

# Public Agenda Pack



Notice of Meeting of

## **SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - COMMUNITIES**

**Wednesday, 12 March 2025 at 10.00 am**

**Luttrell Room - County Hall, Taunton TA1 4DY**

To: The members of the Scrutiny Committee - Communities

Chair: Councillor Gwil Wren

Vice-chair: Councillor Dawn Johnson

Councillor Suria Aujla  
Councillor Lance Duddridge  
Councillor Susannah Hart  
Councillor Marcus Kravis  
Councillor Tom Power  
Councillor Wes Read

Councillor Simon Coles  
Councillor Pauline Ham  
Councillor Andy Kendall  
Councillor Kathy Pearce  
Councillor Hazel Prior-Sankey

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For further information about the meeting, including how to join the meeting virtually, please contact Democratic Services: [democratic@somerset.gov.uk](mailto:democratic@somerset.gov.uk).

All members of the public are welcome to attend our meetings and ask questions or make a statement **by giving advance notice** in writing or by e-mail to the Monitoring Officer at email: [democratic@somerset.gov.uk](mailto:democratic@somerset.gov.uk) by **5pm on Thursday, 6 March 2025**.

This meeting will be open to the public and press, subject to the passing of any resolution under the Local Government Act 1972, Schedule 12A: Access to Information.

The meeting will be webcast and an audio recording made.

Issued by the Proper Officer on Tuesday, 4 March 2025

## **AGENDA**

**Scrutiny Committee - Communities - 10.00 am Wednesday, 12 March 2025**

**Public Guidance Notes contained in Agenda Annexe (Pages 5 - 6)**

**Click here to join the online meeting (Pages 7 - 8)**

### **1 Apologies for Absence**

To receive any apologies for absence.

### **2 Minutes from the Previous Meeting - 22 January 2025 (Pages 9 - 16)**

To approve the minutes from the previous meeting.

### **3 Declarations of Interest**

To receive and note any declarations of interests in respect of any matters included on the agenda for consideration at this meeting.

(The other registrable interests of Councillors of Somerset Council, arising from membership of City, Town or Parish Councils and other Local Authorities will automatically be recorded in the minutes: [City, Town & Parish Twin Hatters - Somerset Councillors 2023](#) )

### **4 Public Question Time**

The Chair to advise the Committee of any items on which members of the public have requested to speak and advise those members of the public present of the details of the Council's public participation scheme.

For those members of the public who have submitted any questions or statements, please note, a three minute time limit applies to each speaker and you will be asked to speak before Councillors debate the issue.

We are now live webcasting most of our committee meetings and you are welcome to view and listen to the discussion. The link to each webcast will be available on the meeting webpage, please see details under 'click here to join online meeting'.

## **5 Work Programme (Pages 17 - 18)**

To discuss the work programme.

To assist the discussion, the following documents are attached:-

- ) The Committee's work programme
- ) The Committee's outcome tracker

Please use the following links to view the latest Somerset Council Forward Plans and Executive Forward Plan of planned key decisions that have been published on the Council's website:

[Somerset Council Forward Plans](#)

[Somerset Council Executive Forward Plan](#)

## **6 Month 9 Budget Monitoring Report (Pages 19 - 28)**

To receive the report

## **7 Customer Service Contact Centre Response Times (Pages 29 - 36)**

To receive the presentation.

## **8 Management of Open Spaces**

To receive the presentation

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## Guidance notes for the meeting

### Council Public Meetings

The legislation that governs Council meetings requires that committee meetings are held face-to-face. The requirement is for members of the committee and key supporting officers (report authors and statutory officers) to attend in person, along with some provision for any public speakers. Provision will be made wherever possible for those who do not need to attend in person including the public and press who wish to view the meeting to be able to do so virtually.

#### Inspection of Papers

Any person wishing to inspect minutes, reports, or the background papers for any item on the agenda should contact Democratic Services at

[democraticserviceteam@somerset.gov.uk](mailto:democraticserviceteam@somerset.gov.uk) or telephone 01823 357628.

They can also be accessed via the council's website on [Committee structure - Modern Council \(somerset.gov.uk\)](#)

### Members' Code of Conduct requirements

When considering the declaration of interests and their actions as a councillor, Members are reminded of the requirements of the Members' Code of Conduct and the underpinning Principles of Public Life: Honesty; Integrity; Selflessness; Objectivity; Accountability; Openness; Leadership. The Code of Conduct can be viewed at: [Code of Conduct](#)

### Minutes of the Meeting

Details of the issues discussed, and recommendations made at the meeting will be set out in the minutes, which the Committee will be asked to approve as a correct record at its next meeting.

### Public Question Time

If you wish to speak or ask a question about any matter on the Committee's agenda please contact Democratic Services by 5pm providing 3 clear working days before the meeting. (for example, for a meeting being held on a Wednesday, the deadline will be 5pm on the Thursday prior to the meeting) Email

[democraticserviceteam@somerset.gov.uk](mailto:democraticserviceteam@somerset.gov.uk) or telephone 01823 357628.

Members of public wishing to speak or ask a question will need to attend in person or if unable can submit their question or statement in writing for an officer to read out, or alternatively can attend the meeting online.

A 20-minute time slot for Public Question Time will be set aside near the beginning of the meeting, after the minutes of the previous meeting have been agreed. Each speaker will have 3 minutes to address the committee.

You must direct your questions and comments through the Chair. You may not take a direct part in the debate. The Chair will decide when public participation is to finish. If an item on the agenda is contentious, with many people wishing to attend the meeting or if multiple speakers wish to ask questions that are similar to others, a representative will need to be nominated to present the views of a group.

### Meeting Etiquette for participants

Only speak when invited to do so by the Chair.

Mute your microphone when you are not talking.

Switch off video if you are not speaking.

Speak clearly (if you are not using video then please state your name)

If you're referring to a specific page, mention the page number.

There is a facility in Microsoft Teams under the ellipsis button called turn on live captions which provides subtitles on the screen.

### **Exclusion of Press & Public**

If when considering an item on the agenda, the Committee may consider it appropriate to pass a resolution under Section 100A (4) Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972 that the press and public be excluded from the meeting on the basis that if they were present during the business to be transacted there would be a likelihood of disclosure of exempt information, as defined under the terms of the Act.

If there are members of the public and press listening to the open part of the meeting, then the Democratic Services Officer will, at the appropriate time, ask participants to leave the meeting when any exempt or confidential information is about to be discussed.

### **Recording of meetings**

The Council supports the principles of openness and transparency. It allows filming, recording, and taking photographs at its meetings that are open to the public - providing this is done in a non-disruptive manner. Members of the public may use Facebook and Twitter or other forms of social media to report on proceedings. No filming or recording may take place when the press and public are excluded for that part of the meeting.

