



Somerset Liberal Democrats
Chard South
 March 2026



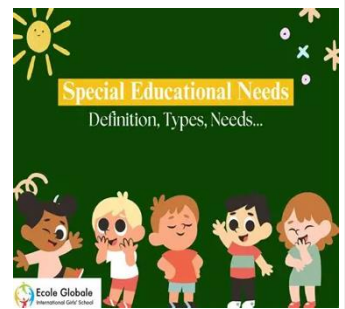
SEND reform proposals 'encouraging' but urgent, sustained reform needed

The government's SEND reform proposals (12-week consultation) set out a shift towards supporting more pupils in mainstream schools, rebalancing the EHCP system, strengthening prevention and early intervention, and reworking funding and tribunal arrangements. Somerset Council welcomes the direction but warns major challenges remain — rising independent placement costs, SEND transport pressures in rural areas and the need for sufficient, fairly distributed funding during the transition.

Key points

- More support in mainstream: Somerset plans 250+ new SEN unit places over 3 years to teach more children closer to home.
- EHCP rebalancing: aim to reserve EHCPs for those most in need and reduce costly plan maintenance. Somerset currently has 1,000+ EHCPs awaiting completion; demand up 47% in five years.
- Tribunals and funding: proposals seek to rebalance tribunal powers and funding responsibilities; councils remain concerned about historic cost pressures.
- Private placement costs: independent special school spending is rising (budget £35m vs forecast £42m); some providers show high profit margins.
- Prevention and early intervention: increased support proposed from early years onward.
- SEND transport: ongoing cost pressures for rural areas like Somerset (projected spend c. £15m this year).
- Council role: schools to carry more per-pupil costs, while councils continue to commission specialist services and curate local offers.
- Timescales and funding: proposals include staged change; Somerset stresses the announced investment must be sufficient and fairly allocated and calls for financial bridging support during transition.

Cllr Bill Revans said: "The direction of travel set out today is encouraging. However, it's vital that the next 12 weeks are not a talking shop. We cannot keep ploughing on with the same system that patently isn't working. We must now analyse the detail and grasp this opportunity for root-and-branch reform."



Planning approved for £15m Octagon Theatre transformation

Planning permission granted for a £15m refurbishment of Yeovil's 50-year-old Octagon Theatre to secure its structure and deliver major front-of-house, backstage and accessibility upgrades. Works will improve the auditorium and rehearsal space, renew plant and infrastructure, add accessible toilets and a Changing Places facility, upgrade technical stage systems (including fly and backstage crossover) and introduce energy-efficiency measures.

Funding comprises £10m from the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, £3.75m from Yeovil Town Council (loan and reserves) and just over £1.25m from ticket levy income, fundraising and Section 106 contributions via Somerset Council. The tender process can now proceed, and work is expected to start in the 2026/27 financial year.

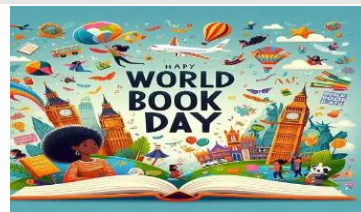


World Book Day Costume Swap launches in Somerset libraries

Families can donate and swap pre-loved World Book Day costumes at participating libraries from half term ahead of World Book Day on 5 March. Donate a clean, good-quality costume, browse the costume rail and take an outfit free of charge — no donation required.

“This Costume Swap makes a big difference — helping parents save money, reducing waste and bringing more people into our welcoming library spaces.”

Participating libraries: Chard, Glastonbury, Ilminster, Langport, Minehead, Porlock, Shepton Mallet, Street, Watchet, Williton, Yeovil, Taunton and Burnham-on-Sea. For details visit your local branch, follow @SomersetLibrariesUK or email librariesmail@somerset.gov.uk.



Plan in place to smarten Somerset's roads, pavements and cycleways

Somerset Council to spend up to £5m over 3 years to smarten roads, pavements and cycleways — more drain and gully clearance, improved signs and road markings, litter collection and vegetation clearance near walking/cycling routes.

Current road maintenance programmes focus on safety critical works which can mean lower priority issues like faded road markings, broken signs and overgrown hedges have been left.

Improvements will also be made to the council's public reporting system, to make it even easier for residents to highlight any issues on the roads.



Since January the council has received 16,332 defect reports (4,417 in the same period last year). As of 20 Feb, 35 teams have fixed 4,577 potholes. Repairs are prioritised by severity and will be completed within 2 hours, 24 hours, 7 days or 28 days depending on the category.

Somerset shortlisted for two LGC Awards

Somerset Council has been shortlisted for two 2026 Local Government Chronicle Awards: Campaign of the Year for the 'Our Story' fostering recruitment campaign, and the Diversity & Inclusion Award for 'Imagine the Possibilities', which supports young people with SEND into paid work.

