

Annex A

Public and Members Questions – Executive 8 November 2023

Question submitted from	Question
Nigel Behan	<p data-bbox="386 517 951 551">Icebergs, Black Holes and Doom Loops</p> <p data-bbox="386 584 1353 667">I wish to make a statement/ask a few questions in relation to Item 7 Financial Strategy Update - Nov 23 (somerset.gov.uk)</p> <p data-bbox="386 701 1390 981">Public Finance reported that Short-termism leaves public services in 'doom loop' noting the problems (funding and workforce shortages etc) in Adult Social Care. As noted, there are also Funding issues in Childrens Social Care(and SEND) and some Local Authorities are at risk because of housing matters (homelessness and no housing stock apart from using the private sector etc). [Statutory provision.]</p> <p data-bbox="386 1014 1398 1144">The report referred to, also suggested: “A relationship “reset” with staff, with improved working conditions, workforce planning and pay negotiations.”</p> <p data-bbox="386 1178 1377 1261">It was announced at the recent Audit Committee that: “we can see the iceberg”.</p> <p data-bbox="386 1294 1185 1328">Black holes: Council looks to address £100m 'black hole'</p> <p data-bbox="386 1361 1398 1491">It was reported that: “Deputy leader and lead member for resources Liz Leyshon said: ‘No one wants to be in this position but we are well aware of the implications of a Section 114 notice.’</p> <p data-bbox="386 1525 1355 1655">She said Somerset intended to take ‘difficult decisions’ now with the benefit of local knowledge, rather than leaving government commissioners to find an answer.”</p> <p data-bbox="386 1688 544 1722"><u>Question 1</u></p> <p data-bbox="386 1756 1382 1863">Does this mean that Somerset Council (SC),is in effect, doing the work that (unelected) Commissioners would be expected to do if a S114 Notice was to be issued?</p> <p data-bbox="386 1897 564 1930"><u>Question 2a</u></p> <p data-bbox="386 1964 903 1998">As reported earlier in the year (BBC):</p>

	<p>Plans to increase council tax in Croydon by 15% have been approved by the government</p> <p>“Croydon Council sought permission to impose the rise without a referendum after declaring itself bankrupt for the second time in three years in November.</p> <p>Elsewhere, Thurrock and Slough councils, have also had requests approved to raise council tax by 10%.”</p> <p>Is SC considering (and modelled - including the proportionate increase in the ASC precept) raising Council Tax (CTAX) to a level that would “balance the budget” and, if so, what is the approximate CTAX increase (figure & %) -over the 4.99% increase “allowed” without a referendum”?</p> <p><u>Question 2b</u></p> <p>Since many other Councils are facing similar issues – Districts: Housing etc and Upper Tier/Unitary (as the County Council Network reported): Adults and Childrens Social Care etc – how are Councils working together to pressurise the Government (for realistic increases in the Local Government Settlement) to meet the existing needs of service users rather than further rationing of local government services?</p>
<p>Response</p>	<p>Responses from Deputy Leader and Lead Member for Resources and Performance, Cllr Liz Leyshon</p> <p><u>Question 1</u></p> <p>Somerset Council is doing the work it is here to do, at what is an inflection point in the long life of local authorities in Somerset, and the short life of this new Council.</p> <p>I believe that it is better for the residents, businesses and communities of Somerset, that where difficult decisions need to be taken, they are taken by local representatives with a democratic mandate and a strong interest in securing the best for Somerset, even in difficult times.</p> <p>We are not doing the work of ‘unelected commissioners.’ We are doing our job, using our very best endeavours to make sure that we do not need to issue a s114 notice.</p> <p><u>Question 2a</u></p> <p>Looking back to the introduction of Council Tax in the early 1990s, we can see that Somerset has had distinct challenges that have led to the</p>

current structural deficit, where the income cannot keep pace with expenditure, particularly on social care services.

When Avon Council was formed, the Council Tax base for Somerset was reduced in terms of house banding numbers – many of the higher band homes near Bath & Bristol moving to Avon, now BaNES and North Somerset.

The yield from Council Tax was clearly affected by the six year Council Tax freeze, and although the previous administration then used maximum % increases and ASC precept, we have more than £20million 'lost' from the base budget, and a Band D Council Tax for Somerset Council that is lower than other Unitary Councils in the south west, and lower than average across the country.