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Minutes of a Meeting of the Scrutiny Committee - Communities held in the John Meikle Room, The Deane House, Belvedere Road, Taunton TA1 1HE, on Wednesday, 22 January 2025 at 10.00 am

**Present:**

Cllr Gwil Wren (Chair)  
Cllr Dawn Johnson (Vice-Chair)

Cllr Suria Aujla	Cllr Simon Coles
Cllr Susannah Hart	Cllr Andy Kendall
Cllr Marcus Kravis	Cllr Kathy Pearce
Cllr Hazel Prior-Sankey	Cllr Wes Read
Cllr Henry Hobhouse	

**In attendance:**

Cllr Sarah Wakefield

**Other Members present remotely:**

Cllr Andy Dingwall	Cllr Christine Lawrence
Cllr Heather Shearer	Cllr Federica Smith-Roberts

**83 Apologies for Absence - Agenda Item 1**

Apologies were received from Councillor Pauline Ham, Councillor Tom Power and Councillor Lance Duddridge

**84 Minutes from the Previous Meeting - 11 December 2024 - Agenda Item 2**

Resolved that the minutes of the Scrutiny Committee – Communities held on 11 December 2024 be confirmed as a correct record.

**85 Declarations of Interest - Agenda Item 3**

No additional interest, new or updated declarations of interest were made at the meeting.

**86 Work Programme - Agenda Item 5**

The Chair reported a few of the committee had a successful visit to the Bridgwater CCTV office recently, this was very useful and the members were impressed. Jennie Murphy can be contacted to arrange for other members to visit if they wish.

Members had nothing to add to the work programme but if further requests please contact The Chair or Jennie Murphy.

## **87 Public Question Time - Agenda Item 4**

Mr and Mrs Orr both attended and asked their questions ahead of Agenda Item 8 :

Mr Orr described his frustration with the council's handling of planning and complaint processes. He highlighted a controversial planning decision in Taunton South that allowed 315 houses to be built within the Vivary Green Wedge, degrading this green space. Promises of a new primary school helped secure approval, but later, the land was repurposed for a care home without proper consultation or planning for the displaced schoolchildren. Mr Orr had escalated his concerns through various channels but received inadequate responses, leading to a prolonged unresolved complaint. Mr Orr questioned the effectiveness of the council's complaint system and accountability, expressing concern that the public may become disillusioned and stop raising complaints.

Cllr Frederica Smith-Roberts, Lead Member of Communities, Housing Revenue Account, Culture and Equalities and Diversity responded. She is not in a position to comment on the subject of the complaint which will be dealt with outside of the meeting. She apologised for the time taken to respond to the stage 1 answer and understood this would now be escalated to stage 2. She will be raising the issue with the relevant lead member but is aware of the workloads issues in that department.

Cllr Wren and Cllr Coles declared that they had sat on the Taunton Deane planning committee where the decision regarding building the houses was made.

Mrs Orr, a retired secondary teacher, requested a governance review to address deficiencies in the "Unreasonable Customer" policy. She felt that the policy is applied by officers without democratic oversight, which can lead to abuses of power. She suggests that Executive Councillors should approve any unreasonable customer designations before they are applied. She also believes that citizens accused of misconduct should have the same right of appeal as employees. Mrs Orr raises concerns about the potential misuse of the policy to deter engaged citizens and calls for individuals to have the right to see evidence against them and what has been written about their alleged behaviours. She requested assurances that the democratic and natural justice deficiencies in the current "Unreasonable Customer" policy will be fully addressed without further delay.

Cllr Frederica Smith-Roberts responded:

For clarity – the unreasonable customer referred to in the question is defined in our policies as unreasonable customers behaviour. Customers are not defined as unreasonable or vexatious, it is the behaviour that is being referenced within that policy and that policy will be brought back for review later this year for this committee to consider. If a customer's behaviour is said to be unreasonable then they are not stopped with interacting with the council, simply given clearly defined routes as to how they interact.

Rebecca Martin - Strategic Manager – Customer Insight, Experience & Standards responded to the question –

The "Unreasonable Customer Behaviour Policy" is not decided by a single officer but involves a multi-step process:

1. A manager from the affected service requests the policy's use, providing details about the behaviour, impacts, and any actions taken.
2. The Customer Experience Manager reviews the request, discusses it with the requesting manager, and agrees on next steps.
3. Decisions are made by two managers, and customers have the right to appeal to a third, more senior officer.

The policy needs to be reactive and quick to protect staff and manage challenging behaviour effectively. The policy focuses on customer behaviour, not character, and does not revoke legal or democratic rights. It ensures services are accessed without undue burden on the council and protects staff from extreme behaviour.

The policy is under review, with no current intention to change the decision-making process, but transparency and oversight will be improved by including anonymised summaries of decisions in annual reports.

Rebecca Martin confirmed that the Difficult Customers Policy will be reviewed and come before this committee for further discussion.

## **88 Budget Monitoring Report - Month 7 - Agenda Item 6**

Christian Evans, Head of Finance Business Partnering gave a presentation on the Communities Revenue Budget It is an opportunity for Members to feed back to Executive and if there were any further actions Members would wish to be included. Christian reminded members that regarding the overall council budget some of the underspend is unused contingency and that in the last financial year reserves were used to balance the budget. The underspend will therefore just reduce the amount of reserves required to balance the budget.

Specifically relating to the community services budget - Housing, Customer Services and Cultural Services currently forecast to be on budget. Leisure contracts continue to be predicting an underspend.

During the discussion, the following points were raised and responded to: -

- Chris Hall explained that the duplicate entries are due to the merging of the five legacy district councils. Understanding all the budgets has taken time, and there is still work to be done. They aim to address these issues in the current budget process, and if not resolved this year, they will be considered in the 2025/26 budget process.
- Members appreciated the level of detail provided in the Appendix. It was highlighted that the pressures on temporary accommodation tables shows different date lines – one calendar year and one financial year finance team will look to correct this.
- Members requested some trend data as this would be useful as a comparison and the finance team will work with the service to see what can be produced.

- Clarification was provided regarding some of the risks showing as red – occasionally government grants has been provided for a specific area however this money is held in a separate earmarked reserve, a few other areas of overspending are being offset within the budget and some of these have proved difficult for Service Directors to control, for example it is not possible to control the number of autopsies undertaken by the Coroners Services.
- It was noted that overall, we are achieving an underspend against the budget which was allocated to the Communities Directorate.
- Members were reminded this MTFP saving relating to visitor centres came through quite late in the budget setting process and that the Leisure Services budget underspend was as a result of the budget for the contracts being too high.
- Explanation was provided regarding the Street cleaning underspend relating to additional works that were being asked of one of the previous district councils and the street cleaning contract, those additional works have now been cancelled.
- Some savings are starting to now show following devolution to Bridgwater Town Council, however it was always going to be difficult to estimate the true saving.
- Chris Hall agreed to have a conversation with Finance Colleague to see if the MTFP report could be made clearer.

## **89 Environmental Health - Agenda Item 7**

Sarah Dowdon – Service Director Regulatory and Operations shared the presentation.

- Sarah highlighted the various responsibilities of the team including – food safety, public health funerals, private sector housing, dog control, Licensing. She highlighted several issues relating to –
  - the food hygiene inspections,
  - Renters Rights Bill and associated work but only small amount of funding available.
  - Increase in abandoned vehicles.
- Currently her team are working with information and policies and procedures from five legacy councils which needs combining to one system and one team approach.
- Higher demand in stray dog service and the public health funeral work
- There have been recruitment issues finding qualified officers.
- Given the transformation within the council, it is important there is the resource to undertake service transformation. The team are already looking at mobile solutions - moving processes online for customers and greater use of co-pilot.
- There are different workloads across the county regarding number of food inspections so this needs to be considered.
- Although not a big reduction in staff, the biggest pressure is at management level. So teams will change to having one overall manager for each of the teams with those managers will be supporting more staff with assistance of additional managers supporting at lower grades.

