

Full Council – 17 July 2024 – Public and Member Questions

Annexe A – Public Questions	
Name of person submitting	Question
Chris Waddilove	<p>A Cultural Hub for Somerset</p> <p>My name is Chris Waddilove. I have been resident in Taunton for 21 years. I am here this afternoon because I have read the Delivery Plan for your Cultural Strategy and wish to engage with you urgently on this because I believe that access to culture is so important for wellbeing and enlightenment. I was really heartened, as I started to read this document, that the authors felt the same way, making accessibility to the arts the most important criterion for their delivery plan. However there seems to be a fatal contradiction in the plan because a key part of it, as we know, is the development of a 'Flagship Cultural Hub' for the county in Yeovil, based on the regeneration of the Octagon. Now I have lived all these years in Taunton; I love theatre, dance and live music, but never once in all that time have I travelled from Taunton to the Octagon for an event - for the simple reason I have no car and of course cannot get to Yeovil by public transport and back the same evening. It is much easier to get to Bristol or Exeter for an evening out than it is to Yeovil. So this hub which seems to be absorbing all the moneys coming from Government for the arts in Somerset will be of no benefit to me and thousands like me who love the arts and live entertainment, but who do not own a car and do not live in the purlieu of Yeovil. I simply do not understand how it is possible to come up with a cultural strategy for the county that does not recognise that geographically we need 2 cultural hubs (at least) one for east and one for west Somerset. Yeovil, yes, for the east and Taunton for the west.</p> <p>Question 1a -</p> <p>So, my question to you councillors for the county, is what about Taunton, your county town? Why are we so neglected? Provision for live entertainment in our town is lamentable. The Brewhouse does its best but with a capacity of 350, it is so limited in what it can offer - and the biggest auditorium we have, believe it or not is the Minster which can only seat 500, and has other obvious drawbacks. I am particularly concerned about the lack of live music. If pub bands or tribute bands or small classical or choral works are not your bag, there is nothing at all by way of live music in the town. This is scandalous.</p> <p>When the shops shut, the town becomes a dead zone, even on Fridays and Saturdays. There needs to be an urgent plan for the regeneration of Taunton. This town needs to find a new identity to revive its fortunes - rather than the barely managed decline we have currently. A cultural hub would in many people's opinions be an exciting and realistic plan to bring footfall, economic prosperity and nightlife back to the town. And there is a building right in the centre of the town that could be the epicentre of that cultural hub. I speak of course of the entertainment centre that opened in 1932 as the Gaumont Palace, doubling as both cinema and variety theatre, now Mecca Bingo. It is a magnificent building with a seating capacity of 1200, still in an excellent state of repair, with a gorgeous art-deco interior - which could be brought back, at relatively low cost, as a first rate live music venue and developed as the multi-purpose arts centre and community hub, that we so need. Somerset Council, of course, own this building</p>

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	<p>and the Mecca Bingo lease terminates at the end of 2027 - so, anything should be possible. I belong to a community group which has just been registered by the FCA as the Gaumont Palace Cooperative Community Benefit Trust. We are determined that this great building should be secure as a community asset in perpetuity. We would love to begin a dialogue with Council about this. And we must plan for a second cultural hub for the county as the only fair and practical way ahead.</p> <p>Response from Lead Member for Communities, Housing and Culture, Councillor Federica Smith-Roberts</p>
<p>David Redgewell</p>	<p>Question 2a - With the new Government in London and the importance of an integrated Transport Network in Somerset and Southwest England Integrated Transport is very important Policy to the new secretary of state for Transport Louise Haigh MP and bus and coaches minister Steven Lightwood MP Taunton bus and coach station. Taunton Transport hub. Is a very important Region bus and coach interchange. What progress is being made? On the project with the Department for transport funding. under the Bus service improvement plan as Taunton mobility hub on passengers facilities, cafe, waiting rooms facilities Toilets including changing places toilets. 7 bus and coach bays. For First Group plc Wales and West buses Division and south buses Division. Facilities for National express coaches Flixbus coaches and stagecoach Southwest Megabus Scottish City link Go ahead group Southwest Hatch Green and Somerset unity council own bus company. Work on the building 2 joint with First group plc and other bus and coach operators for staff and management facilities. The council have made statement that public and stakeholders consultation will take place this summer including planning a planning application. For the site to remain as a bus and coach station as per the local plan allocation at present. And the NHS will be given Notice to Quit the site to alternative accommodation can we please have urgent update on the reopening of Taunton bus and coach station as Regional important mobility hub Details programme that Somerset council are working to with stakeholders to reopen this important bus and coach station. (mobility hub)</p> <p>Question 2b - In view of the importance of Railway improvement to the new government integrated Transport strategy. Working with Regional Transport Authority's ie Somerset unity council Western Gateway Transport Board Peninsula Transport Board and West of England mayoral combined transport Authority North Somerset council and Devon County Council. On the metro west railway south Network Between Bristol Temple meads station, Bedminster, Parson Street, Nailsea and Backwell, new lifts. Yatton for Clevedon, Worle parkway, weston Milton Weston super mare, needs passengers lifts, Highbridge and Burnham on sea, needs passengers lifts Bridgwater need passengers lifts Taunton, Wellington Tiverton Cullompton and Exeter St David and central. What progress is being made on the delivery of Wellington Railway station</p>

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Passengers facilities shelters lifts bus interchange and planning permission and progress with Devon County Council on Cullompton railway station. in view of overcrowding on Taunton to Minehead x28 28 bus service from Taunton Town centre soon to Taunton Transport hub. Taunton Railway station Bishop Lydeard, Watchet and Minehead Town Centre Bank, Railway station and Butlins

