# Somerset Council trials AI to reduce delays in special needs reports



Somerset Council is embarking on an innovative initiative to trial artificial intelligence (AI) as a means to alleviate the chronic delays in processing reports for children with special educational needs. This move comes as part of a broader trend among various councils across England employing technology to enhance operational efficiencies and outputs in public service.

At the forefront of this effort is Councillor Heather Shearer, the Liberal Democrat lead for children, families, and education, who underscore the trial's preliminary nature. She noted that while AI will play a role in drafting routine reports, particularly education, health, and care plans (EHCPs), its application will be cautious and highly regulated. “We will be using this with consideration and care,” Shearer stated, highlighting the need for quality assurance in the reports which ultimately guide the care and support provided to vulnerable children.

The optimistic outlook towards AI's potential benefits is mirrored by sentiments from stakeholders like Ruth Hobbs, chief executive of Somerset Parent Carer Forum. While Hobbs acknowledged the advantages of AI in reducing the administrative burden on case workers, she also raised valid concerns regarding the handling of sensitive information pertaining to vulnerable children. “If it means spending more time face-to-face with children and parents then that has to be a good thing,” she added, emphasising the dual necessity of efficiency and safeguarding privacy.

The urgency behind this trial is underscored by troubling statistics. Recent data revealed that only 26.9% of EHCP assessments in Somerset met the mandated 20-week completion timeframe. This dismal figure has alarmed parents and guardians, who rely on timely assessments to secure necessary support. Somerset Council attributed these delays to structural challenges, including a significant staffing restructure and a backlog of cases with complex needs. The introduction of AI, alongside ongoing staffing strategies, may provide a much-needed solution to these pressing issues.

Moreover, Somerset Council is not alone in its exploration of AI technologies. The council has previously piloted Microsoft Copilot, a tool designed to enhance productivity, distributing 300 licenses to staff volunteers. Early feedback suggests this initiative has led to time savings of up to four hours per week, with many participants reporting improved focus and job satisfaction. Such positive outcomes could signal a broader integration of AI tools throughout various council operations in the future.

This trial aligns with a significant government initiative aimed at reforming bureaucratic processes across the public sector. The UK government is currently testing an experimental AI tool aimed at digitising council planning records, a move intended to modernise operations and enable more effective decision-making. By harnessing AI for these tasks, councils hope to streamline processes, ultimately fostering an environment conducive to meeting urgent housing and support targets.

As Somerset Council moves forward with its AI trial for EHCPs, it remains essential to continually assess the impact on both efficiency and data privacy. With public opinion and stakeholder feedback being pivotal, the council has expressed its eagerness to engage with those affected by these changes. The successful implementation of AI could herald a transformative period for services supporting children with special educational needs, provided that the balance between innovation and responsibility is carefully maintained.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.burnham-on-sea.com/news/somerset-council-trialling-artificial-intelligence-for-special-needs-reports/> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.local.gov.uk/case-studies/somerset-council-using-microsoft-copilot-improve-productivity> - In November 2023, Somerset Council initiated a project to explore Microsoft Copilot, aiming to enhance workforce efficiency. They distributed 300 Copilot licenses to staff volunteers, leading to significant productivity gains. Users reported saving between 2 to 4 hours weekly, with 75% noting improved focus and 53% finding their work more enjoyable. The council plans to expand Copilot's use based on these positive outcomes.
3. <https://www.invision360.com/vita-ehcp> - VITA by Invision360 offers a generative AI-powered module designed to assist in drafting Education, Health, and Care Plans (EHCPs). This tool aims to streamline the EHCP process, ensuring timely and high-quality plans for children and young people with special educational needs. VITA emphasizes maintaining the human element in the process, with professionals reviewing and refining AI-generated drafts to ensure accuracy and personalization.
4. <https://www.somerset.gov.uk/news/somerset-council-working-with-the-nhs-to-digitise-adult-social-care-in-somerset/> - Somerset Council is collaborating with the NHS to digitize adult social care, implementing sensors in care homes and individuals' residences to reduce avoidable falls, which cost the NHS £2.3 billion annually. Mel Lock, Executive Director of Adult Social Care at Somerset Council, highlighted the program's role in supporting carers and embracing technology to benefit communities.
5. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/experimental-ai-could-help-councils-meet-housing-targets-by-digitising-records> - The UK government is developing an AI tool to digitize council planning records, converting old documents into machine-readable data in seconds. This initiative aims to modernize planning processes, enabling faster, more informed decisions and supporting the goal of building 1.5 million homes. The tool is currently in early testing, with potential to significantly reduce the time required for digitization.
6. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c9wljqld47po> - In recent months, only 26.9% of Education, Health and Care Plan assessments in Somerset were completed within the required 20-week timeframe. The council acknowledged challenges, including a staffing restructure and a backlog of complex cases, and expressed confidence in meeting targets over time. The delays have raised concerns among parents and carers regarding the timeliness of support for children with special educational needs.
7. <https://www.communitycare.co.uk/2019/06/14/county-becomes-latest-authority-trial-predictive-algorithms-childrens-social-work/> - In 2019, Somerset Council collaborated with the Behavioural Insights Team to trial machine learning algorithms in children's social work. The initiative aimed to identify potential recurring cases at the assessment stage, with initial results indicating a 95% success rate. This approach sought to enhance decision-making processes and improve outcomes for children and young people.