

Meeting of Somerset County Council held in the Council Chamber, Shire Hall, Taunton on Wednesday 29 November 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:

Member questions submitted in advance of the meeting:

1. Cresta Pool, Chard

From Cllr Amanda Broom

Can SCC confirm the current condition of Cresta Pool, Chard, and advise if the required finances will be spent to ensure it continues to remain operational at the appropriate standards?

Response from Cllr Anna Groskop, Cabinet Member for Corporate and Community Services

The extent of works required are currently being scoped by consultants, with the intention to go to tender thereafter. 1610 has requested any works should be programmed to be carried out April/May subject to contractor availability and this is what is being targeted.

2. Budget 2017/2018

From Cllr Simon Coles

We are told that details of any Budget Cuts for 2017/2018 will come forward for discussion in January 2018.

If this is correct, how will any cuts be implemented in time to allow Council to scrutinise and comment these proposals before implementation and year end? Let alone any discussion with Unions, Staff etc. should part of the answer be, a reduction in Staff and/or services bearing in mind, also, that there is a legal requirement to, set a balanced budget.

There will inevitably be a deficit "carry forward" Where are the cuts going to fall in order to maintain a balanced budget? As SCC is required to set and agree in a legal and balanced budget in February 2018 for 2018/2019

SCC is already carrying a large deficit. When will the final amount of any shortfall be announced? How does SCC propose to balance the budget for 2017/2018 by April 2018?

Is SCC about to borrow money to prop up the revenue budget?

What reassurance can the "cash strapped" Directorates have that, the required amount of Funding is secure for not just this year, but moving forward into 2018/2019? In particular, Adults Social Care and Children's Social care where costs appear to be rising exponentially?

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

The proposals to balance the Medium Term Financial Plan for 2018/19 will go to Scrutiny committees in January and to Cabinet in February. They will follow the normal governance applied in previous years. Any consultations that those proposals require will be carried out in full before the final decisions are taken. This does indeed mean that some may not be ready for full implementation for the whole of the financial year ahead. The MTFP will take into account the part-year effects where appropriate. We will of course meet the statutory requirement to set a balanced budget in February.

I do not agree with the statement that we will inevitably carry forward a deficit and that this is a large deficit. Achieving an in-year financial position that does not have some element of overspend will be extremely difficult to achieve given our mid-year position but we are absolutely focussed on trying to do this. The spending pressures experienced in Children's Services are a national issue which many council leaders and finance leads have brought to the minister's attention on a very regular basis.

Lastly, it is not true that Adults Social Care and Children's Social care costs are rising exponentially. The total forecast cost for these two services is £190m, almost two thirds of our spend, but this has only marginally increased since last year. Forecasts throughout this year have been reasonably flatlined. The problem is that the budget available for these services is reduced because of the loss of grant. We are doing our best to identify savings across the council effectively to support those statutory core functions.

As ever, I would make a plea to all Councillors of all parties to come forward with any ideas they have to make savings. Suggestions can come forward at any point in the year and not just when budget proposals are presented.

3. Accommodation Allowances

From Cllr Simon Coles

How many members of staff are in receipt of any form of Accommodation Allowance?

When did Accommodation Allowances start being paid? And for how long? Is it for the duration of the individuals' service with SCC?

How many grades and which grades are eligible for these allowances?

What is the cost of these allowances? Per month or Per annum?

Is there an individual time and or payment amount limit? If so, what is it, Grade by Grade? May we have a comprehensive list?

How does SCC compare with our benchmark colleagues in other Councils around the South west?

May I have a written response to all of these questions?

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

Somerset County Council does not pay an accommodation allowance to staff. Like many employers, we do offer a relocation allowance to new staff where applicable and existing colleagues who are required to relocate. There is no restriction on grade, in terms of eligibility. We have also offered several locum children's social workers assistance with the first month's rent, when they need to secure accommodation in Somerset.

Relocation allowance is capped at £8,000, as per Inland Revenue guidelines and 13 employees have received this in 2017.

4. Vision for Somerset

From Cllr Liz Leyshon

Can Council be assured that the new Vision for Somerset will be a full and rounded view of the County we all serve? A Vision that, as well as focussing on essential economic development, reflects the unique natural environment, the heritage and culture of Somerset. A place where the people, together with their legacy and their future, are valued, supported and celebrated.

Responses from Cllr David Fothergill, Leader of the Council

Thank you for the question Liz. I totally agree that the Vision needs to be something that encompasses all of Somerset. I am also in complete agreement with you that as well as the economy, the Vision should take into account other important aspects of Somerset including our unique natural environment and can confirm it does do that. I would also like to point out that the Vision refers to reducing inequalities, and improving lives, two principles that are in reality more important than anything else. I am happy to share the latest draft of the Vision with Councillors and hope everyone will be able to talk up our Vision and by extension, talk up Somerset as we move from a draft to a signed off version over the coming months.