During the discussion, the following points were raised and responded to: -

- 250% increase in complaints regarding abandoned vehicle complaints – it was acknowledged that this was a particular issue in Glastonbury and not always clear who has responsibility. Issue with cars parked and left near train stations and airports which must be dealt with through the usual complaint routes. Team is still learning where the hotspots are. Cllr Wakefield confirmed that there was a difference between abandoned vehicles and those people who were having to live in vans who do not have other accommodation, the team is particularly aware of the issue in the Glastonbury area. It was not felt possible to delegate the responsibility to town/parish councils.
- It is not possible yet to share the details of team members and their responsibilities. More clarification available after 4 February regarding the roles just no details yet of who is filling each position.
- Further to a question regarding the definition of a stray dog – this is one which roams the streets and is collected by a member of the public or the police we have duty to hold it for a period to see if the owner comes forward. It was confirmed dangerous dog issues would be a matter for the police although there can be an overlap with our services. Chris Hall provided some further information regarding Stray Dog regulations: [The Environmental Protection \(Stray Dogs\) Regulations 1992](#)
- Abandoned vehicles on private land:
  - its within the Council's power to remove them rather than our duty
  - vehicles are either crossed or sold depending on the price of scrap metal or the market for second hand vehicles at the time.
  - Abandoned caravans are a separate issue relating to specific areas which will be addressed separately outside of this meeting between the Chair and officers.

Chris Hall provided some further information for members regarding responsibilities: Abandoned vehicles (no one is claiming ownership) - Council [Abandoned vehicles: local authority responsibilities - GOV.UK](#)

Uninsured / untaxed vehicle and in use – Police [Report an untaxed vehicle - GOV.UK](#)

Vehicle with an owner but untaxed on the highway – this would be responsibility of the DVLA

- Concern from members regarding loss of knowledge from staff leaving the team and will there be sufficient resource in the future. Glastonbury was highlighted as an example of where we have had a few years to prepare for that event and same rules apply which helps. It was highlighted that the managers now managing bigger teams will need extra support.
- Regarding the food hygiene certificates confirmation that the 28 days starts from the date of registration and unfortunately some businesses are still not ready to open within that timescale.

## 90 Complaints policy and Annual Customer Feedback reports - Agenda Item 8

Rebecca Martin - Strategic Manager – Customer Insight, Experience & Standards

explained the report looks at the implications around the first year of unitary operation and overview of the changes made to the policy. She highlighted the following:

- The majority of complaints are rejected or withdrawn due to the misunderstanding of what the council considers to be a complaint, e.g. complaining about a pothole is a request for service rather than a complaint.
- The team has refined the self-service online system to reduce the number of rejected/withdrawn complaints.
- Difficult to compare data between old district council and the council as complaints were logged in different ways however there is an estimated 30% increase in complaints. Her Team are looking to work with services to improve.
- There can be a delay when cases are referred to Ombudsman as they can take a while to resolve cases.
- The high number of SEND complaints reflects the national picture but work is being done on this with the Children's team and also working with the Ombudsman.

During the discussion, the following points were raised and responded to: -

- Concerns raised about the delay in responding to Mr Orr and behaviour of some officers regarding Mr Orr's complaint.
- The Committee Chair felt it was important Members focus on the overall complaints policy rather than on an individual's complaint.
- Concern from members regarding the number of SEND complaints and the service being overwhelmed and concern for the families. Reassurance provided that the service are not aware of the unreasonable customer behaviour policy being used in the SEND cases.
- The report author, Amelia Walker will be contacted and asked to share the improvement plan for SEND.
- Confirmation was provided that each complaint will be considered on an individual basis.
- Members noted that the majority of SEND complaints are upheld and wanting reassurance the children's scrutiny were aware of the issue
- Cllr Heather Shearer, Lead Member for Children, Families and Education spoke to confirm the Children's team are aware of the complaints record but they are working with the government and the ombudsman and aiming to pick up complaints early. The Department are trying to improve what they are doing for the children with SEND and their families and she will check that an update will be going to a Scrutiny Children & Families meeting
- Committee Chair will email chair of Children & Families to ensure this issue is discussed at Children & Families Scrutiny Committee.
- Recent improvements in the Local Government Ombudsman's response times were noted. The high number of upheld cases is attributed to the previous policy of not offering financial remedies unless mandated by the ombudsman, to deter a compensation culture. However, given the changing nature of complaints, particularly regarding SEND complaints, it may be wise to reconsider this approach.
- Chris Hall felt there was not a culture of not responding to the customers however there is a resourcing pressure preventing quick responses while dealing with multiple sets of data which affects response times and then the number of complaints which are escalated.

- Rebecca Martin proposed including in next year's report an overview of the usage of the policy on unreasonable behaviour. This policy is rarely used and only as a last resort, fewer than 10 times a year. This is only done to ensure communication comes through one route then appropriately passed onto correct officer for a response. Members agreed that this would be helpful information to include.
- Rebecca Martin confirmed that the data is produced from a self-service i casework system and most of the complaints arrive directly from customers, occasionally these need to be reallocated to correct teams and may not be logged until escalation, but training takes place to avoid this.
- Members raised concerns about not being informed when complaints are made against them. They requested training on handling such situations and expressed the need for council policies to protect them from complaints. It was confirmed that complaints go through the Standards Committee with the Monitoring Officer, and the unreasonable customer policy could be applied if councillors face public abuse.

Chris Hall shared this link for members information [General advice on handling abuse and intimidation | Local Government Association](#)

- The Committee Chair will consider if its necessary for a reply to come back to this Committee regarding the policy for Complaints about where Members are referred to by name in a complaint and how these complaints are dealt with. Rebecca Martin confirmed that stage 1 complaints are not seen by her team and these are dealt with within the services, however in the training her team provide to Services it would be recommended that Members are contacted if a complaint comes in in which they are named or if its an issue affecting their area.
- Regarding number of regular/serial complainants, if the customer service team notice the same complainant is contacting the same service on a regular basis then the team will raise this with the service however all valid complaints will be treated in the same way.
- Concerns expressed by members if the service was resourced adequately to cope with the number of enquiries.

**The Committee discussed the report and resolved to recommend that there should be “Democratic oversight at Executive level at the point a complainant is likely to be restricted on their access to the Council under the ‘Managing Unreasonable Customer Behaviour Policy’.**

Proposed by Cllr Hobhouse and Seconded by Cllr Kravis.

## 91 HRA Performance - Agenda Item 9

Simon Lewis - Head of Housing, Income and Tenancy Management and Ian Candlish - Head of Housing Property attended to present the report.

- They highlighted the recent change to two landlords – Somerset Council and Homes in Sedgemoor. This report shows the combined performance, and the report has been to Executive.
- The areas of concern related to Decent Homes Standard - Gas and Electrical safety certificates and Legionnaires risk assessments and Asbestos

management services The team want both these figures to be 100% so that every home is safe and resource from the team is focused on this.

