



Somerset Archive and Record Service

Information Leaflet

Local Government Records in Somerset

LOCAL GOVERNMENT RECORDS

Local government in Somerset has been the responsibility of a wide range of bodies since the Middle Ages onwards. Justices of the Peace, parish vestries, manor courts, boroughs and Poor Law unions all had their place in the complex pattern of local administration. Records of such bodies are considered elsewhere in this guide.

Described here are the records of more recently-created local government bodies, namely:

- [Local Boards](#)
- [Somerset County Council](#)
- [District Councils](#)
- [Parish Councils](#)

LOCAL BOARDS

In the course of the 19th century a large number of statutory authorities were set up to undertake special functions. Such authorities included Turnpike Trusts, Boards of Guardians and School Boards, all of whose records are described elsewhere in this guide. Other authorities whose functions were in general taken over by the County Council (created in 1889) and district councils (created in 1894) included the following:

Highway Boards

In 1862 the court of Quarter Sessions was permitted to set up highway districts formed from groups of parishes. Between 1894 and 1900 their functions were taken over by the County Council. Minutes and other records of Somerset's highway boards survive abundantly for the period 1863-96, and reflect the systematic attempts of the new boards to maintain the highway system of the county. The records are almost all to be found listed with the records of rural district councils (D/R/--).

Rural Sanitary Authorities

Under the Public Health Act, 1872, the public health responsibilities exercised by boards of guardians in non-urban areas were delegated to Rural Sanitary Authorities based on union boundaries. Minutes survive in great quantity for 1872-94 and are an especially valuable source for the history of public health in the county. The responsibilities of rural sanitary authorities were taken over by rural district councils in 1894, and relevant records almost all survive in the collections of those successor authorities (D/R/--).

SOMERSET COUNTY COUNCIL

Somerset County Council was created in 1889 and took over the administrative functions exercised since the Middle Ages by Quarter Sessions. The County Council's archives (some of which are not yet open for public inspection) are chiefly classified under the headings listed below. The departmental structure implicit in the classification has in many cases been modified or superseded, and some functions formerly exercised by the County Council have been transferred elsewhere.

Children's Committee (C/CHI)

Records of the former Children's Committee, chiefly comprising admission registers, log books and other papers relating to children's homes, and minutes of the Children's Committee and area sub-committees. The records cover the period c. 1930-85. (See also C/PA and C/WS.)

Civil Defence (C/CD)

An important collection chiefly reflecting civil defence activities immediately before and during the Second World War, including records of bombing incidents, evacuation schemes, air raid precautions, and emergency transport. Later civil defence records are also included as are the minutes of the Public Protection Committee, 1964-82.

Cooke Hurle Collection (C/CH)

An artificial collection created by Mrs Norah Cooke Hurle (d. 1960) of Kilve Court. Mrs Cooke Hurle became the first woman member of Somerset County Council in 1918 and was very active in the fields of education, health and social welfare. The collection chiefly comprises copy County Council and other papers relating to those subjects, and covers the period 1900-60.

County Architect (C/CA)

A small collection chiefly comprising 19th and 20th century plans of schools, social services establishments, civil defence premises, magistrates courts, police houses and police stations.

County Council (C/CC)

A collection chiefly comprising the signed minutes of meetings of the County Council from 1889, together with committee reports, agendas, attendance books, and seal registers.

District Nursing Association (C/DN)

An extensive collection containing minutes, accounts and other records of 33 District Nursing Associations covering the whole county, as well as many midwifery case registers, c. 1900-70.

Education Department (C/E)

The largest of the County Council collections, including minutes and reports of the Education Committee and related committees, HMI reports (few), school histories, and log books, attendance registers, managers' or governors' minutes, and other papers relating to a large number of (chiefly closed) Somerset schools, c. 1890-1990.

Finance Committee (C/F)

A collection containing accounting and budgetary records of the County Council from its formation in 1889. Included also are minutes and reports of the Finance Committee and related committees, as well as annual accounts received from external bodies (chiefly drainage boards, and waterworks and gas companies).

Fire Brigade (C/FB)

A small collection comprising minutes and reports of the Fire Brigade Committee, and associated committees, fire brigade log books, and miscellaneous papers, chiefly 1930-75.

General Purposes Committee (C/GP)

Under this misleading heading are gathered records of the former Clerk's Department of the County Council, and of that department's successor, the County Secretary and Solicitor's Department. These two departments have successively been responsible for most of the committee functions of the County Council; as a result many committee and sub-committee minutes, reports and agenda papers are included in the collection. The statutory functions of the County Council are reflected in extensive series of orders chiefly relating to local government boundaries and rights of way. The other contents of the collection are highly miscellaneous. The County Secretary and Solicitor's Department maintains its own registry of current deeds, contracts and other legal documents.

Libraries (C/LIB)

A small collection of records, chiefly 1905-65, many of which relate to the former Taunton Borough Library. Includes the County Library accession registers, 1946-53.

Mental Health (C/MD)

A collection containing minutes of the Mental Deficiency Act Committee, and related committees, chiefly 1917-40, and papers relating to the Cotford (Tone Vale) and Wells asylums to 1948.

Motor Taxation (C/MT)

A collection almost entirely consisting of vehicle licensing (registration) books, 1899-1974. The books provide a virtually comprehensive record of registration marks issued in the county and of the vehicles to which they applied.

Personnel Department (C/PER)

A collection containing minutes of the Staff Committee, Management Services Committee, Personnel Panel, etc., 1920-88.

