to save such services from complete withdrawal.
- Trialling other service improvements within the county and improving county-wide information and bus shelter infrastructure.

The current BSIP-funded £1.50 single fare for Taunton runs until 31 March. There are no plans to continue this due to the cost and the fact that spending the money here will prohibit wider county initiatives.

The Government confirmed last month that a fare cap remains in place at just £3 for any single journey across Somerset and England until December 2025.

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

The BSIP settlement this year is positive and we want to look at an exciting range of proposals across more towns.

The fare cap trial in Taunton has been extremely successful but continuing that is costly, and we want to prioritise funding on BSIP initiatives and benefits across the wider county.

We've shown we can make a difference in Taunton, now it is time to do that in Yeovil and Bridgwater and the wider county.

Part of this process will also involve a full review of all nine BSIP- Plus funded routes across Somerset with the operator.

Measures and costings are yet to be decided and there will be a further report for Somerset Council's Planning and Transport Sub Committee next month, followed by a report to Scrutiny.

A final decision will be taken on any proposals in the spring.

Experts on the road to cutting carbon

Somerset Council has hosted an event to drive forward the 'greening' of road transport in the county.

The successful session brought together more than 70 highways and transport experts from a range of organisations to explore how non-fossil fuels could be used to reduce the carbon emissions of their fleets of vehicles.

These included the NHS, National Grid, local emergency services, highways contractors such as Kiely Bros, and neighboring councils.

Attendees discussed a range of case studies of cutting-edge 'decarbonisation' transport technologies and approaches which were introduced by leading consultants in the field including WSP, MH Tech and Gregory's Group.

Moving from diesel and petrol fleets to electric vehicles was a key theme, though other future fuels such as hydrogen were also covered.

The group shared thoughts on the financial, commercial and logistical barriers to decarbonisation and ideas for how to overcome them through joint working and collaboration.

The event aims to kick-start ongoing work between all those attending the event to address the pressing issue of climate change through innovation. The participants of the day have joined forces in working groups to move towards a greener future.

Councillor Richard Wilkins, Somerset Council's Lead member for Transport and Waste Services, said,

Everyone involved understands the urgent need for change across the sector to make a significant positive impact on our environment, and that this is best achieved by working with each other.

We saw fascinating case studies and had a really positive discussion. There is a welcome commitment to work together to move to a more sustainable Somerset, benefiting our environment and future generations.

Kier General Manager, Alan Rigby said:

Since starting our highways maintenance contract with Somerset Council we have been exploring the viability of alternative fuel sources to help meet our shared carbon reduction targets and reduce the environmental impact of our operations.

It's been fantastic to bring together organisations that share our passion to create more sustainable transport options that benefit the wider region and look forward to jointly hosting further working groups with Somerset Council and new collaborative partners to see how we can work together to take this further.

Council sets out plan to tackle homelessness

Somerset Council is welcoming more Government funding to help ease winter pressures on homelessness and rough sleeping, as it launches its new strategy to tackle the twin problems.

Somerset will receive an extra £242,000 from the latest Rough Sleeper Winter Pressures funding round, bringing the total to just under £400,000 from the national pot.

The Council has just published its homelessness and rough sleeping strategy for the next five years which is being considered by the Executive today (3 February). Once approved, an action plan will be drawn up to put principles into practice.

The 70-page document acknowledges that while Somerset has a higher-than-average number of people facing homelessness or sleeping rough, the Council plans to build on work already achieved.

The main reasons for becoming homeless across the county remain loss of rented accommodation, parents or relatives no longer willing to accommodate, and domestic abuse.

Finding private rented accommodation is becoming harder. Tenants are getting into rent arrears or private sector landlords are not housing people because of a growing gap between market rent and benefit levels. Large infrastructure projects, while providing welcome investment, add to the pressures on private rented and temporary housing.

Introducing the strategy, [Councillor Sarah Wakefield](#), Executive Lead Member for Adult Services, Housing and Homelessness, and Claire Tough, Chair of the Somerset Homelessness Reduction Board, say:

Homelessness across the UK is rising, Somerset is no exception to this with high numbers of rough sleepers with increasing needs.

There is some truly amazing work already happening in our county across all our partners, yet we know that we need to do much more to prevent homelessness.

Our belief remains that fundamentally no-one should be without a place they can call home, and no-one should have to sleep rough.

Since the peak of the Covid 19 pandemic, much has been achieved in the last three years in Somerset including:

- Stronger partnership working
- Better outreach services such as nursing and rough sleeper support teams
- Delivering innovative housing schemes.

But much still needs to be done to tackle challenges including the cost of housing, a low-wage economy, the ageing population, the rising costs of temporary accommodation and difficulty in accessing services in a largely rural county.

