

SOMERSET COUNCIL

Briefing Sheet for May 2026

Somerset Council Sets 2026/27 Budget & Council Tax: Somerset Council has set its 2026/27 budget following the Government's decision to reject proposals for a council tax increase above the 4.99% referendum threshold, with the authority having previously considered a rise of up to 11% to address a £25 million funding gap. The Government also raised concerns about the Council's financial management and pace of transformation in response to a request for £30 million of Exceptional Financial Support, of which £25 million will support the budget gap and £5 million ongoing service transformation. The average Somerset council tax bill will increase by nearly £122 a year.

Somerset Council Budget: Somerset Council's **2025/26** budget was balanced by the use of Capital receipts from the sale of assets to the order of £43m. The 2026/27 proposed budget is also using capital sales to balance, but this year's planned used is £25m. Although, the Government gave permission for the use of Capital funding (Capitalization Direction) something not normally permitted, but allowed in exceptional circumstances, however they have suggested they would not be likely to allow this next year, for the fourth consecutive year.

Somerset Council Chief Finance Officer Recruitment: Somerset Council's efforts to appoint a permanent Chief Finance Officer faced further disruption after the latest candidate withdrew just days before taking up the role. The appointment would have marked the fifth Chief Finance Officer in four years. The authority has relied on interim arrangements, with the current interim officer costing approximately £7,000 per week. It has now been confirmed that the interim Chief Finance Officer, Clive Heaphy, will remain in post until the end of March 2027, meaning responsibility for overseeing the council's financial position and next budget will continue under interim leadership.

Somerset Council SEND Services and EHCP Delays: A recent report by Somerset Council has highlighted significant delays in the delivery of Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs), with between 0–5% of assessments being completed within the statutory 20-week timeframe. The report identifies delays in Educational Psychology advice, currently averaging 27 weeks, as a key contributor to the growing backlog, and warns that without additional resource waiting times could exceed 52 weeks. At the Council's budget meeting Somerset Conservatives proposed targeted investment to increase capacity and speed up assessments, but the amendment was not supported by the administration. However, proposals to allocate additional resource to SEND services will now be brought forward for discussion in June.

Somerset Local Housing Needs Assessment (LHNA): Somerset Council has published its latest Local Housing Needs Assessment, setting out the level and type of housing needed across the county from 2025 to 2045. The report highlights pressures around affordability, future housing demand and the need for accessible and specialist housing. While it does not set policy, it will inform the Somerset Local Plan and future housing strategies. The full assessment can be viewed here: <https://www.somerset.gov.uk/planning-buildings-and-land/somerset-local-plan/evidence-gathering-and-early-engagement/>

Local Major Route Network improvement scheme: Somerset Council are awaiting the sign off on the final business case for the A38 scheme from Edithmead (M5 J22 to Somerset border). The Strawberry line crossing works have been reduced following local consultation. Likely commencement (subject to funding) Sept/Oct 2026.

Government Planning Consultation: Government plans for amending planning consultation looks set to stop Planning authorities from having any non-major applications taken to committee for public debate and decision. This will result in any Minor applications including those for less than 10 properties being delegated to officers to decide.

Tourism Tax: The government has introduced legislation to allow council's (as part of a strategic authority) to introduce local Tourism taxes. If introduced this could seriously impact local businesses that provide services that tourists use and could drive that business elsewhere.

Somerset Retail and Leisure Needs Assessment (RLNA): Somerset Council has published its Retail and Leisure Needs Assessment, which reviews future retail and leisure demand across the county up to 2045. The report considers expenditure trends, town centre performance and whether additional retail or leisure floorspace may be required. While not a policy document, it will inform the Somerset Local Plan and future decisions on town centre development. The full assessment can be viewed here: <https://www.somerset.gov.uk/planning-buildings-and-land/somerset-local-plan/evidence-gathering-and-early-engagement/>

Somerset Council Gritter Fleet Investment: Somerset Council has approved plans to invest up to £2.3 million in new gritter lorries over the next four years, replacing ageing vehicles within its fleet of 23. Ten vehicles are nearing the end of their operational life, with increasing maintenance costs and reliability concerns. The council currently spends around £200,000 a year on servicing, with risks identified to winter service delivery if the fleet is not renewed. The new vehicles will be procured through Romaquip as part of the council's capital programme.

Somerset Leisure Centres to See Limited Investment: Somerset Council has confirmed that no major investment will be delivered in five leisure centres over the next two years, following the collapse of operator Fusion Lifestyle. The council has provided £370,000 of interim funding to keep sites in Frome, Glastonbury, Shepton Mallet, Street and Wells open while a new operator is procured. A short-term two-year contract is expected to be awarded, with providers including Everyone Active and Freedom Leisure expressing interest. Officers have confirmed the focus will be on maintaining services, with no significant upgrades planned during this period while a longer-term strategy is developed.

Foster Care Fortnight (11–24 May): Somerset Council is supporting Foster Care Fortnight, a national campaign to raise awareness of fostering and encourage more people to come forward. There are currently more than 670 children in care in Somerset, highlighting the need for more local foster carers to provide stable homes and keep children close to their communities. Everyone is encouraged to support the campaign through community engagement and social media activity. More information about fostering can be found here: www.fosteringinsomerset.org.uk

SEND Reform Plan Consultation Now Open: Consultation on the Government's SEND reforms is underway, alongside the national process for local areas to submit SEND Reform Plans by 19th June. Children's Services teams are working intensively to engage a wide range of partners and stakeholders, including children and young people with SEND, whose views are essential. If you know a young person with SEND, please encourage them to complete the SEND Reform Plan Survey for Children and Young People by Friday 15 May 2026. Have your say here: <https://www.menti.com/aln9dtyib2no>