As we know, Somerset also has an ageing demographic and so there is an obvious correlation with demand on social care being greater, and each 1% of council tax produces less income than in other places.

We have no idea yet whether Government will consider raising the referendum limit, or whether there may be a higher maximum level of social care precept.

We do know that people's budgets are well stretched by the cost-of-living crisis, higher energy costs and interest rates. We have a Council Tax Reduction Scheme that will be revisited for the next financial year, and an Exceptional Hardship Scheme to help those whose budgets are tightest, but we realise now more than ever that Government needs to take a very careful look at the future of local government, as there seems to be little understanding at times of the huge importance of the services and facilities provided locally. It's a shame that Members of Parliament don't have to do work experience at a local authority, that would be to the benefit of the whole country.

Question 2b

Councils are most definitely working together, across the country and across the political spectrum. We took the decision to stay in the County Councils Network (CCN), to rejoin the District Councils Network (DCN) as Somerset Council, to join the Local Government Information Unit (a specialist think tank) and we are of course also part of the Local Government Association (LGA), where the Leader of the Opposition, Cllr David Fothergill, is the Chair of the Community Wellbeing Board. We need all these memberships, the collective, national influence and combined data. This is by far the most effective way of influencing Government as well as helping all Councils explain to the public this

unprecedented time of extreme challenge in the life of local government.

Eva Bryczkowski

Out of the 21 councils across Britain who have funding gaps, Somerset County are 16th on the list.

Council	Region	Funding gap for 2023/24
1 Birmingham City	West Midlands	£164.8m
2 Thurrock	Eastern	£156.5m
3 Wiltshire County	South East	£82m
4 Sheffield City	Yorkshire Humber	£72.7m
5 Bradford City	Yorkshire Humber	£72m
6 Liverpool City	North West	£67m
7 Leeds City	Yorkshire Humber	£59.2m
8 Nottingham City	East Midlands	£50.9m
9 Shetland Islands	Scotland	£47.1m
10 Kirklees	Yorkshire Humber	£47m
11 Highland	Scotland	£46.7m
12 Norfolk County	Eastern	£45.9m
13 Bournemouth	South West	£44.4m
14 Christchurch & Poole		
15 Leicester City	East Midlands	£44.2m
16 Somerset County	South West	£41.6m
17 Warrington Borough	North West	£39m
18 Medway	South East	£38.7m
19 Glasgow City	Scotland	£37.7m
20 Edinburgh City	Scotland	£37.6m
21 Caerphilly/Caerffili	Wales	£37.4m

As we are all aware, Birmingham City is at the top of the list, with a funding gap of £164.8 million, and Thurrock next on the list with £156.5 million.

As of Friday 29th of September 2023, Somerset County's funding gap was £41.6 million.

Councillors and officers, you will know what the more up to date figures are, with the biggest overspends being adult social care, children and families, and highways. This situation that the council, and council tax payers are in is: a local, a Somerset county, and a NATIONAL EMERGENCY.

I am not a Lib Dem member, and profoundly disagree with the choices they made when they were in coalition with the conservative government in 2010, but I think that since they have led Somerset council they've done a fairly good fist of prioritising and looking after the most vulnerable people in our county. However, they are not deeply rooted in the trade union and labour movement, unlike other parties.

This matters, because if they were, this would profoundly influence the decisions they have to make regarding the funding gap.

I don't envy what all you councillors need to do now, and as soon as possible in order to avoid insolvency. You have at the very least two directions you can go in:

You can do the usual things that governments and councils do, and say something like "We have difficult decisions to make....." Same old, same old. Or you could do something radically different.

THE ROOT CAUSE

Starting from the premise that the root cause of Somerset being strapped for cash, with council tax payers enduring the brunt of savage cuts having to be made since 2010, the root cause is:

The drastic underfunding imposed by the coalition originally, and now the Conservative government. Austerity has damaged the economy, with destitute people spending little, leading to less tax revenue, and local authorities burdened with more responsibilities but less cash to be able to fund these obligations. The root cause lies at the door of number ten Downing street.

OTHER ALTERNATIVE COURSES OF ACTION ARE POSSIBLE

One course of action is to stand shoulder to shoulder with the people you represent. i.e. Us council tax payers, the unions who are trying to save jobs & working conditions, and particularly, the most vulnerable people in Somerset.