The Strategy sets out key principles and aims, and requests to government, such as ensuring local government has the funds to cope with pressures and demands, ending no-fault evictions and funding to build more social housing.

It was commissioned by Somerset Homelessness Reduction Board, a multi-agency partnership of services and organisations (all sectors) with a role in tackling homelessness and rough sleeping.

A consultation was carried out in late summer last year inviting Somerset residents and those closely involved in the sector, including social care, housing and public health to share their views. People who have experienced of homelessness and rough sleeping were also asked to provide their thoughts

Government announces Exceptional Financial Support for Somerset Council

Somerset Council's share of Council Tax could rise by 7.5% – this includes 2.5% above the national cap of 5% – following an announcement from Government. Somerset Council had been seeking Exceptional Financial Support from Government as part of its budget setting for 2025/26.

Since its creation in April 2023, the council has been taking emergency action to reduce costs and plans to save a further £47m next year, including £34m by reducing the number of staff and managers employed by April 2025.

However, cost pressures in Children's and Adults Social Care continue to soar nationally and Somerset Council is facing a gap of around £66m for 2025/26.

Leader [Bill Revans](#) wrote to [Angela Rayner MP](#), Secretary of State for [Housing, Communities and Local Government \(MHCLG\)](#), to highlight the challenge and request Exceptional Financial Support.

MHCLG has now confirmed Somerset Council will be allowed to raise Council Tax by up to 7.5%, an amount 2.5% above the national cap of 5%.

The Council will now meet to decide whether to agree to the increase.

As the increase will not raise enough money to fill the gap, Somerset Council will again be reliant on a Capitalisation Direction. This is a form of one-off assistance offered last

year which allows councils to sell assets or borrow money and use the proceeds to fund the budget gap and the day-to-day running costs.

Cllr Revans said:

Today's announcement gives us clarity and we will need to consider the implications before we finalise our budget proposals for debate and decision at Full Council later this month.

Somerset Council's budget will be discussed at the revised Full Council meeting date for Budget proposals – **5 March**

[Agendas and papers](#) will be published in advance with the public encouraged to attend the meetings, either in person or online.

Reuse shop at Taunton Recycling Site reopens

The popular Reuse Shop at [Priorswood Recycling Site](#) in Taunton recently reopened with new trader Bob Bowyer running the centre on behalf of site contractor, Biffa.

Sitting in the heart of the recycling site, the shop promotes reuse by stopping items that still have life from being recycled or thrown out.

Residents should let the Taunton site team know when bringing reusable items to site, so that it can be put to one side.

The Reuse Shop can take and offer good quality items, from books, bikes, toys, games, furniture, CDs, DVDs and sports equipment to crockery and cutlery but not electrical or gas appliances, or safety related items such as those needed for working at height or head protection.

Reusing items, rather than recycling or throwing away is more environmentally friendly – reducing demand for new items and preventing valuable materials from going to the waste.

[Councillor Richard Wilkins](#), Somerset Council's Lead Member for Transport and Waste said:

Extending the life of the things we own helps to protect the environment. We know that residents love this local offer and have been looking forward to it reopening.

The shop helps to conserve materials and energy while offering a bargain.

However, for those who are not local to Taunton, there are many other ways to reuse and we still encourage people to donate to charity shops and furniture reuse groups or to give items away on Freecycle or Freecycle.

The shop is open Monday to Friday 9am to 5pm from 1 October to 31 March, and 9am to 6pm from 1 April to 30 September. It will also be open every weekend from 9am to 4pm. Parking is available opposite the shop, visitors need to follow the one-way system around the site to reach it.

The Reuse Shop first opened in 2013 and had been closed since March 2023 following a bereavement.

To find the opening times and locations of all of Somerset's 16 recycling sites, visit the Council's [recycling centre search](#) page.

Taunton High Street car park update

Plans to sell the [High Street Car Park](#) in Taunton are set to be reversed next month, Somerset Council has confirmed today (11 February).

[Councillor Mike Rigby](#), Somerset Council's Lead Member for Economic Development, Planning and Assets, has scheduled a decision to no longer progress the sale of the 270-space multi-story car park, which is also known as Mary Street Car Park.

The key decision recommending the removal of the car park from the 'for sale' list has been added to the Council's forward plan and will be formalised before the end of March.

The move follows significant feedback from [Taunton Town Council](#), businesses and local members concerned by the possible impacts of selling it for development.

Cllr Rigby said:

This Council has to be sustainable in these extremely tough financial times, but we also have to listen. The message we've heard loud and clear is that the impacts of the sale of the High Street car park are such that we need to reconsider and that's what we have done. We thank everyone who has taken the time to let us know their views.

