

**Public questions**

PQ/MQ	From	Topic	Question/statement
PQ1	David Redgewell	Taunton Bus Station	<p>From a passenger perspective and an organisation which considers Taunton to be a major transport interchange of the SouthWest, whilst we welcome the new bus rail interchange Taunton Station, we are acutely aware that the design of the interchange being built by Network Rail and First Group only involves 5 bus bays. Therefore, we would be extremely concerned if the Council thought that by shutting Tower Street Bus station that these facilities could be replaced at Taunton Railway Station, without considerable amounts of work and investment in building. We therefore think it is essential that we retain the bus station for its regional connectivity (Wellington, Tiverton, Axminster, Wells and Burnham and Bridgewater), as well as being a major hub for national express.</p> <p>Whilst we wouldn't be against the relocation of the bus station within the town centre and are aware that the Crescent has been previously considered, we would not consider it appropriate to make the Parade into a linear bus Station.</p> <p>The bus station currently includes a café, information centre, staff accommodation and toilets. We would urge the Council to consider full Consultation allowing engagement with Somerset Bus Users, TravelWatch SouthWest, UK Citizens, Transport Focus etc. There must be consultation.</p> <p>We must emphasise that, our concern is with retention of facility to the community and not in the land and that if the facility is moved, we would like full consultation with key stakeholders.</p> <p>TravelWatch SouthWest will be supplying it's own note of concern and hope that you will engage with us as soon as possible.</p>
Answer: From Cllr John Woodman, Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport			

Response to both PQ1 and PQ2 provided below.			
<b>PQ/MQ</b>	<b>From</b>	<b>Topic</b>	<b>Question/Statement</b>
PQ2	Nigel Behan	Taunton Bus Station	<p>Will SCC commit to campaign to maintain Taunton Bus Station on the existing site as a Bus Station (if possible, with Somerset West &amp; Taunton (SWT) who part own the site) Somerset County Council (SCC) state:</p> <p>“Together we look at the transport requirements throughout Somerset and work out the best way to achieve a comprehensive and efficient transport network.”?</p> <p>If an alternative site (similar Town Centre location) can be secured – would it be able to cope (have the capacity) with - at least- the existing flow and movement of buses and coaches?</p>
<p>Answer: Cllr John Woodman, Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport</p> <p>Firstly, I would like to thank Mr Redgewell and Mr Behan for their questions. The proposed sale of Taunton Bus Station is a matter for First South West and Somerset West and Taunton Council. We intend to work with both First South West and Somerset West and Taunton Council to ensure that implications associated with the sale of the bus station are fully understood.</p>			
<b>PQ/MQ</b>	<b>From</b>	<b>Topic</b>	<b>Question/statement</b>
PQ3	Sigurd Reimers	Pensions Investments	<p>Nearly half of all investments worldwide are made by pensions schemes (1).</p> <p>A large proportion of these investments are in fossil fuels, which are harmful to the climate and the wider environment, and particularly to the younger generation.</p> <p>County Council pensions schemes up and down this country are also involved in making such</p>

investments.

However, some Councils are already using their ESG (Environmental, Social and Governance) powers in finding attractive alternative investments. Furthermore, Brunel Pensions Partnership, a pensions pool in which Somerset is a stakeholder, have just joined in signing a resolution requesting Barclays Bank to stop investing in fossil fuels. (2)

I have attended nearly all the meetings of Somerset County Council’s Pensions Committee in the past three years. At most of these I have asked questions about their policy on fossil fuels investments. I have found little, if any, interest in reducing such investments, exemplified in one of their few comments about climate change in their most recent annual report: “For example, the Fund will not require any form of dis-investment from fossil fuels, tobacco or such like.” (3) This position is being held despite national resolutions about divestment from large constituent bodies such as some of the Unions (4).

Somerset County Council staff contribute to and benefit financially from the Somerset County Council pensions scheme, and are therefore, probably unwittingly, contributing to the problem of continued fossil fuel use.

In the end, pensions are mainly intended for retired people. I stand here as one of those people, and my question is: Does my County Council believe that the climate emergency they declared last year is serious enough to challenge its own Pensions Committee on its apparent indifference to the effects of climate change on its future pensioners and their families?

