

SOMERSET COUNCIL
Frome Town Council
Cllr Dawn Denton
Annual Report 2024 / 2025

This past year has not been easy. The pressure Somerset Council is under immense pressure. The residents may not have felt this just yet, but this coming year will be the biggest challenge yet. Officers who have worked in local government all their careers have told me that they have never found their jobs and work environments so challenging.

What is the financial situation at Somerset Council?

Although the council produced a balanced budget, it has meant over 500 job redundancies, as well as reduction of spend for each department, grants and funding for local projects. There are 'pots of money' that come in from government and other sources over the year for national projects. These sums are ringfenced, but it means that there are services that can benefit. The council has also sold off assets to recoup some money, but often these sales bring in less than was originally paid, which has been disappointing. The leader of Somerset Council, Cllr Bill Revans, asked central government if our council tax could be increased above the 4.99% rate. After a Freedom of Information Request, the amount he asked for would have increased our council tax to over 22%. This was thankfully denied and instead our council tax has gone up by 7.49% (with local parish and town increases reflected too).

What does this mean for residents?

In the first instance this means paying more tax for fewer services. There have been over 500 staff redundancies at Somerset Council. This will mean those remaining will be taking on more responsibilities, delivery will be slower and services may reduce. At this stage residents may not notice much of a change because the statutory services, such as Adult Social Care and Children's services, will continue as normal.

What to expect in 2025?

Over the coming year services (such as beaches, ports, flooding, bins, recycling, waste, communities, births, deaths, ceremonies, leisure, tourism, environmental health, food safety, health, safety, wellbeing, housing, homeless, libraries, planning, buildings, land, roads, travel and parking), may become fewer, responses will be slower and overall things will feel more of a struggle.

Patience will be required from all sides.

Frome North (urban)

Packsaddle: I chose to withdraw from this planning vote as I had shown support for the People for Packsaddle in the past. The committee voted going against officer recommendation of approval and LiveWest has appealed the decision. This appeal is pencilled in for 22nd July.

Cllr Adam Boyden and I have met with the People for Packsaddle and will be in full support of them defending this precious piece of land.

Environmental Health: I have worked closely with residents in relation to a range of issues involving pets, living conditions and business licensing.

Bins and waste: These issues are often quickly resolved and there have been no concerns that have not been resolved within 24-48 hours.

Open spaces: There have been issues with maintenance of open spaces and parks, as well as concerns about trees. Some are on-going and some of these spaces are now devolved to Frome Town Council.

School Crossing: the funding for the school crossing has been cut, and this is now an expense the schools have to pick up.

Roadworks: Fromefield has finally been done, potholes and lighting have been repaired and concerns have been raised about road markings and speed bumps, which have been referred to the relevant agencies.

Leisure Centre: there have been issues with boiler repair, which was repaired within a week and there are on-going concerns about the service delivery at the centre, which has been passed over to the Lead Member for Communities, Cllr Federica Smith-Roberts. But I will continue pushing for this to be resolved.

Merlin Theatre: the stage floor has been a concern. Work needed to be carried out to find the leak and now repair the damage. I believe this is in-hand, but will ensure it is all resolved.

Royal Mail: I have had concerns raised by residents not receiving their specialist medication at the time needed through Royal Mail. This has been resolved.

Frome North (rural)

Council Tax: I have received many emails about residents concerned about their council tax increases. There is nothing I can do, sadly, but it is important for people to know they have been heard.

FlexPlastic trial: This national trial, which started in May 2023, has been hugely successful across the division and other parts of Frome and it is slowly expanding. Residents are fully engaged and 51 tonnes of plastic bags and wrapping have been collected for recycling. This has prevented approximately 217,000 bags from ending up in landfills.

Rights of Way: With over 3,800 miles of Public Rights of Way across the county, this is an important part of rural living. There have been issues with paths needed repairs, Section 106 agreements to upkeep and maintain paths, diversions and new registrations.

Flood engineering: There are on-going concerns about works needed in the villages to ensure the winter months don't cause flooding of roads and homes.

National Highways: Not all the roads around Frome are Somerset Council responsibility. I have had to engage with National Highways about lighting, signage, verge cutting and repairs.

Gritting: There is often slow service to fill local grit bins and I have dealt with Gritting Reviews on more rural roads.

Highways: This has involved collapsed pavements, dangerous junctions, speeding, Community Watch, night speed enforcement, signage, and verge cutting. The work coming into Berkley on Clivey (B3099) after fatal accidents, has now been completed on the both sides of the county border.

Parking: Villages and urban centres have continued parking issues. These are dealt with as part of a bigger conversation, which often means it is left at the bottom of the pile.

Licensing: I have been involved with business and event licensing over the year, with some ongoing issues. The next step is to take a multi-agency approach as many of these issues involve Planning and Environmental Health too.

Bus shelters: I am currently working on getting a couple of rural bus shelters installed.

Flytipping: This has reduced in some areas and increased in others. There have been issues with burning tyres, abandoned caravans and piles of rubbish left in lanes. There is evidence of those responsible, which the police on both sides of the Wiltshire border, are working on.