What progress is being made with Peninsula Transport Board Network rail Western and First group plc Greater Western trains company limited GWR soon to be Nationalised, On reopening the Taunton, Bishop Lydeard Minehead railway service as the Railway line is owned by Somerset council and leased to the west Somerset railway company Ltd. And on Wellington railway station as part of metro west railway Network south,

Question 2c – the New Government in London

What progress is Somerset unity council making working with other Southwest councils and Peninsula Transport Board and Western Gateway Transport Board on looking at a Regional Devolution deal for Transport the Regional economy, planning and Housing, Through the Transport Boards or the Greater southwest and the western Gateway partnership to improve finance for major infrastructure projects in southwest England. Including The Railway network serving Somerset unity council, Banes and North Somerset council and the southwest.

Regional bus and coach Networks Especially as Scottish City link Megabus have withdrawn the Midlands via Cheltenham spa Bristol Bond Street, Weston super mare, bus and coach station Bridgwater Taunton, Wellington Tiverton Barnstaple coach service. Regional bus service Networks Devolution is at heart of this new government policy and we need a strong voice from Somerset county and the south west.

Question 2d - With the new government and the importance of the Regeneration of Yeovil and a Regional centre for Somerset and Dorset and southwest England.

What progress is being made on glovers walk shopping centre Regeneration project and the need to improve passenger experience with temporary facilities including rental of portable Toilets facilities Including wheelchair access facilities at the station and reopening the cafe as a community cafe facility and pop up shops once the Council has brought the shopping centre and Bus and coach station, The waiting room remaining open in partnership with First group plc South buses is to be welcomed For bus coach and rail link bus service passengers to Yeovil pen mill station (which also need a cafe facilities) and Yeovil Junction railway station (which needs passengers lifts)

The cost of Temporary Toilets is far less than the money spent removing the Graffiti from County Hall recently.

Councillor Adam Dance now the local MP accept a passenger's petition and said the unity council, Business and Town council were looking at Temporary facilities at the bus and coach station.

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	<p>Has the council had any discussion Dorset Council Peninsula Transport with the Department for local Government or Department for transport about the Regeneration project or is planning to do so and Temporary bus and coach station facilities During Regeneration work in Yeovil which is very much welcomed.</p> <p>Response from Lead Member for Transport and Digital, Councillor Richard Wilkins</p>
Rosa Kell	<p>Submission from Emery Taylor being read out by Rosa Kell Question 3a - The buses used on the Somerton Slinky are, to my understanding, sat empty on weekends in Somerset Council's Somerton bus depot. If funding was provided from an external source, such as Town councils or private enterprise, could a weekend service that included Castle Cary Train Station and Street (maybe Glastonbury) be run?</p> <p>Response from Lead Member for Transport and Digital, Councillor Richard Wilkins</p>
	Annexe B – Member Questions
Name of person submitting	Question
Cllr Gwil Wren	<p>Cllr John Hunt reading out on his behalf</p> <p>Management and Administration of Postal Votes As you know my wife and I had a holiday booked from 26th June to 5th July 2024. Despite applying for a Postal Vote on 6th June I received nothing other than an acknowledgement before I left the country meaning that my wife and I were unable to cast a vote in this important election. Having made enquiries about this and received responses that I am not sure are adequate I feel it is appropriate to ask questions in the formal setting a Full Council Meeting. In particular I am concerned about the planning and preparedness of Electoral Services, the resources available to deal with a snap election and the steady increase in demand for Postal Votes. My Postal Vote application was received on 6th June and processed the same day. Although candidate nominations did not close until 7th June, initial Postal Vote details were sent to the printers on 5th June. However, I understand that those that arrived after 5th June were not despatched to the printers until 24th June, 10 days before the election. Apparently, part of the delay was additional checks required by Government as well as high demand.</p>

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It is not clear to me why my application was processed on 6th June but took almost 3 weeks before they could be sent out. I appreciate the point about printers capacity but surely it is better to process small batches as and when they arrive rather than wait for all to be done? It is notable that the Elections West stock reply to emails says *“When we send your postal vote will depend on when your application was received and successfully processed, so the sooner you apply the better.”*? However, in reality, the date of application makes no difference.

So my questions are:

1. General and other elections are a feature of British life and tend to rely on the same information and basic administrative processes. It was well known that 2024 would bring both Police and CC Elections as well as a General Election. It was also known that Voter ID would be a factor for voters. So when did Somerset Council commence its planning for the General Election, how much work was just picking up existing processes and what new tasks were required by Government for this election?
2. How many Postal Vote applications were received at the 2019 General Election compared to 2024?
3. What was the Postal Vote return rate in 2019 and 2024?
4. Does the Council or Electoral Commission investigate the reasons for non-returns?
5. I understand that the Electoral Services Team comprised of seven officers to manage seven constituencies although the Team also has three long term absentees. Is this felt to be an adequate level of resource given Local Government Reorganisation, Boundary changes, extra Government requirements and the growing popularity of Postal Votes and how does it compare with the resource levels in the previous four Districts?
6. When a snap summer Election was called resulting in record numbers of Postal Vote applications was there a request for increased resources to manage the increased workload with its hard deadline? If not why not?
7. After a Postal Vote application is received what information regarding processing and turn around time is given to applicants to keep them informed of the progress or their application?

Response from the Leader of the Council and Lead Member for Governance and Communications, Cllr Bill Revans