

SOMERSET COUNCIL

Briefing Sheet for March 2026

Government rejects 11% Council Tax Rise: Somerset Council's request to increase council tax beyond the 4.99% referendum threshold has been rejected by the Government. The authority had considered a rise of up to 11% as it sought to address a £25 million funding gap for 2026/27, reduced from £101 million the previous year. Councillors will now consider a budget based on a 4.99% increase. Concerns have been raised about transparency in the budget process and whether sufficient action was taken to balance the books before approaching Government for additional flexibility.

Government Concerns Over Council Finances: The Local Government Minister has written to Somerset Council raising significant concerns about its financial position in response to a request for £30 million of Exceptional Financial Support. Writing to council leader Bill Revans, McGovern highlighted concerns about the pace and delivery of the council's transformation plans, repeated requests to reprofile support, and statutory recommendations issued by external auditors. *'My clear expectation is that the council is taking robust action to address these specific risks and issues, as part of wider plans for your financial recovery and improvement,'* she said. £25m will be used to cover a budget gap and £5m to support the further transformation of services.

Opposition Budget Amendment Sets Out Alternative Financial Plan: The Conservative Group has tabled a budget amendment setting out proposals which could deliver a balanced Medium Term Financial Plan, begin rebuilding reserves and place the Council on a more sustainable footing. The amendment includes £2.4 million of in year savings in 2026/27 through holding several vacant posts, alongside phased workforce savings of 5% per year over three years from 2027/28, equating to £26.4 million. It also signals a reduction in agency staff reliance and proposes targeted investment in planning enforcement, additional capacity for SEND, and a recurring £500,000 uplift for gully emptying and road sweeping. The proposals are presented as a statement of intent to demonstrate an alternative financial direction with officers advising that further detailed work would be required before formal approval could be recommended.

Government to Clear Majority of Somerset SEND Deficit: The Government has confirmed it will pay off up to 90% of Somerset Council's £116 million special educational needs and disabilities deficit, subject to the Council agreeing a plan to bring future spending under control. Around £104.4 million of the Dedicated Schools Grant deficit is expected to be cleared by the Department for Education, with approximately £11.6 million remaining under the current statutory override arrangements until 2028. The agreement requires the Council to set out measures to manage demand and expenditure, with progress to be monitored by the Department for Education.

Concerns Raised Over Pothole Costs and Repair Standards: Concerns have been raised about the condition of local roads following reports that some Somerset residents are facing vehicle repair bills of between £200 and £800 due to pothole damage. Particular issues have been highlighted on the A359 between Bruton and Nunney, where residents reported multiple defects and questioned whether current repair approaches are sufficiently comprehensive. Questions have also been raised about inspection regimes, intervention thresholds, the durability of repairs and the process for assessing vehicle damage compensation claims.

Devolution and Wessex Spatial Strategy Update: The Government issued two Written Ministerial Statements on 12 February 2026 setting out its next steps on devolution and regional planning. The first outlines proposals to create Foundation Strategic Authorities as a new tier of devolved governance for areas without a mayor, with powers over transport, skills, housing, economic development, environment, health and public safety, alongside devolved funding and potential powers such as an Overnight Visitor Levy. The second launches a non statutory consultation on proposed Spatial Development Strategy geographies, including a Wessex area covering Somerset, Dorset, Wiltshire and Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole. These strategies would provide high level frameworks for housing growth and infrastructure, with local plans required to be in general conformity. The Government has invited expressions of interest from areas seeking Foundation Strategic Authority status, and Wessex leaders have signalled their intention to explore this route, with further governance arrangements and regulations expected following the consultation period.

Consultation on Proposed Reforms to the National Planning Policy Framework: The Government is still running its consultation on proposed reforms to the National Planning Policy Framework, seeking views on a revised approach to national planning policy in England. A draft version of the Framework has been published alongside the consultation and sets out the proposed policy wording, subject to feedback. The consultation runs from 16 December 2025 until 10 March 2026, and parish and town councils are encouraged to review the proposals and submit responses through the Government's Citizen Space portal here: <https://consult.communities.gov.uk/planning/proposed-reforms-to-the-national-planning-policy-f/>

Residents Invited to Shape the Future of Adult Social Care: Somerset Council is inviting residents, unpaid carers and organisations to share their views as it prepares a new Adult Social Care strategy for 2026 to 2029. The refreshed strategy will set priorities for the next three years and aims to reflect the experiences and needs of people who use care and support services, those who care for others, and professionals working in the sector. Take part in the consultation by 27 March here: <https://somersetcouncil.citizenspace.com/adult-social-care/somerset-adult-social-care-strategy-2026-2029/>