# Somerset Council trials AI to speed up children’s special needs reports amid long delays



Somerset Council is currently trialling artificial intelligence (AI) to address the protracted waiting times for children's special educational needs (SEN) reports. This initiative positions the council alongside several other English authorities seeking to leverage AI in enhancing the efficiency of administrative tasks. The use of AI is focused on drafting Education, Health, and Care Plans (EHCPs), which are crucial for the support of vulnerable children.

Councillor Heather Shearer, the Liberal Democrat lead for children, families, and education, emphasised that the AI will only be employed for basic report drafting at this stage. The council is approaching this new technology with caution, seeking to balance efficiency with the need for high-quality work. “We need to ensure our work is always excellent quality and done in a timely manner, so we can spend more time helping parents and children,” Shearer stated. The integration of AI could potentially enable staff to redirect their time towards direct engagement with families, rather than being encumbered by paperwork.

Initial reactions from community stakeholders highlight a blend of optimism and concern. Ruth Hobbs, chief executive of Somerset Parent Carer Forum, acknowledged the potential benefits but also raised issues regarding the protection of sensitive data. The forum is open to exploring the effectiveness of the AI trial, especially if it leads to more face-to-face time for case workers, which has long been identified as a critical factor in improving the support provided to families.

The impetus behind this initiative is underscored by pressing statistics: in recent months, only 26.9% of EHCP assessments in Somerset were completed within the mandated 20-week timeframe. This delay is attributed to various challenges, including staffing restructures and a backlog of complex cases. The council has expressed confidence that, with innovations like AI, they can progressively meet their targets.

Moreover, Somerset Council is not alone in its tech-driven approach; it has been exploring Microsoft Copilot for broader workforce productivity improvements. Since November 2023, the council has issued 300 licences to staff volunteers, resulting in reports of significant time savings and enhanced job satisfaction. Such initiatives indicate a commitment to modernise operations and improve service delivery across various departments.

The use of generative AI tools, similar to those offered by Invision360's VITA, also aims to streamline the drafting process for EHCPs. These tools produce initial drafts for review by SEND professionals, who maintain oversight to ensure that the resulting plans are person-centred. This approach complements Somerset’s objectives by alleviating some administrative burdens, thereby freeing professionals to concentrate on direct service delivery.

As Somerset Council advances in its exploration of AI, it has also observed a shift towards digitisation in other areas, collaborating with the NHS to enhance adult social care. This broader initiative aims to integrate technology in care settings, further reflecting the council’s commitment to improving the efficiency and quality of services through innovative solutions.

In a landscape marked by the growing need for streamlined processes, the council’s trial of AI presents both opportunities and challenges. While the potential for enhanced productivity and faster reporting is evident, the successful integration of these technologies hinges on rigorous safeguards around data privacy and quality assurance. As this trial progresses, Somerset Council remains keen to gather feedback from parents, professionals, and other stakeholders to ensure the initiative meets its intended goals without compromising the sensitivities involved in working with vulnerable populations.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.burnham-on-sea.com/news/somerset-council-trialling-artificial-intelligence-for-special-needs-reports/), [[5]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c9wljqld47po)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.burnham-on-sea.com/news/somerset-council-trialling-artificial-intelligence-for-special-needs-reports/), [[3]](https://www.invision360.com/vita-ehcp)
* Paragraph 3 – [[5]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c9wljqld47po), [[2]](https://www.local.gov.uk/case-studies/somerset-council-using-microsoft-copilot-improve-productivity)
* Paragraph 4 – [[6]](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/experimental-ai-could-help-councils-meet-housing-targets-by-digitising-records), [[4]](https://www.somerset.gov.uk/news/somerset-council-working-with-the-nhs-to-digitise-adult-social-care-in-somerset/)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://www.burnham-on-sea.com/news/somerset-council-trialling-artificial-intelligence-for-special-needs-reports/), [[2]](https://www.local.gov.uk/case-studies/somerset-council-using-microsoft-copilot-improve-productivity)

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## 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 provided 300 Copilot licenses to staff volunteers, leading to significant productivity gains. Users reported saving between 2 and 4 hours weekly, with 75% noting improved focus and 53% finding their work more enjoyable. This initiative aligns with the council's goal to modernize operations and improve service delivery.
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). The tool generates initial drafts, which are then reviewed and refined by SEND professionals, aiming to reduce the time spent on administrative tasks and improve the quality and timeliness of EHCPs. VITA emphasizes maintaining human oversight to ensure person-centered planning and co-production.
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. The initiative aims to enhance care quality and efficiency through technology, with support from local care providers and the registered care provider association.
5. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c9wljqld47po> - In recent months, only 26.9% of Education, Health, and Care Plan assessments for children with special educational needs and disabilities 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.
6. <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 technology 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 and could significantly reduce the time required to digitize planning documents.
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. The council planned to deploy this learning in tools to assist social workers in supporting children and young people effectively.