

SOMERSET COUNCIL

Conservative Group Briefing Sheet for Parish & Town Councils October 2025

Council agrees to pay consultants £20m to balance its budget: Somerset Council has appointed Newton Europe as its “strategic partner” to deliver the Inspiring Innovation Transformation Plan and identify £101.4m of savings for 2026/27, rising to £190m by 2029/30. Newton will be paid up to £20m. The Council expects a minimum £2.50 saving for every £1 spent, though the tight timescale means significant savings must be in place by April 2026 to avoid a budget deficit.

Consultants and Agency Costs: Since declaring a financial emergency in 2023, Somerset Council has spent £33.6m on consultant and agency staff via its Matrix supplier (£12.5m in 2023/24, £14.2m in 2024/25, and £6.8m so far in 2025/26). This excludes non-Matrix spend, so the true cost could be higher. In April, 555 full time posts were cut from the local authority as part of a major restructuring exercise.

Life Factory Project Payments: Somerset Council has faced criticism over its handling of the Life Factory project, part of Glastonbury’s £23.6m Town Deal. Internal audit (SWAP) highlighted serious weaknesses in financial controls, governance, and oversight, yet significant payments continued to be authorised through 2023–24. Following questioning at Full Council, the Council admitted that earlier this year it awarded a £20,812 revenue grant to the Red Brick Building Centre Ltd, specifically to support the closure of accounts.

Planning Service Recovery Plan: A motion at Full Council (25 Sept) called for the Executive to develop a Planning Service Recovery Plan with targets to reduce planning application backlogs, restore parish and councillor engagement, strengthen enforcement, and publish quarterly reports. Instead, the ruling group voted to refer the matter to Climate & Place Scrutiny on 23 Oct. Parish councils and councillors remain restricted under the current emergency measures introduced in July.

Council Homes Purchase: Full Council approved plans to use a £3.3m underspend from the Housing Revenue Account to purchase around 15 additional council homes. The properties will initially be used to reduce reliance on costly temporary accommodation such as hotels and B&Bs, before becoming part of the general housing stock in future years. The proposal received cross-party support.

Consultation on Sunday Parking Charges: Somerset Council launched a six-week consultation on proposals to introduce Sunday charges in car parks across the county. There are currently no Sunday charges in car parks in Taunton, Wellington, Bridgwater, Chard, Crewkerne, Yeovil and Highbridge. The consultation will inform a report to Climate & Place Scrutiny before a final decision is made at Executive on 3 December. If approved, changes would take effect in early 2026. The consultation runs until 20th October:
<https://somersetcouncil.citizenspace.com/parking/copy-of-consultation/>

Community Working Review: Somerset Council has commissioned Citizen Network to lead a review of how the Council works with communities. The review will examine national

best practice, engage councillors, parish councils, VCFSE partners and statutory agencies, and co-produce a framework for future community development and engagement. Somerset Council should decide on the recommendations produced by Citizen Network in May 2026. Find out more information on the review and its current progress here:

<https://sites.google.com/view/sc-community25>

Digital Slinky Transport: Somerset Council is expanding its Digital Slinky demand-responsive transport service, funded through the Government's Bus Service Improvement grant. Following earlier rollouts in Somerton & Langport (May 2024) and Sedgemoor (August), the service launched in Taunton and Wellington on 15 September. Digital Slinky allows passengers to book via app just one hour in advance, with phone booking still available. The service runs Monday–Friday, 7.30am–5.30pm. Registration is required:

<https://www.somerset.gov.uk/roads-travel-and-parking/slinky-services/>