

Public Questions

PQ/MQ	From	Topic	Question/statement
PQ1 - 3	David Redgewell	South West Transport Network and Railfuture Severnside – Submitted by David Redgewell Bus Services in Somerset	<p>We welcome the report into unity government in Somerset and the cost savings in mergers of services, especially planning and transport authority services such as land use at Taunton bus station. One Somerset council would be good for the community. The structure needs addressing. Do we have 3 councils? Somerset west and Taunton and South Somerset plus Sedgemoor, with North Somerset, Banes and Mendip district merging and become part of mayoral with planning and transport authority. Regarding buses and trains services there is a need for a clear bus strategy for the county and rail services investment under the Williams review, with government bids for local transport authority funding. Having a clear plan for bus and coach services is important, as is linking Taunton to Minehead, Bridgwater, Burnham-on-Sea and Wellington. Yeovil needs a network of routes to Chard, Wincanton and Crewkerne, with station improvements at Crewkerne and a new station area at Chard Junction. Yeovil Pen Mill and junction needs disabled access improvements as do the lifts at Bridgwater, Highbridge and Burnham-on-Sea, Weston Super Mare and Nailsea and Backwell. Reopening Wellington station and connection to the West Somerset railway are very, very important for the future. Following the successful rail services link in the summer from Taunton to Minehead connecting trains with First group and GWR we are very keen to maintain bus links 75 - Bridgwater to Wells, 29 - Taunton to Wells, 99 - Chard to Taunton and 25 - Taunton to Dulverton. We need to maintain subsidies on these services. We welcome the opportunity and progress on transport in the County and the new bus interchange at Taunton, whilst at Bridgwater the new interchange needs to be looked at again as at Bridgwater station buses cannot turn around.</p> <p>Councillors, can you also please talk to Dorset County Council about the future of bus service number 6 which First Group Wessex is to stop running from May 2020 and also talk to South Somerset District Council and Crewkerne Town Council about this important transport link, which includes Yeovil College. It is understood that First Group South West may take the</p>

service over under the buses of Somerset brand, operating from its Yeovil depot. Please can the Council discuss this issue with First Group plc.

1. Are the council going to use the £444,000 budget to improve the bus network to include subsidies on rural and evening bus services in the Somerset County Council area in 2020/2021 because the Council have this responsibility under the 2017 Bus Services Act?

2. What arrangements do Somerset County Council have in place for subsidised cross boundary bus services and integration with rail services with North Somerset, East/North Devon, Dorset and Wiltshire?

3. Is Somerset County Council going to put in a bid from the station reopening fund to make sure that Wellington is reopened?

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

Q1 Thank you for your comments which are noted. Somerset County Council published its bus strategy in 2018 and is currently finalising a new rail strategy. Our route development continues to take place in the light of public funds available and we are pleased to announce some proposed additional services within our budget setting for the coming financial year; and will continue to seek funds for further service enhancements through the Government's 'better deal for bus services'. I am assured that the new bus stop at Bridgwater Station has been tested for smaller buses, that there is sufficient space, and that further adjustments can be made to the layout as necessary. We are continuing to work with partners to encourage operators to run a service through the station.

Q2 Bus service 6 Bridport to Yeovil is not currently funded by Somerset County Council, but officers will discuss the future of this service with Dorset County Council, other local Authorities and the relevant Bus Operators.

Q3 On 28 January, the Secretary of State announced that there will be another £20m round (number 3) of the New Stations Fund, supporting both development of new stations and restoration of old station sites. No details have yet been released about submission deadlines or

criteria for successful bids. Previous rounds of this fund have required proposals to be at a well-developed stage with detailed passenger demand forecasts, outline design and cost estimates, economic assessment of benefits, revenue forecasts, and delivery programme confirming that the project can be built within the required timescale for funding. Previous rounds have required 25% of the construction cost to be provided locally. SCC is aware that Somerset West and Taunton Council along with Mid Devon District Council have been undertaking the very early stages of study showing there is likely to be a demand for services at Wellington and Cullompton, and that there are suitable sites that would accommodate the stations. As far as we are aware the detailed work needed to inform a business case submission has not yet started. It will be for those Councils to determine whether they feel they have sufficient time and resource to prepare a business case to the required standard for a successful application once the application criteria have been published.