- 78 % overall satisfaction from customers which is highest rate since this form of reporting started 3 years ago and this compares well with other housing providers.

During the discussion, the following points were raised and responded to: -

- Members queried the legal requirement for 100% Gas and Electrical safety certificates and the number of households without them. Chris Hall explained that regulations mandate electrical tests every 5 years. However, gaining access can be challenging if tenants refuse entry, requiring a legal injunction. Despite owning the properties, legal access is only enforceable through a court-issued injunction, leading to occasional non-compliance. Unfortunately a legal tenancy agreement document does not give legal access to a property.
- Chris Hall confirmed Private Landlords are governed by the same regulations however although a private landlord failing to meet its requirements can be reported to the Council who can attempt to enforce compliance, as a council for our own properties we would report ourselves to a Housing Regulator as appropriate where there are breaches.
- Members felt it was helpful for the report to come to this Scrutiny Committee as it relates to HRA, in addition the overall performance report considered at Corporate and Resources Committee. Members asked to continue to see this report before it being considered at Executive.
- Considering the current financial climate Members were encouraged with the low level of tenant arrears.
- Regarding damp and mold and a request from Members for this to be added as a KPI, Ian Canlish confirmed that six recommendations have been progressed including training of staff to spot damp and mold and knowing the process to follow it through.
- The team will also look at the data regarding complaints and see if the system can be changed to highlight this more easily.
- The issue regarding the quality of the data has been resolved.

**(The meeting ended at 12.53 pm)**

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**CHAIR**



## Scrutiny Communities Work Programme 2024-2025

Meeting date	Agenda item	Officer name/Job title	Service Area
12 March 2025 at 10am County Hall	Management of Open Spaces	Sarah Dowden	
	Customer Service Contact Centre Response times	Sharon Jones	
	Month 9 Budget update	Christian Evans/Kerry Louise Hepple	
30 April 2025 at 10am County Hall	HRA Housing - Landlord Options Appraisal (Verbal)	Chris Hall	
	Devolution Report	Chris Hall	

### Forward Plan Items from the 24/25 Budget:

- Quarterly updates on devolution progression and delivery of various communities services and assets to Parish and Town councils
- Quarterly updates on the progression and delivery of income generation proposals with relevant Parish and Town councils to deliver the target value to avoid cessation of the CCTV service

- Quarterly updates on the delivery of the devolution of specific assets to Yeovil Town Council regarding CMS020 – Yeovil Recreation Centre, CMS022 – Octagon Theatre
- CMS 038 – Westlands Entertainment Venue.

**Items to be added:**

- Devolution Service Level Agreements Post April 2025
- Joint with Climate & Place – Glastonbury Festival - Wash Up Session
- Air Quality ?? -Sarah Dowden

## Scrutiny Report

Scrutiny Committee: Communities  
Meeting Date – 12th March 2025



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### **2024/25 General Fund Budget Monitoring Report Communities – (Quarter 3) to end of December 2024**

Chair of Committee: Cllr Gwil Wren

Executive Member(s): Cllr Federica Smith-Roberts

Local Member(s) and Division(s) affected: All

Executive Director: Maria G Christofi - Interim Chief Finance Officer (S151)

#### **Executive Summary**

This report is the General Fund Revenue Budget Monitoring Report for Communities up to and including December 2024 (Quarter 3).

The full General Fund Revenue Monitoring Report was presented to Corporate and Resources Scrutiny Committee on Monday 24<sup>th</sup> February 2025.

#### **Recommendations:**

Scrutiny is asked to consider the following:

1. If there are any general comments or observations that they would wish to consider making to the Executive on the report.

2. If the actions set out in the report are appropriate and if there are any further actions that scrutiny would wish to include in the report.

Report Author: Christian Evans, Head of Business Partnering  
Contact Details: [Christian.evans@somerset.gov.uk](mailto:Christian.evans@somerset.gov.uk)

## **Community Services**

Lead Member for Communities, Housing Revenue Account, Culture and Equalities & Diversity: Cllr

Federica Smith-Roberts

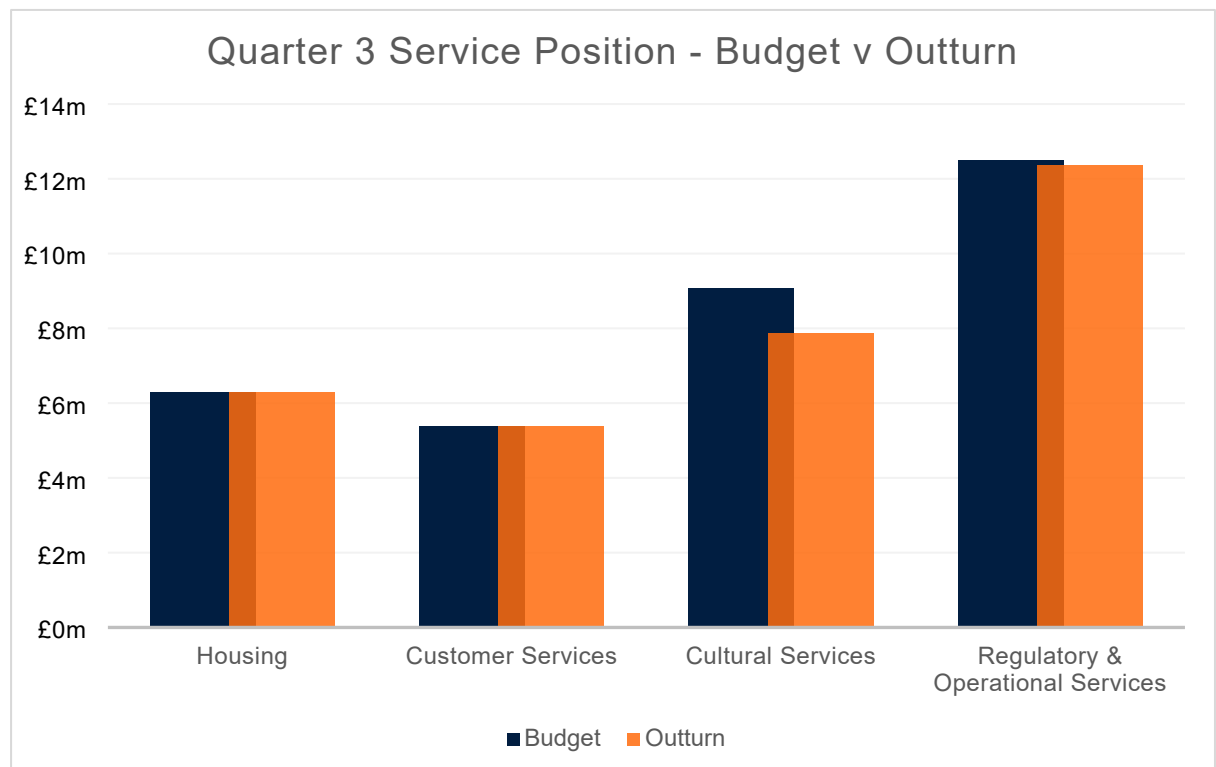
Executive Director: Chris Hall

Service Directors:

- Housing: Kirsty Larkins
- Culture: Elizabeth Dawson
- Customers: Sarah Dowden
- Regulatory and Operational: Sarah Dowden



**Chart 1: Budget versus forecast outturn graph**



**Table 1: 2024/25 Community Services as at the end of December 2024  
(Quarter 3)**

- 2024/25 net budget £33.242m, forecast underspend of £1.314m, a decrease of £0.152m from Month 7.
- 2023/24 net budget £37.400m, outturn underspend of £3.9m.