Last August, the [Council's Executive](#) agreed to dispose of more than 20 assets including the car park as part of its strategy to make sure its portfolio is sustainable in light of the financial pressures facing the Council.

Find out more about plans to improve busy A38 route in Somerset

Somerset Council is launching an online engagement on proposals to make improvements on one of its key transport arteries.

The Council is working in partnership with [North Somerset Council \(NSC\)](#) to secure Government funding for a series of improvement schemes on a stretch of the A38 which runs from the Edithmead Roundabout at Junction 22 of the M5 to the South Bristol Link (Colliters Way).

Many junctions along the route are operating close to capacity leading to varying travel speeds, poor conditions for pedestrians and cyclists, unreliable journey times and congestion at peak times, along with potential road safety issues.

This has a knock-on impact on local communities, the local economy and businesses.

The key aims of the project are to better connect communities with improved walking and cycling provision, improve safety and journey times on the A38, provide better access to public transport and support the regional economy and enable housing delivery.

You can take a look at the proposals and take part in the engagement via Somerset Council's [A38 Improvement Scheme](#) consultation page.

Somerset Council and North Somerset Council are currently pulling together a full business case take the proposals to the next stage.

Somerset Council is looking to further engage with the public and key stakeholders on the proposals as they were first aired in 2021, 4 years ago, and the designs have since evolved. There is also the potential for people to help shape some of the elements involving sustainable travel.

Key proposed schemes in the Somerset Council area include:

- **Edithmead Roundabout near J22 M5:** Creation of a through-about option with signalisation of all arms of the roundabout.
- **Rooksbridge:** Safety scheme comprising mainly road markings.

- **Cross:** Creation of a staggered junction design at Cross which has been discussed with relevant landowners.
- **Strawberry Line Crossing:** An improved crossing of the A38 at Shute Shelve
- **Sustainable travel:** Improvements to bus stops and pedestrian/cycling facilities at various locations.

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

Working in partnership with North Somerset Council, we are very hopeful we can get funding from Government to make these improvements, clearly this is a very busy route and road users along with local people would benefit hugely from these improvements.

We really want people to take part in the engagement, funding will be tight if we're successful and we can't make wholesale changes to the proposals or designs, but people's input will play an important role in finalising the schemes.

Share your views on proposed changes to travel assistance for students over 16

Somerset Council has launched an online consultation on proposed changes to its **[Post-16 Local Transport Policy Statement](#)**.

This policy sets out transport arrangements for eligible Post-16 (age 16 to 18) and Post-19 (aged 19 and over) learners in Somerset to their further education settings.

Currently, Somerset Council provides travel assistance to around 9,000 young people to their education setting each day, including discretionary (non-statutory) assistance for Post-16 learners with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND).

The proposed changes, which focus on Post-16 learners with SEND, include:

- Prioritising the offer of Independent Travel Training (ITT) to enable young people to develop the skills needed to access the public transport network and travel independently.
- Where ITT is not suitable for a young person, a Personal Travel Payment (PTP) is provided as a contribution towards the cost of the learners' travel arrangements.

The payment will take into account individual circumstances and support families, in part to make their own travel arrangements.

- Where there are seats available on a contracted vehicle carrying school-age children to an education provision, these may be offered to a young person as an alternative to a PTP.

[Cllr Heather Shearer](#), Lead Member for Children, Families and Education, said:

Our priority is to ensure all young people in Somerset, regardless of circumstance or additional needs, have access to the best education. The proposed changes aim to promote independence and support young people with SEND with their transition to adulthood, while also ensuring travel options are efficient and sustainable during our current financial situation. I strongly encourage everyone to take part in this survey, especially those who care for a young person with SEND, as your insights and personal experience is crucial in shaping our new policy.

Any agreed changes will be implemented for young people starting further education in September 2025 or onwards. No changes will be made for any young person already in Post-16 education before this date, unless reassessment is required due to a change in circumstances.

A link to the online survey is available via the Council's [Post 16 Transport Policy](#) consultation page.

The consultation is open to all members of the public and will close on Sunday 30 March 2025

Somerset residents invited to join a flood recovery drop-in event

Somerset Council teams have continued to support communities following the recent flooding experienced at the end of January.

As flood water subsided council teams worked hard to clear roads of debris and mud and carry out repairs where needed.

And to support those who were affected by flooding at the end of January 2025, Somerset Council alongside partners from the Environment Agency, Wessex Water and the Somerset Rivers Authority will be hosting drop-in events alongside other agencies.

All events will be running from 4-7pm and there's no need to book ahead.