The nominations recognise work to recruit and support foster carers and to expand Supported Internships (now 15 placements, supporting 100+ young people annually). Winners announced in June.

Cllr Heather Shearer said: “These nominations reflect the real-world impact of services helping vulnerable children and enabling young people with SEND to move into paid employment.”

In 2026, more than 1,000 entries were submitted from councils across the country, making shortlisting a significant achievement.



Keeping in Contact

**COME AND TALK WITH US
AT A LIB DEM SURGERY**

FIRST SATURDAY IN THE MONTH
With your Town and Unitary Councillors

AT THE GUILDHALL, CHARD



10am to 12pm

You can meet with me to discuss any concerns or for help dropping into our monthly surgery or I can arrange an appointment on a day and time that suits you feel free to give me a call on 07736 310805 or email

Jason.baker@somerset.gov.uk

Somerset Council moves into financial recovery after budget approval

Somerset Council says it is shifting from financial emergency to recovery after councillors approved the balanced 2026/27 budget. Leader Bill Revan's told Full Council that independent reports show the authority has "grasped the challenges" and is on the right track after taking difficult decisions while protecting frontline services and vulnerable residents.

The council highlighted progress in narrowing its funding gap from £101m in March 2025 to £25m in February 2026, despite the Government's Fair Funding Review hitting rural counties. Councillors agreed a 4.99% Council Tax rise, taking the average Band D bill to £1,950.30 a year (about £1.78 extra per week), still below many neighbouring unitary councils.

To close the remaining gap, the council will use one further year of Exceptional Financial Support via a Capitalisation Direction while seeking further savings through transformation. The Inspiring Innovation Transformation Programme will invest £45m by 2031, targeting roughly £135m in savings (a 3:1 return). Plans also include up to £5m more over three years to smarten up road signs and lines, to clear more gullies, pavements and cycleways, plus an extra £2m for the Exceptional Hardship Fund. The council said it will sell assets where needed to protect services and countered claims it sought an 11% tax rise as a misrepresentation of government negotiations.

Conservative Budget Amendment Risks Frontline Services and Undermines Financial Recovery for Somerset Council

The Conservative amendment to Somerset Council's budget is not a responsible plan to support residents. It is a proposal that risks removing the very capacity required to deliver essential services across our county, just as Somerset begins to move from emergency response into recovery.

The proposal hinges on over £28 million in workforce reductions, including freezing dozens of vacant posts and reducing the council's pay bill by 15% over three years. But in a county already struggling to recruit social workers, planners, highways engineers and SEND specialists, these roles are not surplus, they are the front line of the services residents depend on.

Leaving posts unfilled does not remove the work, it simply delays assessments, planning decisions, road repairs and safeguarding. Proposing a 30% cut in agency staff, without a credible recruitment plan, risks stripping out the very expertise currently holding services together.

Most concerning of all, Somerset's legally designated Chief Financial Officer, the statutory guardian of our financial integrity, has advised that this amendment lacks sufficient analysis to be confirmed as lawful, deliverable or financially sound. To press ahead regardless of that professional advice would be a deeply serious step, exposing both the council and taxpayers to risk.

There is no meaningful long-term investment in this amendment: just £1 million in short-term additions and a modest recurring uplift of £500,000 for gully clearing, hardly transformational in a county with one of England's largest rural road networks.

We are now in a recovery phase. After taking difficult but necessary decisions to avoid a Section 114 notice, Somerset is stabilising. The council's approach has been recognised by national experts, including the Local Government Association, CIPFA and our external auditors, for acting decisively in the face of crisis and doing so transparently and constructively.

This Liberal Democrat administration has taken responsibility. We have prioritised adult social care, children's services, and vulnerable residents. We have worked across parties, listened to scrutiny, and built a legally balanced budget under extreme financial pressure. And we have done so without the imposition of government commissioners, precisely because of the steps we've taken and the quality of leadership from officers and members alike.

In contrast, the Conservative amendment removes tens of millions in operational capacity without the safeguards of analysis, workforce planning or service impact assessment. In highways alone, the risk is clear: a further reduction in staff would likely mean focusing solely on statutory duties, with visible services — like pothole repair — further delayed or diminished.

Bill Revans, Leader of Somerset Liberal Democrats, said:

"We have taken tough decisions to avoid crisis while protecting the most vulnerable and maintaining frontline services. Experts agree we are on the right track. This is not the time for headline-chasing proposals that put recovery at risk. Somerset needs responsible leadership, not reckless amendments."

The Liberal Democrats believe that the people of Somerset deserve better than proposals driven by short-term headlines rather than long-term responsibility. This is a moment for constructive, transparent governance, and Somerset deserves nothing less. This is a moment for responsible leadership, not reckless amendment.