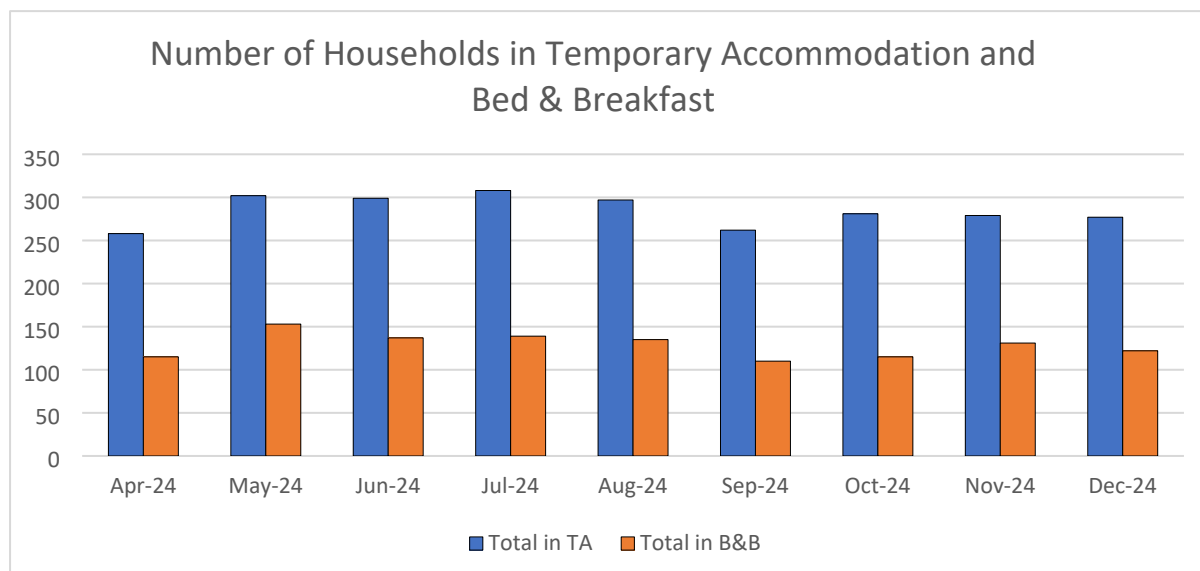
Service Area	Current Expenditure Budget £m	Current Income Budget £m	Current Net Budget £m	Full Year Projection £m	Quarter 3 Variance £m	Overspend / (Underspend)	RAG Status	Ongoing Pressure £m	One-off Pressures £m	Movement From Month 7 £m
<b>Housing</b>										
Service Director - Housing	0.146	-	0.146	0.115	(0.031)	Underspend	Green	-	-	0.000
Housing Strategy	0.331	(0.285)	0.046	0.216	0.170	Overspend	Red	-	0.170	0.050
Housing Options	10.640	(5.545)	5.095	5.569	0.474	Overspend	Red	-	0.474	0.064
Housing Enabling	0.617	(0.143)	0.474	0.376	(0.098)	Underspend	Green	-	-	0.003
Private Sector Support/ DFG's (SIP)	1.353	(0.823)	0.530	0.015	(0.515)	Underspend	Green	-	-	(0.117)
Displaced Person Service	1.069	(1.069)	-	-	-	On-budget	Green	-	-	-
<b>sub total</b>	<b>14.156</b>	<b>(7.865)</b>	<b>6.291</b>	<b>6.291</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>On-budget</b>	<b>Green</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>0.644</b>	<b>(0.000)</b>
<b>Customer Services</b>										
Customer Services	6.466	(0.721)	5.745	5.745	-	On-budget	Green	-	-	-
Somerset Lifeline	2.235	(2.600)	(0.365)	(0.365)	-	On-budget	Green	-	-	-
<b>sub total</b>	<b>8.701</b>	<b>(3.321)</b>	<b>5.380</b>	<b>5.380</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>On-budget</b>	<b>Green</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>-</b>
<b>Cultural Services</b>										
Service Director - Cultural Services	0.146	-	0.146	0.146	-	On-budget	Green	-	-	-
Library Service	5.204	(1.034)	4.170	4.170	-	On-budget	Green	-	-	-
Heritage Service	1.749	-	1.749	1.749	-	On-budget	Green	-	-	-
Leisure - Sports Centre	2.864	(0.494)	2.370	1.170	(1.200)	Underspend	Green	-	-	-
Museums	0.044	(0.003)	0.041	0.012	(0.029)	Underspend	Green	-	-	-
Theatres	2.587	(1.975)	0.612	0.612	-	On-budget	Green	-	-	-
Visitor Centres	0.262	(0.404)	(0.142)	(0.022)	0.120	Underachievement	Red	-	0.120	-
Tourism	0.111	(0.010)	0.101	0.024	(0.077)	Underspend	Green	-	-	-
(wellbeing) Community Grants	0.021	(0.001)	0.020	0.020	-	On-budget	Green	-	-	-
<b>sub total</b>	<b>12.988</b>	<b>(3.921)</b>	<b>9.067</b>	<b>7.881</b>	<b>(1.186)</b>	<b>Underspend</b>	<b>Green</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>0.120</b>	<b>-</b>
<b>Regulatory &amp; Operational Services</b>										
Registration	1.985	(2.047)	(0.062)	(0.065)	(0.003)	Overachievement	Green	-	-	(0.003)
Environmental Health	4.355	(0.328)	4.027	3.793	(0.234)	Underspend	Green	-	-	(0.001)
Bereavement Services	1.007	(2.444)	(1.437)	(1.321)	0.116	Underachievement	Red	-	0.116	0.108
Harbours	0.066	(0.028)	0.038	0.038	-	On-budget	Green	-	-	0.001
Ports	0.230	(0.148)	0.082	0.022	(0.060)	Underspend	Green	-	-	-
Street Cleansing	5.618	(0.872)	4.746	4.446	(0.300)	Underspend	Green	-	-	0.060
Open Spaces	5.711	(2.542)	3.169	3.456	0.287	Overspend	Red	-	0.287	0.067
Public Conveniences	0.558	(0.474)	0.084	0.022	(0.062)	Underspend	Green	-	-	(0.070)
(wellbeing) Community Safety	0.012	-	0.012	0.004	(0.008)	Underspend	Green	-	-	(0.001)
CCTV	0.797	(0.594)	0.203	0.200	(0.003)	Underspend	Green	-	-	(0.044)
Licensing	0.668	(1.058)	(0.390)	(0.456)	(0.066)	Overachievement	Green	-	-	0.002
Resorts	0.388	(0.204)	0.184	0.239	0.055	Overspend	Red	-	0.055	(0.001)
Coroners	1.344	-	1.344	1.510	0.166	Overspend	Red	-	0.166	0.046
Operational Support	0.689	(0.103)	0.586	0.586	-	On-budget	Green	-	-	-
Scientific Services	0.437	(0.414)	0.023	(0.009)	(0.032)	Underspend	Green	-	-	(0.033)
Markets	0.230	(0.335)	(0.105)	(0.089)	0.016	Underachievement	Red	-	0.016	0.021
<b>sub total</b>	<b>24.095</b>	<b>(11.591)</b>	<b>12.504</b>	<b>12.376</b>	<b>(0.128)</b>	<b>Underspend</b>	<b>Green</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>0.640</b>	<b>0.152</b>
<b>Community Services Total</b>	<b>59.940</b>	<b>(26.698)</b>	<b>33.242</b>	<b>31.928</b>	<b>(1.314)</b>	<b>Underspend</b>	<b>Green</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>1.404</b>	<b>0.152</b>

