

SOMERSET COUNCIL
Norton St Philip Parish Council
Cllr Dawn Denton
Annual Report 2023 / 2024

The Somerset Council declared a financial emergency at the end of 2023. In February 2024 it managed to avoid declaring an S114 which is in effect a bankruptcy notice. But that is only for now. There are 'rough waters' ahead and of course this has prompted many questions which have dropped into my inbox over the last month:

If the council goes bankrupt, what do they legally have to provide?

This is not a simple answer. Yes, there are statutory services such as 'adult social care' and 'children's services' that must continue, no matter what. And there are ancillary services that may have to be dropped. But all the statutory services need ancillary services to make them happen. So, it is not always possible to cut ancillary services if they are needed for those services the council legally must provide.

Are Somerset Council staff losing their jobs?

Yes, there is a reorganisation taking place and a 'slimming down' of departments through redundancies. It also means that some people have moved on to other opportunities. This will happen over time, so won't be noticeable just yet.

Are we paying more council tax for fewer services?

Yes, that is correct. You are paying more council tax on a town council level and at a county level. And because things must change, there will be less, and in some cases no services at all for the time being, so that the council's spending can be brought down.

Does this mean potholes won't be repaired?

Yes and no. Often money for roadworks is approved in previous financial years and the money is already allocated. This money can only be used for those works. Often there is a hold up due to contracting, but in many cases this money is still there and ready to be used. But any new work will have to cease, unless the council can get external government funding and grants which they do get regularly for specific things such as pothole repairs, which was in the 2023 Government Budget.

Has the council avoided bankruptcy altogether?

No. There are still hundreds of millions of pounds that need to be saved to ensure the council doesn't declare bankruptcy later this year.

What happens if they do declare bankruptcy?

The government will appoint commissioners to come in to find the savings. These people cost a lot of money (which will have to come out of the council's bank accounts), are not emotionally attached and will behave as if they are winding down a business. It will not be easy, and that is when we will truly feel the impact as services are cut completely.

What next?

This is not an easy time for anyone. Council staff and councillors (at town, parish, and county level) are working hard and firefighting with the bare minimum.

But there is always money coming from central government to cover specific projects.

Most recently, Phase 2 of the government's Swimming Pool Support Fund has been awarded to Somerset Council. Frome Leisure Centre, run by Fusion (Somerset Council is the landlord), will get new swimming pool covers and Photovoltaic (PV) Panels installed on the roof to reduce running costs.

The continued support for the £2 bus fare cap, has been a welcome government grant. And 25 new double- and single decker buses for Somerset are to be funded by a £2.2 million grant from the Department for Transport's (DfT) Zero Emission Bus Regional Area scheme.

There are many more government grants and funding opportunities which will help fill some of the gaps, but of course it is not possible to fill them all. Only a reining in of spending, reducing, and cutting services, and we as a community, coming together, can make a difference.

Norton St Philip

Parking: There have been numerous cases of illegal parking which have disrupted the flow of traffic and damaged paving and stonework. These incidents have been reported either through the parish council, the residents or by me.

Flooding: With the high rainfall over the past 18 months, flooding is more evident than before. The parish council is putting together a full village report to submit to the Flooding Team at the council, and flooding matters have also been reported individually.

Longmead Development: After over 10 years of incomplete work on this development, I met with a group of residents to discuss their concerns and there seemed to be a block in communications between the council's legal team and the developer's legal team. But things seem to be moving, albeit slowly, and I will be having a meeting with the Somerset Council Planning Liaison Officer in the next few weeks.

Gigaclear: There have been many complaints about the work being done, the mess after the work has been completed and errors in communication. But after robust action from the parish council, things seem to be better, but still not what they should be.

Speeding: The speeding on the A366 is a concern for the Norton St Philip and the neighbouring parishes. A collective report has been submitted to Somerset Council Highways and we await a response.