CONTRAST BEFORE AND NOW

When I was a steward coordinator for Learning Disabilities, members in Unison local government branch would march outside county hall against cuts in funding, lobby councillors as they walked into full council meetings, and made sure the media knew about how much we were against the decisions the Tory led council were planning to make. Circumstances are different now. As a member of both Unite the Union and Unison, I know that you can't balance the books at this moment in time because we haven't got the money. Simple. Either you tackle in a united way the root cause of this underfunding or go forward forever in misery further cutting into the bone of services and witnessing even greater destitution than before.

SOCIAL SCARE, (deliberate misspelling).

Reading the figures we can see how much social care is affected, with costs spiralling. For example, the price of residential care shooting up exponentially. Plus other services - children and families, Special Educational Needs children, highways, e.g. potholes, essential repairs, and many other statutory commitments the council have to fulfil.

THE ROLE OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ASSOCIATION

As I see it, the LGA is supposed to campaign against the years of drastic underfunding and help local authorities to get more funding. But all I can see is that they announce all the worrying figures, (which we already know anyway from the Institute of Fiscal Studies). And they

occasionally moan about the dire situation. This is unhelpful to me and other council tax payers, unions fighting deterioration in many directions, and frankly, local authorities themselves.

SUCCESSFUL CAMPAIGNS

Mick Lynch and the RMT led the campaign against the closure of ticket offices. Going on strike, making sacrifices and losing money as a result of all this, led to making the general public aware of what was happening, who then voted a resounding No to the government's proposal. The LGA should act more like trade unions and campaign groups that are successful in achieving their aims, getting the public on their side and fully aware of the situation. Like the paramedics and NHS staff who walked out earlier this year. The attention grabbing headline in the Daily Mirror was,

WE ARE DOING THIS FOR YOU!

Somerset council, and maybe eventually the rest of the councils in Britain, could respectfully stand shoulder to shoulder with the people you are meant to serve. Frankly, you haven't done a bad job so far. Do something different. Like marching on Westminster, or a variety of other actions you think might be successful. That'll wake people up - your voters, (take them with you to London or elsewhere), the media and the rest of the country. No time to waste. Coaches, and other forms of transport, need to be organised. Listening to council tax payers and trade unions as part of this process.

Question 1

Councillors, are you going to go down the usual predictable route, telling council tax payers you have difficult choices to make, in order to justify savings/cuts in vital services and jobs, or are you going to do something different?

Question 2

Are you going to stand shoulder to shoulder with your people, the people you represent?

Question 3

If Yes to the second question, how soon are you going to do it? One final thought, regarding belief systems we may hold, 'Whether you think you can or can't, you are right.' Henry Ford. 'I cannot accept not trying.'

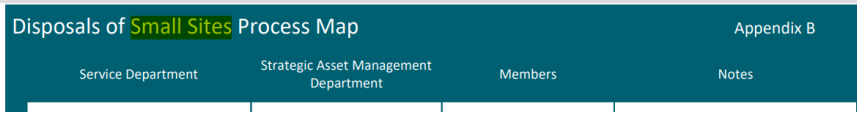
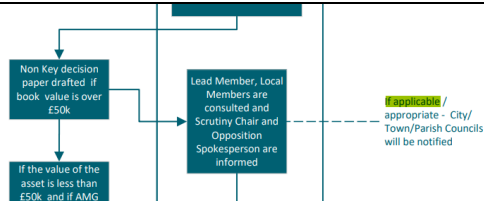
	<p>Michael Jordan, successful baseball player. So go for it, I humbly suggest.</p>
<p>Response</p>	<p>Responses from the Leader of the Council and Lead Member for Governance and Communications, Cllr Bill Revans:</p> <p><u>Question 1</u></p> <p>There are very clear roles and responsibilities on Councillors and Officers. Officers must try to offer members proposals in the Budget that will enable Full Council to set a balanced budget. With the current size of the Budget deficit there are no ‘good’ solutions so it is certain that the proposals will include;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • efficiency and other savings. • a transformation plan seeking to rapidly automate processes. • increases in charges, beyond inflation in many cases: a significant programme of asset disposal. • the offer of devolution of services and assets to our town, city and parish councils. • significant service reductions including in some cases the full closure of functions; and • substantial staff reductions. <p>Officers are required to offer potential solutions to Councillors to set a balanced budget. If we cannot do that then we will be in the position of issuing a s114 notice.</p> <p>Councillors are under a legal duty to set a balanced budget every year and not to do so will ensure Government intervention. Until Councillors have seen the package of measures proposed by Officers to balance the budget, I cannot say what the collective response will be. The law is clear however that we cannot decline to set a budget.</p> <p><u>Question 2</u></p> <p>I entirely agree that there are large pressure within the national financing of local government and wider public services that are a significant factor in Somerset Council’s current position.</p> <p>Officers are in regular communication with senior civil servants and after this meeting I will be writing to the Secretary of State highlighting my concerns. I have already briefed the local MPs and between myself, Executive Members and senior officers we have already briefed many of our partners.</p> <p>I and my Executive colleagues are all Somerset residents ourselves. We will always stand shoulder to shoulder with those who have Somerset’s</p>