Prisoners' Aid Society (C/PAS)

A collection placed artificially with the County Council archives, chiefly comprising annual reports and accounts of the Society, 1882-1963 (see also DD/X/SPAS)

Public Assistance (C/PA)

A collection containing minutes of the Public Assistance Committee and sub-committees, and records of Public Assistance institutions, including registers of inmates, masters' journals, etc., chiefly 1930- 48. (See also C/CHI, C/WS and D/G/--)

Public Health and Housing (C/PHH)

A collection of minutes and papers chiefly of the Sanitary Committee, the Public Health and Housing Committee, the Midwives Act Committee, etc., c. 1890-1970. Includes also reports of the County Medical Officer of Health and the Public Analyst (both from 1891), and extensive miscellaneous papers relating to hospitals and public health, c. 1890-1980.

Planning Committee (C/PL)

A collection chiefly consisting of minutes and reports created by various planning and related committees from c. 1935 onwards; includes also minutes and reports of Exmoor National Park Committee from 1957, and copies of planning schemes, development plans and structure plans, c. 1950-90. (For minutes and papers relating to planning see also C/S.)

Police Standing Joint Committee (C/POSJ)

A collection chiefly consisting of minutes of the Police Standing Joint Committee, and related committees, 1889-1970.

Records Committee (C/REC)

Minutes and related papers of the Records Committee, Libraries, Museums and Records Committee, etc., chiefly 1935-85.

Surveyor's Department (C/S)

Collection containing minutes of the Works Committee and associated committees, 1889-1974, inherited plans and other records relating to road and bridge maintenance (from c. 1850), and extensive miscellaneous papers relating to civil defence during the Second World War, Underwood and Dial Quarries, rights of way, etc.

Small Holdings (C/SH)

A highly miscellaneous collection containing minutes of the Diseases of Animals Committee, 1867- 1946, Somerset (War) Agricultural Executive Committee, 1917-21, Small Holdings Committee and related committees concerning agriculture, 1891-1984. Contains also large numbers of deeds relating to County Council farms and smallholdings, 17th-20th centuries, and prints and photographs of chairmen of Quarter Sessions and the County Council, 1820-1964.

Staff Committee (C/ST)

A collection comprising minutes of the Staff Committee, and other minutes and reports concerning staffing, superannuation, appeals, etc., 1917-85.

Weights and Measures (C/WM)

A small collection concerning weights and measures regulation, etc., 1890-1987, including annual reports of the Inspector for Weights and Measures.

Welfare Services (C/WS)

A collection containing minutes of the Public Assistance Committee, Welfare Services Committee, Children's Committee, Vagrancy Committee, Social Services Committee, etc., 1925-85. Contains also papers and reports relating to children's homes, public assistance institutions, etc. (See also C/CHI and C/PA.)

MINUTES RELATING TO PLANNING

A Town Planning Sub-Committee of the County Works Committee was appointed on 1 July 1930 to exercise all powers relating to town planning under the Town Planning Act, 1925, and the Local Government Act, 1929; on 8 October 1935 the Sub-Committee assumed additional powers under the Restriction of Ribbon Development Act, 1935. The Planning Committee of Somerset County Council was appointed on 4 January 1944 as a result of the Town and Country Planning Act, 1944, and assumed those functions previously exercised by the Town Planning Sub-Committee. Under the Town and Country Planning Act, 1947, the County Council's control of planning functions was reorganised on an area basis, as reflected in surviving minutes, 1948-74. Most county planning functions, other than strategic functions, were assumed by district councils in 1974. From c. 1931 until 1948, various Joint Advisory Town Planning Committees, on which representatives of the County Council and of district councils served, operated in areas of the county. Surviving minutes of the joint committees must be sought in the deposited collections of urban and rural district councils.

For minutes of the Town Planning Sub-Committee, 1935-44, see C/PL/1/15; for minutes of the County Works Committee (including some minutes of the Town Planning Sub-Committee), 1930-1944, see C/S/1/34 and C/S/1/58 (and cf. C/S/1/23). For minutes of the County Planning Committee, 1944-1947, see C/S/1/58. For minutes of the County Planning Committee (West Central Area, South East Area, North Area, North East Area, Central Area, etc), 1948-1974, see C/PL/1/Boxes 1-12. For the minutes of various Joint Advisory Planning Committees see D/R/ax 3/3/1-7, D/R/la 3/8/1-2, D/U/cl 3/1/1, and D/U/wel 3/4/1. Geographical coverage of such minutes is not always easy to predict: D/U/wel 3/4/1, for example, contains the minutes of the Joint Advisory Committee of the Wellington and Taunton Rural District Planning Scheme, 1939-1948, of which no comparable minutes appear to survive in the Taunton Borough or Rural District Council collections. District Council collections should also be consulted passim for minutes and other records concerning planning matters.

DISTRICT COUNCILS

By the Local Government Act, 1894, rural and urban district councils were created from the bodies which had previously been the sanitary authorities in their respective areas. In boroughs, the name of the corporation and council remained unchanged, and the powers and duties of an urban district council were exercised by them. This structure of district government remained in place until 1974.

The Somerset Record Office contains voluminous records of urban district councils, rural district councils and boroughs for the period 1894-1974. Such records include minutes of councils and committees, accounting and rating records, correspondence files, building control plans, and inherited records of local boards. The duties of the councils were highly miscellaneous, and at different periods included public health, utilities, rating, building control, street lighting, licensing, road maintenance, and housing.

PARISH COUNCILS

Parish Councils, the civil successors to parish vestries, were established by the Local Government Act, 1894. They were obligatory for (civil) parishes with 300 or more inhabitants, and permissive

for smaller parishes.

The Somerset Record Office contains collections for some 120 parish councils. Most such collections begin in 1894 or later and contain minutes, accounts and correspondence. A few collections contain extensive inherited records. The East Coker Parish Council collection, for example, contains a fine collection of Poor Law papers dating from the 18th and 19th centuries.