Answer: From Cllr Mandy Chilcott, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Resources

As you are aware responsibility for the running of the Pension Fund has been fully delegated to the Pensions Committee. There are very

good reasons for this. The Pension Fund is not the Council’s money, we are custodians of it on behalf of a wide range of stakeholders and Pensions Committee is specifically set up with representation of all of these stakeholders, Full Council does not have this level of representation. Pensions are a very complex area, the members of the Pensions Committee commit themselves to training so as to be able to deal with these complexities and also can devote the time to discuss and explore them which would not be possible for Full Council. The Climate Emergency and how to respond to it within the Fund’s investments is a complex issue, especially as it is intertwined with the pooling of investments that the Fund is obliged to do. For these reasons the Pensions Committee remains the best place for decisions to be made and without direct interference for this Council.

PQ/MQ	From	Topic	Question/Statement
PQ4	Nigel Behan	<b>Local Government NJC PAY TO Somerset County Council</b>	<p><b><u>A FULLY FUNDED, PROPER PAY RISE FOR COUNCIL (AND SCHOOL) WORKERS</u></b></p> <p><a href="http://democracy.somerset.gov.uk/documents/s13992/REQUISITION%20MOTION%20-%20NJC%20pay%20claim%20for%20November%20full%20council.pdf">http://democracy.somerset.gov.uk/documents/s13992/REQUISITION%20MOTION%20-%20NJC%20pay%20claim%20for%20November%20full%20council.pdf</a></p> <p>In the MTFP Strategy Paper (<a href="http://democracy.somerset.gov.uk/documents/s13808/MTFP%20Strategy%20Paper%202020-23.pdf">http://democracy.somerset.gov.uk/documents/s13808/MTFP%20Strategy%20Paper%202020-23.pdf</a>) that went to Cabinet on 18<sup>th</sup> December 2019 it is stated:</p> <p>“The continued lobbying regarding the review of Local Government Funding is necessary to optimise the long-term financial sustainability and stability of the Councils financial position.”</p> <p>Further on in the paper it is noted that a key (“core spending”) assumption is that Pay will increase by “2.75% for each year” as an “estimate of current pay negotiations”</p> <p>Will Somerset County Council urge the new government to fully fund a (in real terms) pay increase in Local Government as employees have lost approximately 21% of the value of their pay since 2010?</p>

Answer: From Cllr Mandy Chilcott, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Resources

Local Government pay negotiations between trade union and employer representatives were suspended during the General Election campaign and re-commenced this week. As Nigel notes, we continue to lobby central government for fair funding, to ensure our long-term stability. This also includes comment on pay negotiations and where we are finding it difficult to recruit & retain staff.

Nigel will recall that there were adjustments made to our pay-scales last year, which included large percentage increases for our lower-paid staff.

We continue to monitor the pay of our employees and to ensure that the overall package remains broadly competitive with other organisations; this includes salaries, recruitment & retention allowances, pension and non-financial benefits.

The 2.75% estimate that we have included in the paper is precisely that, an estimate, and is subject to the outcome of national negotiations. It should be noted that this figure is in addition to the incremental increases that many posts have, as employees gain experience in their positions. We will therefore continue to support employers' representatives in their negotiations and look forward to a settlement that is fair to staff, local authorities and the people that we serve.

PQ/MQ	From	Topic	Question/Statement
PQ5	Mike Ginger	Investment in cycle and walking infrastructure	<p>Taunton Area Cycling Campaign recently presented our 'Turn the network blue' petition to Councillor Woodman. The petition calls for real investment in cycle and walking infrastructure so that these become alternatives to the 10,000s of short car journeys, particularly with the expected uptake in e bike ownership. Nearly 50% of CO2 emissions in Somerset are from the transport sector and tackling this quickly must be a priority. Increased active travel will help tackle increasing public health issues from inactive lifestyles. Better provision will reduce injuries and deaths to pedestrians and cyclists from road crashes. The petition received 1800 signatures.</p> <p>We'd like to thank Councillor Woodman for his time and the constructive conversation that we</p>

			<p>had. While we wait for the official response to the petition, we have a number of follow up questions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Will SCC adopt our network plan for future policy? Although there is now a draft Local Cycling and Walking Plan, this only covers a number of routes, rather than a comprehensive network. SWTC have adopted it as a policy document</li> <li>2. Will SCC appoint a 'Cycling Champion' to spearhead the cycling network work, in the same way that some other authorities and SWTC have?</li> <li>3. When do SCC envisage that work will be begin on the route improvements outlined in the LCWIP?</li> </ol>
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2. Will SCC appoint a 'Cycling Champion' to spearhead the cycling network work, in the same way that some other authorities and SWTC have?
3. When do SCC envisage that work will be begin on the route improvements outlined in the LCWIP?

