SOMERSET COUNCIL

Briefing Sheet for September 2026

Somerset Council Forecasts £29 Million Overspend: Somerset Council is forecasting an overall overspend of £29.1 million for 2026/27, just three months into the financial year. The Council's Quarter 1 report describes the position as a "matter of significant concern" and says the current level of expenditure is not financially sustainable. The largest pressures are in Children, Families and Education, forecast to overspend by £14.6 million, and Adult Services and Housing, by £11.8 million. Around £29 million of the pressures are expected to be ongoing, potentially increasing the Council's budget gap for 2027/28 from £58 million to around £87 million if they cannot be addressed.

£7 Million Children's Services Transformation Programme Approved: Somerset Council's Executive has approved spending of up to £7 million on the "My World, My Tomorrow" children's services transformation programme, which will be delivered with Newton Consulting Ltd. The programme aims to reduce the number of children unnecessarily entering care, increase in-house fostering capacity, improve placement stability and reduce reliance on expensive residential placements. The Council estimates the programme could deliver £28.4 million in cashable financial benefits by 2031/32, with savings expected to contribute towards the Council's budget from 2027/28.

Ofsted Improvement Plan: Somerset Council has set out its draft improvement plan following the Ofsted inspection which downgraded Children's services from 'Good' to 'Requires Improvement' in three of the four areas inspected. Actions include increasing frontline capacity to reduce social worker workloads, introducing a new 20-day assessment process, improving management oversight and tracking children missing education more accurately. The Council will also take action to reduce the use of inappropriate or unregistered children's homes and increase the number of children able to live in suitable, stable homes.

Best Value Improvement Plan Not Endorsed by Scrutiny: Somerset Council's cross-party Corporate and Strategic Scrutiny Committee has refused to endorse the Council's proposed Improvement and Assurance Framework in response to the Government's Best Value Notice, saying further information, clarity and assurance are needed. Members said the framework lacked clear, measurable outcomes, milestones and timescales, leaving them unable to judge whether sufficient action is being taken to reduce this year's forecast overspend, rebuild reserves or deliver planned savings. The Committee also raised concerns about a lack of evidence that transformation is reducing demand or future costs in Children's Services, Adult Social Care and SEND, and asked for the framework to return regularly to Scrutiny so progress can be properly challenged and monitored.

Changes to Planning Decisions from 31st October: New Government rules governing which planning applications can be decided by planning committees will come into force on 31st October 2026. Smaller applications, including householder developments and most schemes of 1 to 9 homes on sites below 0.5 hectares, will have to be determined by planning officers rather than committees. For larger 'Schedule 2' applications, there will be a presumption of officer determination, with referral to committee only where statutory criteria are met and the nominated senior officer and committee member agree. The Council's Constitution will now need to be amended to reflect the new arrangements, with the changes due to be considered at the next Full Council meeting.

GET SOMERSET WORKING AGAIN

Healthier Eating Workshops for Community Groups: Local voluntary and community organisations can access 'Focusing on MORE' healthier eating workshops, developed jointly by Somerset Council Public Health and an NHS dietitian. The half-day sessions provide practical, evidence-based advice on nutrition, gut health and supporting healthier eating in a positive and non-judgemental way. The workshops are open to staff and volunteers from voluntary, community and social enterprise organisations across Somerset, with shorter 30-minute online taster sessions also available. You can book a place on Eventbrite HERE.

Help Somerset Find More Foster Carers: There are currently around 700 children in care in Somerset, and more local foster carers are needed to provide safe and stable homes while helping children remain close to their schools, families and communities. Parish and town councils can help by promoting fostering through local newsletters, websites, social media and community noticeboards, and by encouraging local businesses to become Fostering Friendly employers. Residents interested in finding out more can attend informal 'Cuppa with a Carer' sessions, including upcoming events in Wedmore, Taunton, Burnham-on-Sea and Wells, or contact Fostering in Somerset on 0800 587 9900

Council Tax Reduction Consultation: Somerset Council is consulting on possible changes to its Council Tax Reduction Scheme for working-age residents from April 2027. More than 28,500 households currently receive support, costing just over £31m a year. The proposals are intended to provide greater support for some of the most vulnerable households while reducing support elsewhere so the overall cost of the scheme does not increase. Pensioners will not be affected by the proposed changes. The consultation runs **until 28th September 2026**. You can take part online via the Council's consultation portal: https://somersetcouncil.citizenspace.com/comms/council-tax-reduction-consultation-2026/