5. Children's Social Care

From Cllr Jane Lock

As the average caseload of children's social workers is rising to 20, it is clear that this figure is being kept artificially low by the half caseloads carried by students and the lower number of cases agency staff have. As our permanent social workers may have as many as 40 cases each could the Cabinet member confirm if she finds this acceptable and if not, what steps are being taken to address the issue?

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

I am grateful for this question which affords me an opportunity to highlight the great work of our social workers and our recruitment teams. The councillor will be delighted to hear since the summer of 2015 we have made over 165 permanent social worker appointments. This includes 70 ASYE's as we continue to grow our own workforce. Over the same period we have reduced turnover in frontline social worker roles from 23% to 8%. This means that our workforce has grown

considerably, the proportion of permanent social worker workforce has grown from less than 50% to almost 70% and we therefore rely on our temporary workforce much less than we have in the past. By any measure it is therefore misleading to suggest that any of our valued newly qualified social workers are artificially lowering caseloads. The opposite is indeed the case and we are committed to reducing caseloads further as our successful recruitment campaign continues.

6. Childcare funding

From Cllr Jane Lock

In Yeovil, within the last few weeks, Health Visitors and get set recently ran a much needed parenting course. Unfortunately it had to be cancelled as there was no childcare available for the participants. I understand this was due to lack of funding. Surely this is a waste of time and effort as well as letting down the people who needed this help and had committed to engaging with those they thought could make a difference in their lives. Is this happening elsewhere in the County?

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

Getset offers a range of parenting courses in South Somerset as it does across the County. When planning such courses the provision of childcare is always discussed by the course facilitators with parents who wish to access the course. Where possible, Family Support Workers or Play Workers accommodate childcare by running crèches, so that parents can access parenting programmes.

If this isn't possible then parents are encouraged to ask their families, close friends, or usual childcare setting to provide child care. If parents need support with this, then Family Support Workers will liaise with the child's nursery/pre-school settings to ask if they can support the family to attend the course and often settings will endeavour to accommodate such requests by changing the session that the child would normally be booked to attend, if appropriate.

I would be grateful if the councillor could furnish me with details of the specific case she refers to so that I can investigate the situation albeit, as she says, it arose some weeks ago. I would encourage all members who have matters they are concerned about to raise them directly with me at the time rather than delaying.

7. Early Years

From Cllr Jane Lock

Could the Cabinet member comment on the recent charges introduced for Support Services for Early Years? With nurseries and other pre school settings struggling to deliver the 30 hours requirement, it seems that this is an added burden for them. Can she confirm support will remain free for settings with an OFSTED ratings of inadequate or requires improvement

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

Support from officers and deployment of Somerset Early Years Specialists related to RI and inadequate providers is and will remain free at point of delivery.

There is a universal Early Years offer funded by the local authority through providers can access support, advice and guidance on matters such as:

- 30 hours
- Safeguarding
- Guidance on policies
- Prevent duty
- EYFS learning and development
- Business planning and sustainability
- Committee support
- Childminders pre-registration

Beyond this, reduced funding allocated to Local Authorities has made it necessary to review the cost of services offered to early years that are not statutory to ensure that they can still be offered locally to the sector.

8. Family Support Services

From Cllr Jane Lock

The consultation document on Family Support Services fails to clearly set out the possibility of a charity or private company delivering the service in the future. My concern at this point is the future for our staff. When we see the way that LD staff have been treated over their terms and conditions, with a Measures Letter being issued within weeks of their transfer, can the Cabinet member reassure Council that any staff transferred out under a Family Support Services contract will be protected from a similar outcome?

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

I am sure that the Councillor will join me in praising the work of our Family Support Services workforce. As I have already said this consultation process supports our desire to ensure that our services reach as many children and families as possible. A positive outcome for the children in Somerset remains our goal as we strive to both give our children the best possible start in life and embed our 'Think Family' approach across the Somerset workforce. Getting the future model of service delivery right will improve outcomes for our children. And of course I will consider the future of our staff through this process.

9. Learning Disability Service

From Cllr Tessa Munt

In the context of the disruption and distress caused to customers, their carers and staff on the transfer of the Learning Disability Service, could the County Council's HR & Organisational Development Director elaborate on the structures and employment arrangements for current County Council employees and workers insofar as the rights and protections they will enjoy, including under TUPE regulations, in the event of any service or part of a service being contracted out of the County Council in the future?