**Community Services - key explanations, actions & mitigating controls**

## **Housing**

The General Fund Housing Service continues to forecast a balanced outturn position for 2024/25.

The Housing Options service has seen an increase in the numbers approaching the service and the number of cases which the Council has a responsibility to provide relief or main duty accommodation. This continued demand for temporary accommodation within the last nine months is demonstrated as follows:



Actions are being progressed by the service to mitigate the need for Bed & Breakfast accommodation, and we are striving towards reducing the necessity of temporary staffing following the restructure and streamlining processes within the service.

The Housing Options service is forecasting an overspend of £1.364m. This will be mitigated by savings of £0.474m derived from the Private Sector Support / DFG service, and a drawdown of £0.890m from Earmarked Reserves ringfenced for this service area.

Savings on permanent staffing budgets within the Housing Enabling and Housing Director services have offset pressures, derived from historical income budgets within the Housing Strategy service unable to be achieved.

## **Cultural Services**

The cultural services are forecasting an underspend of £1.186m, there is no change from Month 7.

## **Regulatory and Operational Services**

Regulatory and Operational Services are forecasting an underspend of £0.128m, a decrease of £0.152m from Month 7. Regulatory and Operational Service have a number of demand led services and it is important to note that whilst there has been

a decrease in the underspend that the service are also absorbing one off pressures within the budget.

**Bereavement Services** are forecasting an overspend of £0.116m. This is due to income being lower than anticipated within Taunton Crematorium. There are significant repairs required to one of the cremators that has now been forecasted within the budget.

**Open Spaces** are forecasting an overspend of £0.287m, an increase of £0.067m from Month 7. This is due to the Ground Maintenance contact costs within the east of the county being higher than anticipated.

**Resorts** are forecasting an overspend of £0.166m. This is due to the impact on income due to a damp summer season.

**Coroners** is forecasting an overspend of £0.166m, an increase of £0.047m from Month 7. This is a demand led service.

To help mitigate the above pressures Regulatory and Operational Services have underspends across other services. Those that have improved positions since Month 7 are listed below:

**Public conveniences** are forecasting an underspend of £0.062m, an increase of £0.070m from Month 7. This is due to successful negotiated contributions towards running costs for some sites alongside controlled cost reductions.

**Table 2: Service Management Actions included in the forecast outturn**

Service Management Actions	Month 7	Quarter 3	Movement	Comments
	£m	£m	£m	
Housing	(0.530)	(0.644)	(0.114)	Implemented in the forecast. Relate to underspends within Housing are held to absorb any overspends within the service.
Cultural Services	(0.120)	(0.120)	-	Implemented in the forecast. Relate to underspends within Cultural Services are held to absorb any overspends within the service.
Regulatory and Operations	(0.454)	(0.640)	(0.186)	Implemented in the forecast. Relate to underspends within Regulatory and Operations are held to absorb any overspends within the service.
<b>Total Management Actions</b>	<b>(1.104)</b>	<b>(1.404)</b>	<b>(0.300)</b>	

## Performance of agreed MTFP savings proposals

Community Services have 36 agreed savings proposals for 2024/25 totalling £2.866m. Whilst budgets have been adjusted to reflect the savings these are monitored throughout the year to ensure that these are achieved, or alternative substitute savings are sought to offset any unachievable savings.

As at the end of December 72.7% or £2.084m of the savings have been achieved. 15.5% of the savings totalling £0.443m have been identified as on track, to achieve these savings services will need to cease and income through Fees and Charges needs to be achieved. 11.8% of the savings totalling £0.339m have been identified as at risk or unachievable. The unachievable savings are in the main due to income generation through and agreed savings prior to amalgamating 5 authorities into one. Where savings are unachievable or at-risk Community Services are offsetting underspends elsewhere within the service.

**Table 3 –MTFP savings (At risk / Unachievable)**

Community Services	Saving 2024/25	At Risk £m	Unachievable £m
Customer Services	Lifeline Services - alignment of fees and charges for new customers from April 2023	(0.106)	-
Cultural Services	Funding for Taunton Visitor Information centre		(0.114)
Regulatory & Operational Services	Contract rationalisation for grounds maintenance contracts		(0.050)
Regulatory & Operational Services	Contract rationalisation for street cleansing contracts		(0.050)
Regulatory & Operational Services	Increased Berrow & Brean Beach Parking fees		(0.012)
Regulatory & Operational Services	Fees and Charges - Beach Parking at Berrow and Brean Beaches		(0.007)
Total		(0.106)	(0.233)



**Community Services Scrutiny  
Committee – 12<sup>th</sup> March 2025**

**Budget Monitoring - Quarter 3(December)  
2024/25**

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**Somerset  
Council**

# Communities Services Quarter 3 (December) 2024/25

**Net budget of £33.242m**  
**Underspend of £1.314m (3.95%) a decrease**  
**of £0.152m since month 7.**

- Housing currently forecasted on budget
- Customer Services forecasted on budget
- Cultural Services forecasted underspend £1.186m mainly due to the underspend in Leisure
- Regulatory & Operational Services forecasting an underspend of £0.128m