Fly Tipping: Many incidents of fly tipping have been reported and resolved. It is hoped that it will be easier for the public to take household waste to the Recycle Centres with changes to policy. The Somerset Council is also raising awareness of the services they offer to collect larger items and white goods.

Council Tax: After the Somerset Council raised Council Tax, I have had many queries and concerns. Sadly, this is the situation we find ourselves in, and the only other option is to see if individuals can change their Council Tax bands (all information is available online).

Litter Picking: Litter along our village and main roads becomes more visible in the winter months when there is less growth. There are constant requests going into the Council to litter pick on the busy roads where it is not safe for the community to come together to do so.

Farleigh-Hungerford

Wild Swimming: Believed to be the oldest river swimming club in the country, I have supported the club to continue the brilliant work they do.

Farleigh-Hungerford Mill Stream Bridge: There are structural concerns, and the Somerset Council has sent someone out to inspect, but I am not aware any work has been carried out. I will confirm over the next few months.

Farleigh Woods: There were questions about illegal activities going on, but I have not had an update for over a year and will ask residents to keep me informed.

Licensing for Farleigh House: Meetings and briefings were held before the event licence was approved. But it is a changing situation, and I am liaising with the Council and the residents after concerns were raised.

Postcode changes: Parts of Frome North have been issued with Bath postcodes which has had an impact on their council tax, car, and home insurance. There are options through the Post Office / Royal Mail, to challenge these changes.

Across Frome North

Devolution of Assets: There have been discussions with parish and town councils to discuss what their options are and the benefits to their local communities to take on Somerset Council assets or service devolution.

Elderly Care: I have been able to support elderly residents with bin collections, transport to community events and getting their care package assessments.

Frome Civic Society: This organisation of skilled and knowledgeable people has been invaluable to answer questions about developments, Listed Buildings and other heritage community assets.

Night Speeding: Sadly, there is only one night vision speed enforcement van in the area which covers the Mendips and parts of Bristol. The officer is also nearing retirement so there are less opportunities for us to get regular nighttime enforcement. But the sessions he did do in the area were very successful.

Friends Groups: As the council must wind down services, they are hoping to form local Friends Groups to help with volunteering opportunities. I have made contact with this team and await the policy to be approved and rolled out.

Cockey Lamps: On a personal level, history and heritage is very important to me. I have met with members of the Frome Society for Local Study who are documenting all the Cockey Lamps in and around Frome. Their next step is to register them all as heritage assets and then apply for funding and grants to restore them.

FlexPlastic trial: I am thrilled that the Somerset Council's FlexPlastic recycling trail was mostly held in my Frome North Division. The briefings and trail included a range of different demographic households and was hugely successful. This has informed the national trial, and we hope that flexplastics will be part of our recycling in the near future.

Somerset Chamber of Commerce: It struck me that the Somerset Chamber had not engaged with the business community in the Frome area. I met with the Somerset Chamber CEO and she arranged two events locally – a business breakfast at Standerwick and a tour of the Fussell's Farm in Rode.

Heritage Connectors: the Frome Medical Practice ran a 6-month programme to trial and create a resource pack for heritage as part of the social prescribing suite of offerings they already have. This was funded by Heritage England. I attended meetings and got involved in the last few weeks to increase the number of people trained as Heritage Connectors.

Housing: It has been emotional to support residents who have lost their homes, but the council has jumped in to ensure these families have a roof over their heads and helped them to find permanent homes – which is not always possible.

School Placements: The complexities of getting special needs children into the right schools has proven challenging, and at times, heartbreaking.

Enterprise Advisor: I signed up to be an Enterprise Advisor before I became a councillor. I am assigned to a school to help them link their curriculum to the 'world of work' and to support them to get speakers and other specialists to meet with the students. This also includes going out to a range of schools to deliver talks at their career days (as far afield as Wells).

Frome Times: There are six Somerset Councillors in Frome. The Frome Times comes out every two weeks, so I submit a piece for the Councillor's Corner every 12 weeks.

The Link: This monthly local parish magazine does not always have the space for my council pieces, but when they do, I am able to share council news and what I am working on as the local councillor.