PQ/MQ	From	Topic	Question/Statement
PQ 4 - 6	Alan Debenham	Budget / Council Tax	<p>4. House of Commons PMQs last week again saw PM Johnson declare a fantastic Government funding settlement for Local Government for 2020/21 of a real term increase of 4% and centrally allocated £1 billion for additional help to Adult Social Care, plus £5 billion now announced for positive promotion of local buses and bicycles.</p> <p>Where does the MTFP show these increases and doesn't the Interim Finance Director's language of tight budget control and just about managing to avoid any further service cuts speak of continuing austerity rather than any of the Johnson's typical post – Brexit golden age fantasy?</p> <p>What is the reality of Johnson's hard Brexit deal, measured on par with 'no deal' by most independent financial experts, in terms of loss of EU grants for rural and agricultural sustainability grants, in which Somerset have done well, and forecasted general economic downturn of 8 to 10% in the next decade?</p> <p>5. Once again, there is a proposed Council Tax demand at an increase of 4% which is over double the level of inflation, for a tax based on property values, as at April 1991, which is one of the most unfair in the way it bears little relation to people's incomes and does not include site</p>

			<p>and/or land values.</p> <p>How does the Council justify this continued enlarged and unfair taxation of its residents?</p> <p>6. The MTFP Strategy recognised that the Council declared a climate change emergency in February 2019 and is now working with partners to develop a Climate Emergency Strategy. When this strategy is adopted, the Council will need a financial strategy that is flexible enough to reflect agreed priorities. Pending this strategy, no specific activities have been factored into the indicative budget proposals at this stage: says the finance report.</p> <p>When is this strategy likely to be concluded and surely some substantial financial provision should be earmarked now, even if only an estimate of definite needs to come, bearing in mind the threat to humankind’s very continued existence on Earth and the possible likelihood of death by starvation or violence before this century ends?</p>
<p>Answer: From Cllr Mandy Chilcott – Cabinet Member for Resources</p> <p>Q4 Finances and Brexit: This Council is clear that tight financial control is a must as custodians of public money. We will always strive to deliver our services as efficiently as possible. Looking ahead, the Council’s financial planning is always informed by the predicted level of service demands, Government funding policy and economic forecasts. We will continue to look closely at these in future years planning. In relation to the second half of your question about Brexit, the context for this question is political and economic policy issues beyond the influence of Somerset County Council and given this I will focus my response on those aspects of the question most relevant to Somerset and the work of Somerset County Council.</p> <p>SCC undertook robust planning and risk assessment relating to Brexit and we will be continuing to monitor closely any impacts on sectors of the economy and individual businesses, again working closely with the LEP, the Heart of the South West Business Growth Hub and local business organisations, including the Somerset Chamber. There are established channels through the LEP to alert Government to business issues identified.</p>			

It is true that Somerset has a good track record of securing grant finance for important projects in the county. SCC has been successful in securing EU Structural Funds investment in a range of strategically significant schemes, including the Somerset Energy Innovation Centre, the iAero Centre, our programme of enterprise centres, broadband infrastructure provision and flood and water management schemes.

Somerset’s economy has enjoyed continued growth throughout the past decade and our projections are for this to continue in the years ahead. We are committed to securing the sustainable economic prosperity of our county, ensuring that growth opportunities are grasped and that the economy is resilient to external factors.

Q5 Council Tax: Council Tax is the council’s main source of funding for the net revenue budget – at 75% (£255m) of the net budget of £338m. Over 60% of that budget is spent on delivering social care related services for vulnerable adults and children – for which demands and costs are increasing at a higher level than the widely recognised level of inflation.

Q6 Climate Change: I’m pleased that this Council was an “early adopter” of the Climate emergency declaration and has worked hard with partners to create a strategy that will work for ALL of Somerset. I would encourage Alan to stay in his seat for the first item after public questions when the Leader of the Council will outline his thoughts on climate change, its priority for this Council and some bold and ambitious funding plans that I’m sure will be welcomed by all politicians in this room as well as the wider population.