Service Area	Current Expenditure Budget £m	Current Income Budget £m	Current Net Budget £m	Full Year Projection £m	Quarter 3 Variance £m	Overspend / (Underspend)	RAG Status	Ongoing Pressure £m	One-off Pressures £m	Movement From Month 7 £m
<b>Housing</b>										
Service Director - Housing	0.146	-	0.146	0.115	(0.031)	Underspend	Green	-	-	0.000
Housing Strategy	0.331	(0.285)	0.046	0.216	0.170	Overspend	Red	-	0.170	0.050
Housing Options	10.640	(5.545)	5.095	5.569	0.474	Overspend	Red	-	0.474	0.064
Housing Enabling	0.617	(0.143)	0.474	0.376	(0.098)	Underspend	Green	-	-	0.003
Private Sector Support/ DFG's (SIP)	1.353	(0.823)	0.530	0.015	(0.515)	Underspend	Green	-	-	(0.117)
Displaced Person Service	1.069	(1.069)	-	-	-	On-budget	Green	-	-	-
<b>sub total</b>	<b>14.156</b>	<b>(7.865)</b>	<b>6.291</b>	<b>6.291</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>On-budget</b>	<b>Green</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>0.644</b>	<b>(0.000)</b>
<b>Customer Services</b>										
Customer Services	6.466	(0.721)	5.745	5.745	-	On-budget	Green	-	-	-
Somerset Lifeline	2.235	(2.600)	(0.365)	(0.365)	-	On-budget	Green	-	-	-
<b>sub total</b>	<b>8.701</b>	<b>(3.321)</b>	<b>5.380</b>	<b>5.380</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>On-budget</b>	<b>Green</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>-</b>
<b>Cultural Services</b>										
Service Director - Cultural Services	0.146	-	0.146	0.146	-	On-budget	Green	-	-	-
Library Service	5.204	(1.034)	4.170	4.170	-	On-budget	Green	-	-	-
Heritage Service	1.749	-	1.749	1.749	-	On-budget	Green	-	-	-
Leisure - Sports Centre	2.864	(0.494)	2.370	1.170	(1.200)	Underspend	Green	-	-	-
Museums	0.044	(0.003)	0.041	0.012	(0.029)	Underspend	Green	-	-	-
Theatres	2.587	(1.975)	0.612	0.612	-	On-budget	Green	-	-	-
Visitor Centres	0.262	(0.404)	(0.142)	(0.022)	0.120	Underachievement	Red	-	0.120	-
Tourism	0.111	(0.010)	0.101	0.024	(0.077)	Underspend	Green	-	-	-
(wellbeing) Community Grants	0.021	(0.001)	0.020	0.020	-	On-budget	Green	-	-	-
<b>sub total</b>	<b>12.988</b>	<b>(3.921)</b>	<b>9.067</b>	<b>7.881</b>	<b>(1.186)</b>	<b>Underspend</b>	<b>Green</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>0.120</b>	<b>-</b>
<b>Regulatory &amp; Operational Services</b>										
Registration	1.985	(2.047)	(0.062)	(0.065)	(0.003)	Overachievement	Green	-	-	(0.003)
Environmental Health	4.355	(0.328)	4.027	3.793	(0.234)	Underspend	Green	-	-	(0.001)
Bereavement Services	1.007	(2.444)	(1.437)	(1.321)	0.116	Underachievement	Red	-	0.116	0.108
Harbours	0.066	(0.028)	0.038	0.038	-	On-budget	Green	-	-	0.001
Ports	0.230	(0.148)	0.082	0.022	(0.060)	Underspend	Green	-	-	-
Street Cleansing	5.618	(0.872)	4.746	4.446	(0.300)	Underspend	Green	-	-	0.060
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(wellbeing) Community Safety	0.012	-	0.012	0.004	(0.008)	Underspend	Green	-	-	(0.001)
CCTV	0.797	(0.594)	0.203	0.200	(0.003)	Underspend	Green	-	-	(0.044)
Licensing	0.668	(1.058)	(0.390)	(0.456)	(0.066)	Overachievement	Green	-	-	0.002
Resorts	0.388	(0.204)	0.184	0.239	0.055	Overspend	Red	-	0.055	(0.001)
Coroners	1.344	-	1.344	1.510	0.166	Overspend	Red	-	0.166	0.046
Operational Support	0.689	(0.103)	0.586	0.586	-	On-budget	Green	-	-	-
Scientific Services	0.437	(0.414)	0.023	(0.009)	(0.032)	Underspend	Green	-	-	(0.033)
Markets	0.230	(0.335)	(0.105)	(0.089)	0.016	Underachievement	Red	-	0.016	0.021
<b>sub total</b>	<b>24.095</b>	<b>(11.591)</b>	<b>12.504</b>	<b>12.376</b>	<b>(0.128)</b>	<b>Underspend</b>	<b>Green</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>0.640</b>	<b>0.152</b>
<b>Community Services Total</b>	<b>59.940</b>	<b>(26.698)</b>	<b>33.242</b>	<b>31.928</b>	<b>(1.314)</b>	<b>Underspend</b>	<b>Green</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>1.404</b>	<b>0.152</b>

# Communities Services MTFP savings tracker 2024/25

- Total 24/25 savings £2.866m
- Savings 'Achieved' 72.7% - £2.084m
- Savings 'On track' 15.5% - £0.443m
- Savings 'At Risk' 3.7% - £0.106m
- Savings 'Unachievable' 8.1% - £0.233m

Where savings are 'At risk' or 'Unachievable', Savings have been offset by underspends elsewhere within Community Services.

Community Services	Saving 2024/25	At Risk £m	Unachievable £m
Customer Services	Lifeline Services - alignment of fees and charges for new customers from April 2023	(0.106)	-
Cultural Services	Funding for Taunton Visitor Information centre		(0.114)
Regulatory & Operational Services	Contract rationalisation for grounds maintenance contracts		(0.050)
Regulatory & Operational Services	Contract rationalisation for street cleansing contracts		(0.050)
Regulatory & Operational Services	Increased Berrow & Brean Beach Parking fees		(0.012)
Regulatory & Operational Services	Fees and Charges - Beach Parking at Berrow and Brean Beaches		(0.007)
Total		(0.106)	(0.233)

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# Customer Services

## Scrutiny Communities

12 March 2024



**Somerset**  
Council

# Customer Service Performance – 2024



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- 609,018 calls
- 79% resolved at first point of contact (increase by 5% from 2023)

- Target for average wait time is 5 minutes
  - Safeguarding is under 40 secs
- Queues with biggest challenges
  - Council Tax – Back office on legacy systems
  - Adults – peaks in demand, staff turnover



- 13038 customer surveys completed
- 84.77% satisfaction

## Welcome BOT

- ❖ 88% to the right place
- ❖ Remaining 12%:
  - No long queue options
  - Caller to a queue in under 1 minute
  - Where BOT doesn't recognise customer speaks to an advisor



- 559 social media enquiries answered
- 8,580 website Contact Us forms received
- 156,151 Emails
- 2,174 Web messenger enquiries
- Response time within 24 hours



29,203 visitors - Percentage in each area - 28% Bridgwater, 27% Taunton, 23% Shepton Mallet, 20% Yeovil

- Converted 5 Customer Service Points to Customer Access Points
- Digital First approach in all CSP