Somerset Activities & Sports Partnership: This organisation is partly funded by the government and partly by the Somerset Council. I met with the youth sport coordinator to chat about free activities for our young people locally. I also met with the coordinator who arranges walking groups and other activities for the older community to support how I can.

Defibrillator training: It is such good news to see communities installing defibrillators, but without knowledge about how to use them, they are useless. The Frome Friends of the Community Hospital arranged training for villages in my division and in neighbouring divisions.

Visitors

Secretary of State for Education, Gillian Keegan: Ms Keegan visited a local village school on her way through the county to a Local Government conference. She was so inspired by the work happening at Berkley School, and she got to enjoy lunch at the Cheese and Grain.

Secretary of State for Transport, Mark Harper: Mr Harper wanted to visit a community in Frome area where there is a transport success story. He was travelling from Devon to Gloucestershire and his stop in Rode was perfect. He met with Peter Travis of the Somerset Bus Partnership and walked through the village where he accidentally also met with the parish chairman, Mike Salmon.

Police and Crime Commissioner, Mark Shelford: Mr Shelford has regularly visited the Frome Police officers to discuss their concerns and met with the Frome Town Council to discuss the CCTV cameras.

Committees

Planning East: I sit alongside other Frome Somerset Councillors on the Planning East Committee. It has been a challenging experience, but I have learned so much and this is the most obvious role I fulfil where lives are impacted dramatically.

Communities Scrutiny: The Communities Scrutiny committee covers everything from Glastonbury Festival to customer service at the council, and public toilets, to housing and libraries. This is an interesting committee where I get to ask the administration to clarify their direction and to challenge them.

Member Development: I sit alongside other Somerset Councillors to support the programme of development for the councillors. This includes getting them up to speed with policy, understanding systems and knowing more about what the council delivers.

Meetings

Vision for Frome: This monthly meeting over a year, included all the head teachers from schools in Frome to discuss the issues around education and the current system.

Local Community Networks (LCNs): I have attended online and in-person meetings to support the work the town and parish councils are doing in the area.

Speedwatch AGM: Speeding is such a concern in the Frome area, and it was important for me to attend their AGM in Shepton Mallet along with the Police and Crime Commissioner, Mark Shelford. This is also really important to him.

Frome Chamber of Commerce AGM: I am a businesswoman, so small business is important to me. I have also sat on the Frome Chamber committee in the past and have delivered a lot of training for them. I want this community to thrive and thus showing my support is vital.

CRRE - The Countryside Charity's Rooftop Revolution: I attended this remarkable event to hear more about solar energy and what the future could look like as we need more electricity.

Discover Frome: Along with Education, tourism is my background, so I have been invited to Discover Frome meetings and events to offer my support and insights.

Frome Town Councillors: I have met with individual town councillors to talk about sustainability projects, tourism, business, devolution and more.

Visits

Edventure: Having worked at Edventure coming out of the Pandemic on the Department of Works and Pensions Kickstart Scheme, I am always keen to support the brilliant work they do. I was inspired, yet again, at the Soup evening as the Start Up team introduced their new project.

Fair Frome: Times are tough for so many families and I wanted to get a clear understanding of the work this local charity is doing. I got to hear all about the services they offer, the food and furniture they hand out and the wonderful space they create for those in need.

Badgers Hill Plans: It was so interesting to see this wonderful community-driven project present their plans for improvement to the site. And their plans to become the heart of the community, again.

Hinkley Point: What a privilege to visit Hinkley Point to learn more about this project and the impact it will have across the county and the country.

Gravity: We were invited to tour the new gigafactory site and learn more about the plans and opportunities.

10 Downing Street: This visit was definitely a highlight for me. I met other councillors, staff at Number 10 and those working behind the scenes in the big government machine.

This is just a snapshot of the period May to May 2023/2024.

Overall, it has been a wonderful year and I have loved connecting communities, asking questions, and representing all those in Frome North.