Environmental Health: The issue with the Beckington Slip 'n Slide was resolved when I visited the site with the Health & Safety Officer from the council. There have also been concerns at a Duchy of Cornwall farm where waste is finding its way into the watercourse.

Housing developments: I have worked hard to ensure both the council and the developers to get works completed in old and new developments across the division. This has involved connecting the council's legal team with lawyers, developers and the council officers to resolve issues, sign off paperwork and complete reviews and assessments.

Unauthorised developments: These are enforcement issues which are proving challenging to deal with.

Rivers and Bridges: There is ongoing work to get bridges structurally assessed and to monitor the quality of the waterways around Frome. This has involved the Environment Agency and Wessex Water working together with the local communities to find sources of waste pouring into the river.

Internet access in the villages: Complaints in relation to connectivity works and overall access have been referred to the Lead Member responsible, Cllr Mike Rigby.

Enterprise Advisor: In my role I have delivered career and inspirational talks in primary and middle schools in Frome and across Somerset. I have also worked with leadership teams to weave oracy into their curriculum.

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.

Committees

Planning East: This past year has been a heavy Planning East load which has included Packsaddle and Selwood Garden Village. There are big developments and appeals coming up for applications around Frome and across the East Somerset area, so it will be a busy summer.

Scrutiny: I started the year on the Communities Scrutiny committee, but have moved across to Climate and Place. We have scrutinised everything from buses to landscape assessments to skills and economic development plans to the Somerset Rivers Authority.

Shadow Executive: Since November I have been the Opposition Spokesperson for Public Health, Climate and Environment. This has been a very interesting role with regular updates from the Director of Public Health and with the Climate team. My role is to challenge and question policies, decisions and direction of the current administration.

Somerset Board: I sit on this 'high-level strategic partnership board for health, care and wellbeing for the county: in essence to consider all influences on what it is to live and work in Somerset.'

Meetings

Full Council: to vote on major decisions.

Frome Local Studies: I met with Frome Local Studies about their project to register and repair our wonderful Cockey Lamps.

Selwood Academy: to support the school getting their academy status.

Parish and Town Council meetings: Cllr Adam Boyden and I alternate (if needed) to attend the monthly, quarterly and annual parish council meetings. This includes Frome, Beckington, Rode, Norton St Philip, Berkley, Laverton and Lullington, Tellisford and Woolverton.

Residents: I have met with residents to discuss their concerns about developments, planning (and ensured I am not pre-determined), environmental health, licensing, Rights of Way and housing.

Business development: This has included the skills team at the council as well as charities and chambers to support growth across the county.

Local Community Networks: I have attended most of these through the year as well as the Highways Working Group.

A36 Closure: These meetings were convened with all the parish councils affected, National Highways and Somerset highways.

Boundary Commission Briefings: To formalise the council's proposals.

Banking Hub Stakeholders: to learn more about the progress and steps taken to open the Hub.

Frome Town Councillors: I have met individually to chat about specific issues relating to Frome Town specifically.

Saxonvale: As a member of the Opposition Executive, I attended the public and confidential decision session.

Youth Adventure Trust: I met with the local representative to find out how I can support.

Members Briefings: These included councillor safety, roadworks, boundaries, mental health, finances and more.

Opposition Spokesperson Briefings: this is for regular updates from the Public Health Director and the Climate team.

Community Speed Watch: I have met with and engaged with this volunteer scheme across the year.

Commerce Park: I attended their annual AGM / update meeting.

Matt Mellen (Frome Town Council Officer): to share my new Opposition Spokesperson role for Climate and to connect and support Matt to others to support his role.

Farleigh Hungerford Bathing: This meeting includes the Environment Agency, local parishes, Friends of the River Frome, Wessex Water and Somerset Council.

Events

Edventure: My annual commitment is to support the Soup evening as the Start Up team introduced their new project. As this organisation is in my division, I also meet for updates and support their projects as needed.

Fair Frome: I attended the Fair Frome 'thank you' BBQ.

Rode Fest: the annual family, food and drink festival in Rode Village.

Frome Town Crier talk: at the Frome Museum.

Cheese and Grain: twice this part year I attended a reception to share plans for growth and news about funding.

Parish Council Conference: Working closely with parish councils, this was an important conference for me to attend to know how I can support the parishes in Frome North better.

Bridgwater LCN: I was invited to speak at the LCN about Frome for Bridgwater to learn from.

Friends of the Frome Library: I attended the launch of the Friends Group.

Frome Chamber: I attend regular breakfasts and events in the capacity of a councillor to answer questions and show my support.

Frome Local Plan Workshop: To workshop ideas for the Local Plan.

This is a small snapshot of the period May to May 2024/2025. It has been a challenging but rewarding year working with and supporting the residents not only in my division as a local councillor, but across Somerset East on the planning committee, and across the county in my other council 'hats'.

Thank you for your ongoing support and here's to a great year ahead!

**“It is what we do with what we have,
not what we are given that separates one person from another”
Nelson Mandela.**