Answer: Cllr John Woodman, Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport

I would like to thank Mr Ginger for his question and for presenting the 'Turn the network blue' petition. Responding to each of the points in turn;

- We appreciate the work that TACC has undertaken to help us develop our investment plans for cycling. We will be refreshing our active travel strategy and polices in due course, but have not yet determined the form these policies will take. We will certainly use TACCs wider work, as a key input to any cycle network policy that is taken forward.
- At this point in time, we do not intend to appoint a specific cycling champion. Responsibility for championing cycling falls firmly within my portfolio as Cabinet Member for highways and transport.
- The timing of route improvements depends very much on securing funding to undertake works, so we cannot confirm a specific timescale at present. We are submitting a pinch points funding bid to DfT at the end of January.

I recognise the role of the transport sector can have in influencing carbon emissions and we will be taking this into account when developing

our policies and plans.

PQ/MQ	From	Topic	Question/Statement
PQ6	Nigel Behan	Climate Emergency	<p>This Question relates to Item 6 <b><u>Report of the Leader and Cabinet - for decision</u></b> (Paper A Climate Emergency Framework)  <a href="http://democracy.somerset.gov.uk/documents/s13987/Paper%20A%20Climate%20Emergency%20Framework.pdf">http://democracy.somerset.gov.uk/documents/s13987/Paper%20A%20Climate%20Emergency%20Framework.pdf</a></p> <p>The BBC reported that Sir David Attenborough warned "<b>The moment of crisis has come</b>" in efforts to tackle Climate Change. He also said "We have to realise that this is not playing games," "This is not just having a nice little debate, arguments and then coming away with a compromise.</p> <p>And</p> <p>"This is an urgent problem that has to be solved and, what's more, we know how to do it - that's the paradoxical thing, that we're refusing to take steps that we know have to be taken."</p> <p>The BBC report continued:</p> <p><a href="https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-51123638">https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-51123638</a></p> <p>"This year is seen as a vital opportunity to turn the tide on climate change.</p> <p>The UK is hosting what's billed as a crucial UN summit, known as COP26, in Glasgow in November.</p>

			<p>Ahead of that gathering, governments worldwide are coming under pressure to toughen their targets for cutting emissions. That's because their current pledges <b><u>do not go nearly far enough.</u></b>"</p>
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Does SCC believe it (along with the District Councils) has prioritised (taking action) sufficiently -for instance much more focus than "Business as Usual" (more resources/finances and people etc) - to address the Climate Change "Emergency"?

Answer: Cllr David Hall, Economic Development, Planning and Community Infrastructure

Thank you for your question Nigel. We recognise that the way we do things and how we prioritise our resources will need to change in the light of our Climate Emergency declaration, and we are committed to doing so. We need to ensure that our resources are focussed on where they will make the greatest impact.

We are currently consulting on a framework document that outlines the work currently being co-ordinated by the Local Authorities to meet our targets for carbon neutrality and, it provides detail on the actions that we collectively believe that we should be prioritising. We want to gather views from the public on whether the framework covers everything it should and to find out whether there are actions that Somerset's communities are already doing to contribute to this agenda.

The work that is being undertaken by the five local authorities, along with the outputs of the consultation questionnaire and public events will be considered when developing the Climate Emergency Strategy.