	<p>best interests at heart and I, my colleagues and our partners will continue to lobby for Somerset.</p> <p><u>Question 3</u> Covered above.</p>
<p>David Redgewell</p>	<p><u>Question 1</u> Whilst we agree with the disposal of Council assets we want be to make sure that no public transport infrastructure assets are being put for sales. Such as the county's Bus and coach stations and interchanges facilities including Bridgwater bus and coach station, Wells bus and coach station, Yeovil bus and coach station leased. For a For the Northern Irish property Group. Frome Cork Street coach station, street coach station, Glastonbury coach station and coach parks, Wellington coach park and car park. Minehead coach park, Shepton mallet interchange and Chard interchange, Wincanton memorial hall bus and coach station and car park. the Future Taunton Transport hub former bus and coach station. But money can be made through Cafes Kiosks bike hire e scooter hire and Retail activities at theses transport hubs. Can we assured that no public transport infrastructure is be sold off</p> <p><u>Question 2</u> At the Somerset place scrutiny commission meeting Somerset catch the bus campaign and South west transport Network We raised the concern about how theses contracts would work with regards to the public transport Network infrastructure that has been transferred from the former District Councils. So that the council owned Bus and coach station and coach park have proper maintenance contracts With repair contracts to cover the Bus and coach stations at Wells bus and coach station, Yeovil bus and coach station lease from the shopping centre company. Frome Cork Street coach station, Wincanton bus and coach station, Glastonbury coach station and coach park, street coach park Bridgwater bus and coach station Shepton mallet interchange Chard interchange Wellington coach park, Minehead Coach Park Minehead Bank Street Minehead railway station Transport interchange. The county bus stops and shelters. Many of which have been transferred from the former District Councils. With the new Highway contracts, we want assures that theses contracts are</p>

	<p>Design to cover all the Highway and Transport Department assets not just the footways but castle kerbs, drop kerbs and bus and coach stops and interchanges.</p> <p>Would the council not have been better to taking the service in House like Cormac in Cornwall,</p> <p>With the unity council taking over all the public transport, car parks coach parks, public transport interchanges and Bus and coach stations. We are looking for assurance for bus and coach and public transport users that Somerset council has maintain contracts in place.</p> <p><u>Question 3</u></p> <p>With the county looking to sale assets</p> <p>Which we support the Sale of the portfolio of shops shopping centres, Offices across the county and in Bristol. Including leasing buildings to commercial organisations like Gloucester City Council Bath and North East Somerset council and Bristol city council who lease a lot of buildings in theses 3 city's</p> <p>We are looking for assurance that the</p> <p>Trackbed and Railway infrastructure will not be sold to a Private Railway company including the west Somerset railway company Ltd</p> <p>But remain public ownership under Somerset unitary council to be able to develop a future public transport railway service between Minehead Dunster Blue Ancor Washford, Watchet, Dunsford Beach willton Stogumber Crowcombe Heathfield Bishop Lydeard Norton Fitzwarren and Taunton along with a steam Tourist railway.</p>
Response	<p>Responses from:</p> <p><u>Question 1</u> – The Lead Member for Transport and Digital, Cllr Mike Rigby & the Lead Member for Economic Development, Planning and Assets, Cllr Ros Wyke</p> <p>We have no current proposals to dispose of the assets listed by the questioner. We will when resources permit look to exploit the income potential of all Transport Hubs to support transport and council services where additional facilities would provide a better customer experience.</p> <p><u>Question 2</u> – The Lead Member for Transport and Digital, Cllr Mike Rigby</p>