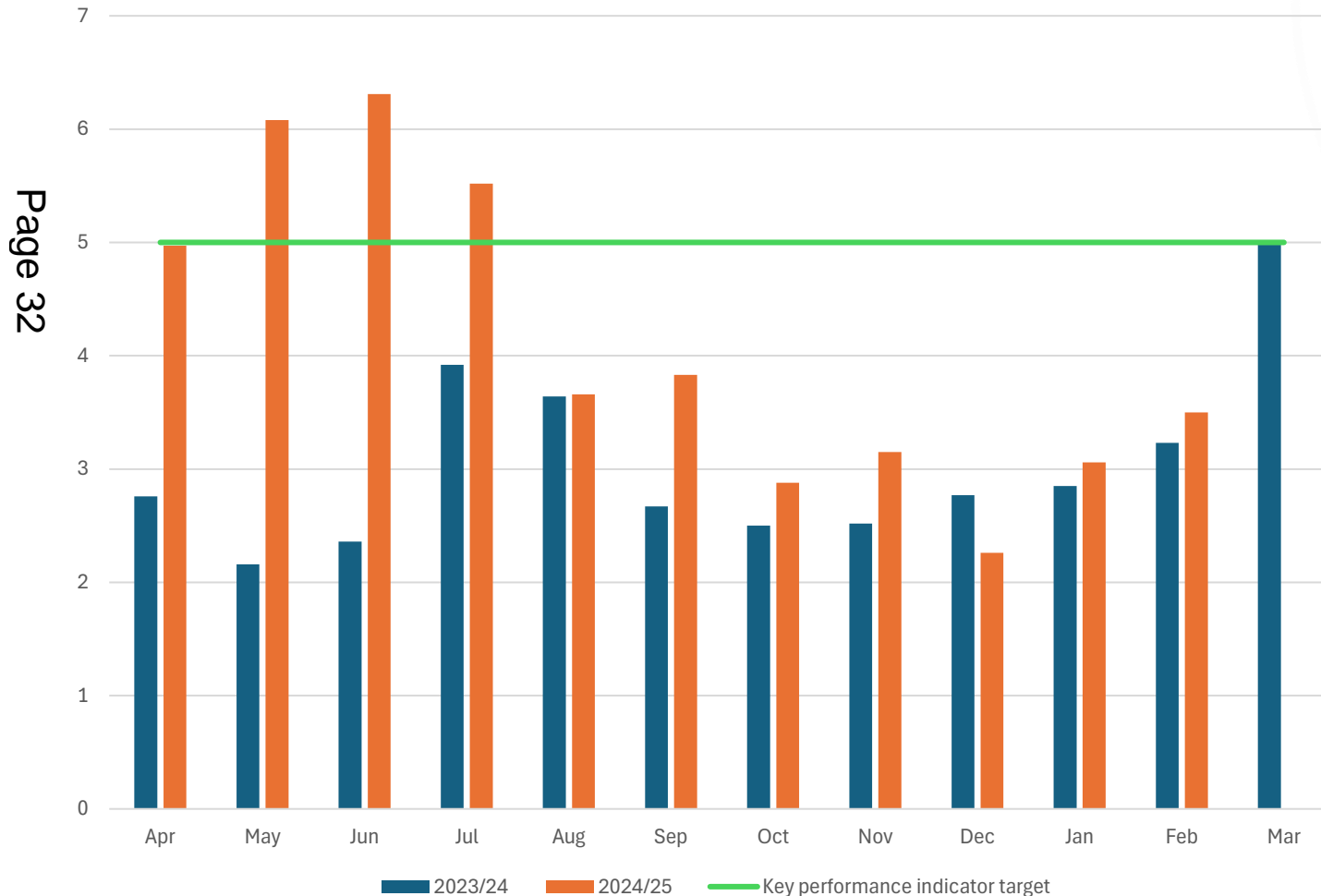
# Top 8 services January 24 - December 24

Service Name	Volume	% Volume	Avg Wait	Avg Handle
Revenues & Benefits (Inc. Capita)	175831	29%	00:05:24	00:10:19
General Enquiries	88009	14%	00:02:50	00:06:09
Housing	72545	12%	00:05:16	00:09:01
Waste	57319	9%	00:04:58	00:07:51
Adults	40320	7%	00:06:18	00:18:13
Childrens	36202	6%	00:01:56	00:11:21
Registration Services	21534	4%	00:03:21	00:05:53
Highways	20506	3%	00:02:09	00:09:56

- During periods of high demand or limited resources, there may be instances where a maximum wait time occasionally exceeds one hour.
- Complex queue system, our teams are still dealing with legacy processes, with back offices are not aligned.
- Our current resources are not in the right areas so encouraging staff to learn another area where we have pressure to build more resilience, such as Adults.

# Call wait times

Average call wait times



## Demand/Resources

- September 2023 – Local Government Reform funding for 7 staff was removed
- March 2024 - 75% increase in calls for Council Tax due to Annual Billing
- May/June 2024 - General Election unexpected peaks in demand
- Summer 2024 - high staff turn-over

## Mitigations

- Prioritise safeguarding calls
- Customers are single handled more with less transfers between queues
- Working with services to reduce pressures
- Multi contact handling and multi skilling staff to build more resilience over priority queues
- Channel shift approach to reduce demand on calls where customer services don't add value



# Digital First – what does this mean to our customers

- Where a service can be delivered through a digital solution and customer services add no value, we will strongly encourage our customers to use this channel, suggesting help from relatives, trusted friend or using our Customer Service Points (CSPs) or Customer Access Points (CAPs)
- For some services, the telephony channel maybe removed in favour of the digital one.
- A mediated service will exist for those customers not able to access digital solutions and a robust Equalities Impact Assessment will be completed for each decision made.
- This frees up customer services time deal to with the most vulnerable customers and services such as Adults Social care, Children's Social Care, Housing, Benefits and Council Tax.

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## Successes so far:

**Waste services:** Used ability to push text (SMS) link to customer's phone. Conversations about the using online to try and change customer behaviours. Channel shift has increase from 67% in November 2023 to as high as nearly 88% in June 2024, over 30,000 calls moved to online

**Payments:** Fully compliant (Payment Card Industry Data Security Standard) payments can now **only** be taken via Automated Telephony Payment or online. Exceptional payment process in place.

**Customer Service Points (CSP):** Focused on self-serve. A space to promote and support customers to use digital channels. 20% of footfall in our CSP now using self-serve.

**Customer Service Points converted to Customer Access Points:** Digital support in locations to support use of Video Assistant Live (VAL). VAL calls target is to answer within 10 minutes. Saving 4.76 staff.

Deliver a ***New Ways of Working (NWOW) plan*** detailing how Customer Services, working alongside Council services, will transform the contact channels that customers of Somerset Council will use to access services at the front door.

With a focus on 'digital first' delivery set out in the Council's [Customer](#) and [Digital](#) strategies, the NWOW plan will identify efficiencies in delivery, utilising new and existing technologies.

#### **Four areas of focus**

**Digital First/Channel shift** opportunities to drive self-help and reduce demand for the service.

**Service Standard & Quality** - length of call, wait time, failure demand, where the handoff between first point of contact and service lies.

**Do more at the front door/grow the service**- What can Customer Services take on as a more cost-effective model of delivery that is better for the customer and the service. Increasing income and releasing savings in services.

**Increase our own efficiency** – Restructure, Functional leads, building capacity in right areas to bring more resilience, skills matrix and more fluid approach to resources, AI technology.

Work has already started in many areas but delivery plans and overall programme plan are currently being developed.

# Challenges for 2025

- Council Tax billing
- Impact of organisational restructure
- Risk of increase in failure demand
- Alignment of legacy Local Government Reorganisation queues
- Staff retention - Loss of experienced staff to other services
- Contact Centre architecture procurement exercise
- Advisor burnout over high demand months March to July
- End of Capita contract September 2025 and return of Revenues and Benefits service in Mendip area
- Revenues and Benefits system consolidation project
- Unplanned spikes in demand – weather
- Creating a strong digital first approach culture within the organisation

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