PQ/MQ	From	Topic	Question/Statement
PQ7	Alan Debenham	Council budget	<p>I note that in the Queen's Speech Commons debate last week the Secretary for Housing, Communities and Local Government, in latest Johnson-led new Tory government's exaggerated "post-Brexit golden age style", now announces that the Local Government financial settlement for the coming year and the new decade is going to be the most fantastic compared with the last decade and would involve an increase of government support finance to the tune of an annual increase of 4% in real terms, including another £1 billion centrally allocated support fund for Social Care and renewed permission for a special Adult Care dedicated 2% Council Tax levy, plus again, selected Councils being allowed to have control over spending of local business rates and not necessarily being restricted in any Council Tax increase they may pursue, etc.</p> <p>What does all this mean in detail for the coming 2020/21 Budget for Somerset and will this Council make a response pointing out that Council Tax in its current form is very regressive in not bearing sensible relationship to people's incomes and urgently needs radical reform or replacement ( reference Layfield Royal Commission report 1976 plus recent active support for site and land value taxes ), alongside promised changes to business rates ?</p> <p>Is the Council now going to be able to plan in terms of there being, not only no further cuts in services or staff, but in fact restoration of many of the severe cuts made over the past Tory government's unneeded and over-excessive ten-year austerity?</p>
<p>Answer from Cllr Mandy Chilcott, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Resources</p> <p>The Director of Finance submitted a response, on behalf of the Council, to the MHCLG in relation to their Provisional LG Settlement by the closing date of 17<sup>th</sup> Jan. This did draw their attention to the regressive nature of CT and the fact that demands for adult social care services is not related to the level of funding raised by CT increases.</p> <p>Looking ahead, the Council will continue to input proactively to any consultations regarding the future Funding of Local Government –</p>			

expected during 2020.

The Council is in the process of finalizing the MTFP Budget report for the period 2020-23, which will be considered by Cabinet on 10 Feb ahead of consideration by Council on 19 Feb. This paper will set out proposed service budgets.

<b>PQ/MQ</b>	<b>From</b>	<b>Topic</b>	<b>Question/Statement</b>
PQ8	Alan Debenham	Unitary authority	In the latest news and potential consultation programme initiated by this Council regarding Local Councils re-organisation, possibly creating a Somerset Unitary Authority, how and why is it, in the name of better democratic engagement and 'localism', not deemed essential to put the point of view that Somerset County Council should be abolished and more powers given to District and Parish Councils, especially with regard to new very local administration to meet the present and increasing Climate Emergency which is likely to lead to social and economic breakdown in the next decade or so ?

Answer from Cllr David Fothergill, Leader of the Council

My thanks to Alan for the question – I have to say I did find it rather confusing as to which of the two options likely to come out of the recent discussions you are promoting but perhaps if I state the case for my own personal preference, a single unitary for Somerset, you can adapt this response accordingly.

Alan – at first view, those opposing a single unitary authority claim that there is a centralising of power in one town, and that local democracy is therefore weaker. Nothing could be further from the truth in Somerset. I am actively supporting more local decision making, more community involvement and more resources spent in local communities. As a first step, I have been talking to, and engaging with, parish and town councils with a view to listening to challenges and opportunities and I have to report that so far there is considerable interest and some excitement at the prospect of parish and town councils having more, not less, responsibility. Just as a for instance, why wouldn't a town council want to control all parking charging in its patch – unlike the current arrangement when the decision is left to districts and county

council? There are a number of similar opportunities that I'm very willing to discuss and debate.

Your specific point about climate change is valid – and again, why should local communities not be able to come up with their own local opportunities and have the resources to pursue them? I'm sure that as the local government reorganisation debate takes off, the Climate Change work all local councils in Somerset are carrying out and currently consulting with the public, will be prominent and I'm confident it will address some of the issues we all face both as a Council and of course as concerned individuals.

I note there are further questions on the subject of local government reorganisation later in the meeting Alan, if you wish to stay.

**Member Questions**

<b>PQ/MQ</b>	<b>From</b>	<b>Topic</b>	<b>Question/Statement</b>
MQ1	Cllr Liz Leyshon	Future of Local Government	How will the Leader of this Council ensure that the residents of Somerset and elected Members of all Authorities have confidence that the process of determining the Future of Local Government in Somerset will include the virtues of transparency, democracy and openness?
MQ2	Cllr Jane Lock	Unitary Authorities	Can you give a recent example of where a newly formed unitary council has been on budget with set up costs and achieved the expected savings within the set timescale, where not all the local authorities involved were in agreement with the proposal? Dorset has been quoted which does not seem a like for like comparison.

