

Meeting of Somerset County Council held in the Council Chamber, Shire Hall,
Taunton on Wednesday 19 July 2017 at 10.00am.

Written responses to questions to Cabinet Members

The following questions were asked of the Cabinet Members during the County Council meeting, who undertook to give written responses:

Questions submitted in advance of the meeting:

1. Council's pension fund investment policy

From Cllr Amanda Broom

In view of the negative interest shown by many residents of Somerset into the subject of fracking, can I ask for clarification of the Council's pension fund investment policy in relation to fracking companies? If the Council's policy is to invest can I ask that consideration is given to reviewing this policy with a view to ceasing further investment into fracking companies. This may be difficult from the investment and legal perspective, but I consider this vital in terms of providing reassurance to our residents on the Council's stance.

Response from Cllr David Hall, Cabinet Member for Resources and Economic Development

First thanks for the question and a bit of background to the pensions committee. This is a cross-party committee with independent representation, so this Council does not control investments directly. Second, the Committee has considered general ethical investments on a regular basis and indeed focussed on some specific ethical questions (although never specifically fracking). It has consistently decided that it does not wish to exclude any type of investment. Finally, from a purely practical point of view there is also the issue of what constitutes a "fracking company". We are not aware of any company holding which is 100% dedicated to fracking, although we do not specifically track this. The question is how do we treat a company that derives, for example, 5% of revenue from fracking, or a company that doesn't undertake fracking but either supplies the industry or buys the produce, assuming companies make sufficient disclosure for us to be aware of this activity? Again thanks for a very interesting question. I will give a more detailed written response.

2. Safe journeys for children to schools

From Cllr Liz Leyshon

Following the recent school bus fire on the Crispin School route, the third in a matter of a few years, and the subsequent delay in informing the school of the incident:

Can Council assure the parents of pupils in Somerset schools, and their Headteachers, that every effort is being made to ensure the safest possible journeys for children who are transported by bus operators contracted by Somerset County Council?

Can Council tell me what steps are being taken to implement appropriate and timely communication with schools in the event of an incident involving the school bus transport of Somerset's children?

Response from Cllr John Woodman, Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport

The safety of children on School Transport is paramount and I can give an assurance that every effort is made to ensure the safest possible journeys for children into school. Operators wishing to provide these services are thoroughly checked when applying to become suppliers. In addition to this we manage all school contracts closely and record and investigate all incidents that occur on School Transport. With regard to vehicle maintenance we work closely with the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency (DVSA) to carry out vehicle checks at Schools across the County each year. In the 2016/17 academic year we have carried out twenty six checks at school sites and we already have eight planned for the 2017/18 academic year. These checks are undertaken at random with neither schools nor operators knowing when and where they will take place. Defects found by DVSA staff can lead to a Public Inquiry being held by the Traffic Commissioner with the Operator who can impose a number of penalties up to and including the withdrawal of an operator's licence.

With regard to contact with schools regarding timely communications in the event of incidents involving School Transport, I can confirm that there is a procedure for ensuring that schools are advised as soon as possible after Transporting Somerset becomes aware of an incident. Following this incident, I have reviewed the process and asked that it is adhered to in future.

3. Hinkley Nuclear Power Station

From Cllr Simon Coles

The National Audit Office recently reported that the development of Hinkley Nuclear Power Station was not good value for money - indeed a very bad deal. Since the NAO Report, EDF, the main developers of the Station, has announced that the cost has increased by £1.5 billion to £19.5 billion and the expected date when the Station will be generating electricity has receded by 15 months - making it an even worse deal. EDF has blamed British regulation of nuclear power for these changes. However EDF should have known about the British regulatory regimen at the planning stage and the excuse is a cover for its own incompetent planning and management.

Based on EDF experience of building nuclear power stations in Finland and France, it can be expected that the new Hinkley Station will increase in cost still more and the time to generation recede still further. This will turn a bad deal into a terrible deal. By the time Hinkley Point is capable of generating electricity - if ever - it will be a white elephant.

Whilst EDF and its Chinese partner are meeting the costs of construction, the British public will eventually have to pay for the electricity generated at a cost way above the cost of renewable electricity at that time. Furthermore the cost of renewable electricity is rapidly decreasing, battery technology is fast developing and sophisticated techniques for managing the demand and supply of electricity will make the concept of a national grid obsolete before Hinkley Point starts generating electricity. These developments also overcome the intermittent supply from some forms of renewable electricity making the need for nuclear power unnecessary.

What plans does Somerset County Council have in place, to ensure that; The promised infrastructure projects will actually be forthcoming? That guarantees are sufficiently robust, to adequately compensate for any failure to deliver by EDF or any other contractor in the supply chain?

Response from Cllr David Hall, Cabinet Member for Resources and Economic Development

The report by the National Audit Office assesses the Government's deal for HPC and makes recommendations for how it now oversees the project and how it agrees deals for other major projects. The more recent announcement by EDF Energy follows a risk review of the costs and timetable on the HPC project undertaken after EDF's final investment decision in September 2016. The County Council has no responsibility or accountability over either of these matters.

It is important to state that the HPC construction programme remains on track for delivery of Unit 1 in 2025. The County Council will continue to work with Government and stakeholders to ensure the local benefits of the project are realised and my Annual Report to Council refers to the work we are doing to strengthen the link between the Government's ambitions, set out in its Industrial Strategy Green Paper, and the opportunities and challenges for Somerset and the wider South West in particular associated with a 'sector deal' on Nuclear. My report also lists some of our impressive suite of assets which include the Somerset Energy and Innovation Centre, National College for Nuclear, Huntspill Energy Park, the Hinkley Point Training Agency, and the Hinkley Supply Chain Portal and Hinkley Enabling Team that has already enabled over 2,000 Somerset business to be registered as potential suppliers for the project and £465m worth of contracts across the South West.

Questions asked at Full Council:

1. Education, Health and Care Plans

From Cllr Leigh Redman

Response from Cllr Frances Nicholson – Cabinet Member for Children and Families

- *There are currently 1,041 Education Health and Care Plans as of 7th August 2017. In the January 2017 School Census, a total of 1,368 Somerset pupils had a Statement of SEND or an Education, Health and Care (EHC) Plan, representing 1.8% of all pupils (77,618). The England average was 2.8%. (This Includes maintained and direct grant nursery schools, maintained primary and secondary schools, city technology colleges, university technology colleges, studio schools, primary and secondary academies including free schools, special schools, special academies including free schools, general hospital schools, pupil referral units, alternative provision academies including free schools and independent schools.) As at 10th August 2017 441 have received final EHCPs with 603 Statements to be transferred. The percentage of process complete is 47%. EHCP plan target completion is within 20 weeks – For SCC at the 31st July 2017 = 56%. The South West average is 63%. Transfers from Statements to EHC Plans are required to be completed by March 31st 2018.*