

SOMERSET COUNCIL

Briefing Sheet for Parish & Town Councils August 2026

Government Issues Best Value Notice to Somerset Council: The Government [has issued Somerset Council with a Best Value Notice](#) following concerns about the authority's financial resilience and governance. The notice describes the council as being in a "fragile financial position" and identifies weaknesses in financial management, continued reliance on Exceptional Financial Support, low reserves and instability in financial leadership. The notice comes almost three years after Somerset Council declared a financial emergency and follows a series of financial challenges, including an expected £90 million loss on the council's commercial property investment portfolio.

A Best Value Notice is a formal government intervention and is generally regarded as the final stage before more direct intervention, such as the appointment of government commissioners, if sufficient improvement is not made. While the notice does not remove decision-making powers from the council, it requires Somerset Council to report to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government every three months for at least one year on progress against a series of improvement actions.

New Chief Finance Officer Appointed: Somerset Council has appointed Lizzie Watkin as its [new permanent Chief Finance Officer](#) (Section 151 Officer), the statutory officer responsible for the proper administration of the council's finances. Ms Watkin joins from Wiltshire Council and takes up the role from 31st July. Ms Watkin becomes the sixth person to be appointed to the role in just over four years, during a period in which the council has declared a financial emergency, accumulated borrowing of more than £1 billion and remains under significant financial pressure.

Councillors Back Stronger Financial Oversight: Somerset Council has agreed to introduce enhanced monitoring of its Financial Management Improvement Plan following the independent Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) review, which rated the authority's financial management as "weak" and awarded it one star out of five. The measures, brought forward by the Conservative opposition group, are intended to strengthen transparency and accountability as the council works to improve its financial management and deliver long-term financial sustainability.

£7 Million Property Loss Equivalent to 65,000 Pothole Repairs: During a meeting of Somerset Council's Executive, councillors discussed the sale of the former Steelite site in Stoke-on-Trent, which was purchased by the former Somerset West and Taunton Council for around £21 million and later sold for approximately £14.4 million, resulting in a loss of around £7 million. Based on Somerset Council's published average cost of repairing a pothole, that sum would have been [enough to repair around 65,000 potholes](#) across the county. The discussion formed part of wider concerns about the council's commercial property investment portfolio, which is expected to generate an overall loss of around £90 million as assets continue to be sold.

Planning Enforcement Review Rejected: Somerset Council has voted against proposals brought forward by the Conservative opposition group to carry out [a review of its Planning Enforcement Policy and associated procedures](#). The proposed review would have examined whether enforcement powers are being used consistently, whether current service standards remain effective, and whether further improvements are needed to strengthen public confidence in the planning system. During the debate, councillors from across the chamber acknowledged ongoing challenges within the planning enforcement service, including vacancies, increasing caseloads and delays in resolving cases. The Council's administration said work is already underway to strengthen the service through a business and argued that resources, rather than the policy itself, are the main issue.

Automatic Free School Meals Registration: Somerset Council has supported proposals to introduce an automatic "opt-out" system for registering eligible children for free school meals. Under the current system, families must apply for free school meals, meaning some eligible children miss out because of a lack of awareness, administrative barriers or concerns about stigma. The new approach aims to automatically identify eligible pupils using existing council data, while allowing parents to opt out if they wish. The Council will now develop a business case and implementation timetable for the new system.

Temporary Limits on Fridge and Freezer Recycling: Somerset Council has announced a temporary limit of one fridge or freezer per household at its recycling sites throughout August due to a national shortage of specialist treatment capacity for cooling appliances. The shortage has been caused by reduced UK reprocessing capacity, disruption at specialist treatment facilities and increased seasonal demand.

Review of Polling Districts and Polling Places: Somerset Council has launched a public consultation on its review of polling districts and polling places following the completion of the Local Government Boundary Commission for England's electoral review. The review aims to ensure that polling places are practical, accessible and continue to meet the needs of voters, particularly disabled electors. The consultation runs **until 3rd September 2026**. You can take part online via the Council's consultation portal: <https://somersetcouncil.citizenspace.com/democratic-services/somerset-polling-districts-and-polling-places-2026/>

Somerset Local Plan Consultation Extended: Somerset Council has extended the public consultation on the first stage of its new Local Plan **until 9th August 2026**, following requests from residents for additional time to respond. The Local Plan will guide development across Somerset to 2045, including future housing, employment, infrastructure and environmental policies. At this stage, the consultation seeks views on the scope of the plan, its vision and objectives, how communities should be engaged, and broad options for where future development could take place. Residents can take part online via the consultation portal: <https://somersetcouncil.citizenspace.com/planning/local-plan-scoping-consultation-2026/>