Answer: From Cllr David Fothergill, Leader of the Council to both questions

1) Liz, thanks for the question. Before giving a more full answer, I do need to point out the process for reorganisation lies with national government rather than Somerset County Council or the district councils. That's where the decision will be taken.

However, I do understand the thrust of your question Liz and yes, I can commit to the virtues as you have listed them. I would like to stress

that there is a strong feeling among all councils that the current arrangements must change, we cannot stay the same. I'm also pleased that despite going down separate paths, all councils, county and districts, are continuing to work together and to continue the good arrangements that have existed for many years whilst exploring new options for the future.

Liz, you ask about transparency, yes I am very open to publishing all documentation as it becomes available – in fact I can assure you that I worked long and hard behind the scenes to ensure that the co-commissioned Future of Local Government in Somerset report by the independent consultants Ignite WAS published in full. Ideally I would have liked this to happen much sooner.

We did our very best to ensure that our message, intention, preference and next steps were published and broadcast far and wide. So for example, we issued our press release and participated in numerous press interviews to get our message out. All county councillors were briefed in advance. We communicated with MPs, all councils in Somerset, all of our key stakeholders in the public, private and voluntary sectors and the Secretary of State. We have launched an accessible website and have pledged to publish all relevant data and updates. Over the coming months it is our intention to visit our partners and stakeholders and to undertake extensive public awareness and engagement. As I mentioned in a previous response to Alan Debenham, I have already spoken to a number of town and parish councils about reorganisation and as I said in that response I have been really enthused by their level of engagement.

You also ask about democracy and openness. At various times during the coming months, there will be opportunities to bring forward decisions to this Council, or to Cabinet, or to Scrutiny meetings. I am sure all councillors will have ample opportunity to express their views and to vote accordingly.

We have nothing to hide and I would hope that we can easily and readily support the virtues quoted within the question. We are developing our project plan for this initiative and all can be reassured that this will include a comprehensive plan for engagement and inclusion as we move forward. The views of the public will be fed back into our business case as it develops and there will be full transparency on that document.

I must stress that it is very early days as yet. We haven't submitted any request to government but I hope that should that happen, I can count on the support of all parties to develop a reorganised Somerset that will ease confusion for the public over which council carries out which function, that removes duplication across five councils, that is more efficient with bigger economies of scale, and that has a stronger, more powerful voice in its dealings with Government.

2) Jane, thank you for your question. In terms of the experience from recent unitary councils, you are referring to authorities other than our own but I can point you to a nearby example where Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole converted to unitary status last year. In that scenario, Christchurch formally objected to the approach but was overruled by Government. My understanding now is that the new council is working well and delivering results for its residents.

As I mentioned in my response to Liz Leyshon just now, any final decision on local government reorganisation in Somerset lies with national government not here, so it is perhaps more appropriate for your question to be submitted to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG). I can also point you to the Local Government Association and County Councils Network if you are interested in more reading on the creation and performance of unitary authorities.

You are right that Dorset Council is not an exact match for comparison with Somerset – however we have approached a number of authorities to learn from their applications and implementation to ensure we are in the best position we can be. There is no perfect example of a county like ours, because, of course, Somerset is unique and the best!

<b>PQ/MQ</b>	<b>From</b>	<b>Topic</b>	<b>Question/Statement</b>
MQ3	Cllr Hugh Davies	B3191 Watchet	Has the Council considered placing a weight limit on the section of road on B3191 where there is the ongoing cliff erosion in the vicinity of Daw Castle to preserve it and help prevent further damage?

Answer: From Cllr John Woodman, Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport

In 2019, Somerset County Council (SCC) commissioned a study to undertake a site inspection, and subsequent reporting of an historic landslip at Cleeve Hill, Watchet. The objective of the study was to review the risk of further instability of the cliff, and subsequent impacts on the B3191 that is located immediately above the failure. The report findings will be used to inform a risk assessment and to recommend a strategy for risk management. The recommendations contained within the report do not include the implementation of a weight limit on the B3191. Weight limits are very difficult to manage and enforce, and we would not want to unnecessarily restrict HGV access where no benefit can be evidenced.

In the meantime, the site continues to be inspected on a weekly basis.