SOMERSET COUNCIL

Briefing Sheet for Parish & Town Councils
November 2026

Government Announces New Wessex Mayoral Authority, with Elections Expected in May 2028: The Government has confirmed its support for establishing a new Wessex Mayoral Strategic Authority by 2028, bringing together Somerset, Dorset, Wiltshire and Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole councils. The authority would receive devolved powers and funding from central government covering areas such as transport, housing, infrastructure, skills and economic development. The Government has also announced plans to give these strategic authorities new revenue-raising powers, including the ability to introduce an Overnight Visitor Levy, effectively a Holiday Tax on overnight accommodation.

Somerset Council Forecasts £23.9 Million Overspend as Financial Pressures Continue: Somerset Council's latest financial monitoring report, covering the period to September 2026, forecasts a £23.9 million overspend for 2026/27, down from £29.1 million reported in the first quarter. The Council warns that most of the financial pressures could continue into next year, adding to an already identified £40.3 million budget gap for 2027/28. The Chief Finance Officer describes the position as one of "grave concern", warning that significant use of reserves may be required unless further savings are achieved.

Children's Commissioner Ranks Somerset 11th Most Challenging Place for Children to Grow Up: The Children's Commissioner for England's latest report, *The Childhood Lottery*, identifies Somerset as the 11th most challenging local authority area in England in which to grow up, and the lowest-scoring in the South West. The findings highlight significant concerns about services for vulnerable children. Somerset ranks third worst nationally for care placement instability, with 17.6% of children in care experiencing three or more placements in a year. It also ranks third worst for Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) timeliness, with just 6.4% issued within the statutory 20 weeks. Somerset is seventh worst for the use of unregistered alternative education provision, at 60.4%, and 13th worst for mid-year school moves among children in care, at 12.9%. The findings follow Ofsted's recent downgrade of Somerset Council's children's services from *Good* to *Requires Improvement* in three of four areas.

New National Planning Rules Reduce Applications Going to Committee: New national planning rules came into force on 31st October 2026, changing how planning applications are determined by Somerset Council. Under the National Scheme of Delegation, householder applications and most minor developments must now be decided by planning officers rather than elected councillors. Larger developments and other qualifying applications will also normally be determined by officers, unless objections from parish or town councils, or ward councillors, raise material planning considerations that conflict with officer recommendations. These cases will enter a new Gateway Process, where a senior planning officer and nominated councillor *(committee chairman)* decide whether referral to Planning Committee is justified. Applications will normally only reach committee where they raise significant economic, social, environmental or planning issues. The changes establish a national presumption in favour of officer decisions, with committee referrals becoming the exception.

GET SOMERSET WORKING AGAIN

Somerset Council Allocated £5.87 Million to Tackle Rough Sleeping: Somerset Council has been allocated £5.87 million in Government funding over three years to help people sleeping rough move into safe accommodation. The funding includes £1 million in 2026/27, £2.26 million in 2027/28 and £2.61 million in 2028/29. Working with health and voluntary sector partners, the Council will provide accommodation alongside mental health and addiction support, helping people secure long-term housing. Residents concerned about homelessness can access advice through the Council's Homelessness and Prevention service, while anyone concerned about someone sleeping rough can report this through StreetLink.

Somerset Council Approves 10% Parking Charge Increase, with Further Changes Delayed Until After May 2027 Elections: Somerset Council's Executive has approved a 10% increase in existing car parking charges across council-owned car parks from January 2027. The decision follows a county-wide parking review, which cost £272,824 in external consultancy fees, and significant public opposition, including a petition signed by nearly 4,200 residents. More substantial changes, including a new tiered pricing structure and proposed Sunday parking charges, have been postponed until autumn 2027, after the May local elections. Further proposals covering charges at currently free car parks and new on-street parking charges remain under consideration.

£100 Household Energy Payment: Following the Government's Autumn Budget, eligible households in Council Tax bands A to D will receive a one-off £100 payment towards energy costs, starting January 2027. The Government-funded scheme will be administered by Somerset Council and will cover main residences, including most Council Tax-exempt households, but exclude second homes and empty properties. Eligible residents paying Council Tax by Direct Debit will receive the payment automatically, while others will be contacted by the Council with instructions on how to apply. Residents do not need to contact the Council and are encouraged to set up a Direct Debit to receive payment promptly.

£10,000 Grants Available for Local Nature Recovery Projects: Somerset Council has launched a Government-funded Community Seed Fund offering grants of up to £10,000 to support nature recovery projects across Somerset. Applications are open to parish and town councils, community groups, charities, schools, farmers and landowners. Funding can support projects such as creating or restoring wildlife habitats, protecting priority species, connecting green spaces, and undertaking surveys or feasibility studies. Applications close on 4th December 2026. You can find out more and apply online here: https://somersetcouncil.citizenspace.com/climate-and-environment/lnrs-community-seed-fund-application-form/

Somerset Council Marks National Care Leavers Month: Throughout November Somerset Council will be celebrating National Care Leavers Month, recognising the achievements and resilience of young people who have spent time in care. This year's theme, *From Experience to Empowerment*, highlights their successes in education, employment and independent living. Coffee and cake events will take place on 16th November at County Hall, Taunton, and 20th November at Shape Mendip, Shepton Mallet, both from 10am to midday, offering opportunities to hear directly from care-experienced young people. Donation points will also be available at Council offices throughout November, collecting advent calendars, warm clothing accessories and toiletries to support care leavers.