- **Chard:** Wednesday 26 February, The Guildhall, TA20 1PP
- **Ilminster:** Wednesday 5 March, The Shrubbery, TA19 9AR
- **South Petherton:** Tuesday 11 March, The David Hall, TA13 5AA

Attendees will be able to speak with different agencies and service areas from the council including the Flood and Coastal Team, Housing, Highways, Town Planning, Emergency Planning, Public Health, Economic Development as well as the Environment Agency, Wessex Water and the Somerset Rivers Authority.

Flood-affected residents will be able to get advice and support as well as share any information they may have that can help inform flood investigations.

Councillor Graham Oakes, Somerset Council Lead Member for Public Health, Climate Change and Environment said:

We understand that our communities are still feeling the effects of the recent flooding. Since the major incident, teams from the council have been supporting families to return to normality.

We know families have been affected in many different ways and we've set up these events to give everyone the opportunity to find out about the support available.

An Environment Agency spokesperson said:

Nearly 17,000 people and 9,000 properties were warned about flood risk by the Environment Agency during Storms Éowyn and Herminia. In Somerset alone, 30 flood warnings were issued.

We are working with partners to host these local drop in events to support communities affected by recent flooding.

We are now seeing the impacts of a changing climate on rainfall patterns and groundwater and river behaviour. These impacts are likely to become more acute over time, bringing the risk of more frequent and severe flooding. We encourage everyone to **check their flood risk**, **sign up for flood warnings** and look at the **advice on preparing for flooding**.

Homes in parts of Chard, Ilminster, Somerton and South Petherton were among those affected following Storm Eowyn in January 2025.

Reporting flooding incidents helps the authority to build a picture of the worse-hit areas and understand where support is needed.

Resident's affected by flooding can report it online using the **[flood reporting tool](#)**.

For information on flooding – how to prepare, what to do during a flood event and what you can do after flooding, visit the Council's **[Flooding information and advice](#)** page.

Uncovering Ham Hill's Past for Its Future: A New Chapter Begins

A new visitor centre and other improvements are on the way for an iconic Somerset landmark as a major project at Somerset Council's [Ham Hill Country Park](#) starts soon.

The 'Uncovering Ham Hill's past for its future' project has been made possible thanks to a £2.153M grant from [The National Lottery Heritage Fund](#) and further financial support totalling £111,200 from the [Wolfson Foundation](#), [Leonardo](#), and with the support of the [Friends of Ham Hill](#), [Garfield Weston](#), [Bernard Sunley Foundation](#) and the Bannister Trust.

The first works on site are expected to start next month, connecting water and power to the site of a brand-new purpose-built visitor centre next to the Lime Kiln Car Park.

The aim is to start the visitor centre build itself at the end of March, with the goal to complete this autumn – though as with any construction project the schedule can be affected by unforeseen factors, such as the weather.

The new visitor centre will feature a café and changing places facilities and host permanent exhibitions and interactive displays, to make Ham Hill's stories accessible to all. The project also aims to support local schools and community groups with educational resources.

Thanks to the generous Heritage Fund grant, Somerset Council has welcomed two new members to our team to help deliver the project: An Assistant Ranger and Engagement Ranger have joined the Council's two permanent rangers Paul and James and our incredible group of volunteers. Together, their work will help conserve and celebrate the rich heritage and nature of Ham Hill including:

- Heritage Conservation: Protecting and showcasing the wealth of archaeology at Ham Hill, including its status as one of Europe's largest Iron Age hillforts.

- Biodiversity Enhancement: Improving habitat management to support a diverse range of species and ecosystems.
- Community Engagement: Offering educational programmes and interactive exhibits to engage visitors with the history, geology, wildlife and natural beauty of Ham Hill.
- Visitor Experience: Developing new ways to help people explore Ham Hill with an accessible visitor centre, a café and permanent and temporary themed exhibitions.

[Councillor Graham Oakes](#), Somerset Council's Lead Member for Public Health, Environment and Climate Change said:

This is an exciting time for the Ham Hill community. We can't wait for visitors to see and experience the positive impact of these efforts. We are committed to making Ham Hill an accessible place where people can connect with nature and history in meaningful ways, ensuring this much-loved historical beauty spot is preserved for future generations and continues to be a wildlife haven for nature to thrive.

This project will also serve as a model for heritage and conservation efforts across Somerset, inspiring similar initiatives throughout the county. As part of the council's plan for a greener, more sustainable Somerset, we aim to promote environmental stewardship and sustainable tourism.

We are extremely grateful to the Heritage Fund and other generous benefactors for their amazing support—without them, this project would have just been a dream.

Get involved

If you would like to get involved at Ham Hill through volunteering or find out more about the activities on offer for your group or organisation, email countryside@somerset.gov.uk.

To keep up to date with the project's progress, follow Ham Hill Country Park's [Facebook](#) page or go to visitsouthsomerset.com.