	<p>The new highways contracts have been designed to accommodate a wider range of Unitary Council services than the previous highways contracts. For instance, the surfacing contract could be utilised for a wider range of council asset needs (such as surfacing car parks or other spaces) and the new assets contract can be used for a wide range of construction activity in the public realm if on a case-by-case basis this offers better value for money than other potential routes to market.</p> <p>The new highway contracts will not meet the maintenance needs of all our assets; for instance, we envisage that specialist contracts will be needed for bus shelter cleaning and maintenance. We need to review the maintenance arrangements as each District had different systems and contracts in place. Some had earmarked budgets, and some undertook ad-hoc maintenance when required. There were no dedicated staff associated with these services, so Transporting Somerset is now taking responsibility for this activity. We need to establish what budget provision there is and then establish a level of service and delivery mechanisms that reflect the budget. There will of course also be facilities that are not our responsibility so we will have to clearly identify these. All this will take a while unfortunately so please bear with us whilst we work this through.</p> <p>Question 3 – The Lead Member for Economic Development, Planning and Assets, Cllr Ros Wyke</p> <p>There are no proposals to sell the Council's freehold land on which the trackbed and rail infrastructure of the West Somerset Railway is situated. A sale of ancillary car parking land at Bishop's Lydeard was commenced by the former Somerset West and Taunton Council and is currently in progress.</p>
<p>Rosa Kell</p>	<p>As part of the new Highway contracts</p> <p>Will the council new Highways and Transport Department contracts Take over the maintenance and cleaning of bus and coach station in Wells.</p> <p>The Transport interchange at Shepton mallet, Glastonbury, street and Frome coach stations.</p> <p>And the bus and coach shelter bus stops and timetables information display formerly owned by Mendip District council.</p> <p>We would also support hypothecation of car and coach parking charges into funding the bus and coach services.</p> <p>And public transport infrastructure.</p>

Response	Response from the Lead Member for Transport and Digital, Cllr Mike Rigby
	<p>The new highways contracts have been designed to accommodate a wider range of Unitary Council services than the previous highways contracts. For instance, the surfacing contract could be utilised for a wider range of council asset needs (such as surfacing car parks or other spaces) and the new assets contract can be used for a wide range of construction activity in the public realm if on a case-by-case basis this offers better value for money than other potential routes to market.</p> <p>The new highway contracts will not meet the maintenance needs of all our assets; for instance, we envisage that specialist contracts will be needed for bus shelter cleaning and maintenance. We need to review the maintenance arrangements as each District had different systems and contracts in place. Some had earmarked budgets, and some undertook ad-hoc maintenance when required. There were no dedicated staff associated with these services, so Transporting Somerset is now taking responsibility for this activity. We need to establish what budget provision there is and then establish a level of service and delivery mechanisms that reflect the budget. There will of course also be facilities that are not our responsibility so we will have to clearly identify these. All this will take a while unfortunately so please bear with us whilst we work this through.</p> <p>As part of the current financial review, we are considering the implications of using hypothecated revenue from parking charges to fund transport services and infrastructure.</p>
David Mears	<p>How town and parish councils can assist with some of the financial pressures to protect service delivery and the need for Somerset Council to speak with one voice on devolution and the need to invest in devolution and highlight delays with the Bridgwater Pilot.</p> <p>Raise positive areas of agenda item 9 'Policy for the Disposal of Assets' and raise the following concerns/points:</p> <p>Page 121 of the public report pack</p> <p>Delete - "If applicable/appropriate city, town and parish councils will be notified."</p> <p>and replace with "City, town and parish councils will be consulted prior to any decision to dispose of any asset identified as surplus."</p>



After the heading “Small Sites”

Insert “City, town and parish councils will be consulted prior to any decision to dispose of any asset identified as surplus.”

Response from the Lead Member for Economic Development, Planning and Assets, Cllr Ros Wyke

Thank you for the helpful question and further emails, which the Executive and relevant officers have considered. Following feedback from a number of Town Clerk colleagues over the past few days, we have amended the original decision report and policy wording to clarify that the Framework for Asset and Service Devolution will be brought forward early in 2024, to provide supplementary guidance on how City, Town and Parsich councils can assist with some of the financial pressures to protect service delivery. The amended Policy document before this committee today clarifies that City, Town and Parish Councils are important strategic partners for this Authority, and how discussions on Asset Disposals will be held with individual local councils as appropriate.