Response from Cllr Anna Groskop, Cabinet Member for Corporate and Community Services

Any transfer of a service outside of Somerset County Council is typically protected by TUPE regulation and as such is subject to relevant protection. Any changes to terms & conditions, irrespective of whether these are proposed for staff working within SCC or outside of the authority, have to be consulted on with staff and their

representatives and are therefore subject to agreement. Whilst it is impossible to comment with certainty on future structures and arrangements, transfers of staff and consultation are always done in accordance with relevant legislation and policy.

Member questions asked at Full Council:

1. A358/J25

From Cllr Mike Rigby
Highways England will be launching a fresh consultation on the A358 Expressway routes in January.

This Council is currently planning improvements to J25 and they are currently subject to "direction" by Highways England which places a hold on those plans.

I don't think we should pass the J25 improvements through the Regulation Committee until after the Highways England consultation completes and the preferred route is announced.

We have had over 30 years to regret the Ilminster bypass design from its initial opening and I am concerned that we take a little time to ensure that the A358 Expressway, J25 improvement and Nexus Business Park are designed to function together as a co-ordinated programme.

I also think it is very important that this Council makes available its professional advice to affected communities during the Highways England consultation.

Q1. Will the Highways service publish impact statements for the M5 J25 improvement plans and Nexus Business Park access against each route option for the A358 Expressway before the public consultation closes?

Q2. Will the Council agree to defer Regulation Committee approval of the M5 J25 improvements until after the preferred route for the Highways England A358 Expressway is announced?

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

Thank you for your questions on the M5 Junction 25 improvement scheme and Highways England's A358 scheme.

Firstly can I clarify that Highways England's 'direction' on our M5 J25 scheme is not connected in any way to their A358 proposals. The direction requests further information on traffic modelling and safety audit for the J25 scheme before HE's planning liaison team can finalise their response as part of their routine role in engaging on local planning matters. This information has been supplied and we are confident that all matters can be resolved prior to regulation committee determining the application in February.

Secondly it is important to note that the design of the M5 J25 scheme and the Nexus 25 development are not dependent on any route alignment for the A358 that may eventually be agreed through the Development Consent process for Highways England's improvement scheme. The M5 J25 scheme has been

designed to provide as much additional capacity at J25 as is possible, short of a grade separated solution which would be unaffordable; and to provide access to the Nexus 25 site at an early opportunity. The funding for this has been provided by the LEP, Highways England, TDBC and the Developer to unlock the employment opportunity and to support the wider growth of Taunton before 2021. The design of the schemes provides the opportunity for a link between the new A358 and the existing M5 J25 to be formed in the longer term if this becomes the preferred route emerging from Highways England's A358 scheme, so does not preclude any of their options being taken forward in due course.

The promoters of the M5 J25 scheme (SCC, TDBC and the LEP) agreed some time ago that we should grasp the opportunity to take forward a localised improvement to unlock the economic opportunity in the area using LEP funding, rather than wait for the outcome of the A358 scheme. This was on the basis that the LEP funding is only available up to 2021; economic opportunity needs unlocking now rather than in the longer term; and there has never been any certainty that the A358 scheme will provide the localised infrastructure needed to overcome capacity constraints at J25 and access to the employment site. We have subsequently worked with Highways England to make sure that they take our proposals into account in developing their scheme. If we wait for the outcome of the A358 DCO process before progressing our scheme then we will lose the funding contributions which are time limited and there will be no local scheme to enable growth in Taunton, with the investment going elsewhere in the Region.

In response to your specific questions.

- 1. Proposals for M5 J25 and Nexus 25 are being treated as committed development by HE and have therefore been taken account of within their traffic modelling and appraisal of their scheme options. We have made it clear to HE that we wish to see more detailed figures in terms of the traffic impact of their scheme options as part of their consultation (we have asked for figures such as journey times and delays at key locations such as J25 under each option), so we will be able to understand how each option performs in tandem with our proposals which will assist us in formulating our response. Therefore the information you are seeking should be provided by Highways England as part of their consultation.*
- 2. Since our M5 J25 proposal is not dependent on any route alignment for the A358 it is not necessary or appropriate to defer regulation committee approval for J25 until after the preferred route for the A358 expressway is announced.*

2. A39 Road Improvements

From Cllr Ann Bown

With the current road improvements along the corridor of the A39, can I be assured that we are listening to our residents and that are working to resolve any problems in the area?

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

We are all always open to listening and recognise the considerable effects on Bridgwater. The town will also benefit from economic prosperity of Hinkley C and we will continue to monitor the road use situation.