PQ/MQ	From	Topic	Question/statement
PQ 7 - 9	Nigel Behan	Climate Emergency	<p>Q7 Relates to Climate Change Emergency (and Framework)</p> <p>We welcome the quote on the leaflet (with an Extinction Rebellion logo) by the Somerset Climate Action Network who are facilitating the current consultations around the County.</p> <p>“We know we can’t wait – action has to start now for the people of Somerset” Somerset’s local authorities have declared A Climate Emergency Did you know? Councillor David Hall, Somerset County Council Cabinet Member, February 2019</p>

With structured (programmed) timescales still at a formative stage for SCC’s actions (for instance changes in commissioning, procurement, planning, transport, air quality - processes, policies...etc etc) to be measurable, meaningfully significant – when will it be Business as Usual (Would a new type of Key Performance Indicators be introduced)?

Q8 We also note that the existing “Procedure Rules and Contract Standing Orders” are being reviewed and a paper will be considered by the Constitutions and Standards Committee in the Spring (2020).

The Future of Local Government in Somerset: Delivering together for the people of Somerset stated: “The Somerset Councils have come together to develop a county-wide strategy for tackling the Climate Emergency. Each of us has pledged to bring our own operations and estate to carbon neutrality by 2030”

Which of the models of Local Government (in the options from Ignite & Co) does SCC believe is most likely to provide a strategic, coherent, joined up, practical response to combatting the adverse consequences of (anthropogenic) impacts on Our Climate (e.g. on commission/procurement changes)?

Q9 A major United Nations climate change summit will take place in Glasgow.

The UK has won the bid to host the 26th Conference of the Parties, known as COP26, following a partnership with Italy. As the BBC put it. What responses will SCC provide/contribute to this event?

Answer: From Cllr David Hall – Cabinet Member for Economic Development, Planning and Community Infrastructure

Q7 Thanks for the questions Nigel – as you know, and we have answered this in previous questions, we are working hard alongside our partners including district councils to develop a strategy that will work for ALL Somerset. I will skirt over this question and move on to the

next as they are all linked and the response covers the range of questions you have asked – as you heard earlier, there will be a climate change announcement later.

Q8 We have been clear all along that in our view, a single unitary council across Somerset will enable more effective working and reduce duplication. In Somerset we have four districts and the county council all having their own commissioning arrangements and procurement systems. It must be obvious to all that there is the scope to develop a single approach to commissioning and procurement system that will benefit residents, improve efficiencies, and end duplication and unnecessary costs- this will deliver savings that can be invested in frontline services and initiatives such as climate change. I know the Council Leader will be highlighting opportunities for communities to get involved in climate change initiatives when he introduces his report in a few minutes.

Q9 In relation to COP26, I understand the Government are going to be providing branding materials for Local authorities which can be used for climate change related events in the lead up to the COP26 summit in November.

Member Questions

PQ/MQ	From	Topic	Question/Statement
MQ1	Cllr Jane Lock	Unitary Council for Somerset	If consensus cannot be reached between the five Somerset Councils as to the future of local government in the County does the Leader believe that residents should be given the final say through a referendum or other appropriate process to ensure that any outcome reflects the wishes of the Council Tax payer?

Answer: From Cllr David Fothergill, Leader of the Council

Thanks for the question Jane and your support in general for this proposed change to the way local government is organised in Somerset. I think it is important that we recognise that ALL councils in Somerset have acknowledged that the current system of local government cannot continue – we all agree we need to change.

Your question suggests there is a “final say” and indeed there is – but it is government who have that final say. The process is that we – both

district councils and ourselves - are invited to submit a business case to Robert Jenrick the Secretary of State and we then pull together that business case and send it to government. It is then a decision which will be made in Westminster as to whether any option is given the green light to proceed or not. We will of course fulfil any requests or demands of government for public consultation. Personally I am absolutely committed to ensure the public's voice is heard throughout the debate and will be looking to engage with and consult significant number of residents, our colleagues in Parish, Town and City Councils, our businesses and Chambers of Trade, the Police Authority, the Fire Authority, the NHS and of course the Clinical Commissioning Group to name but a few. I would also ask that all council members do the same to help the public understand the very clear benefits that reorganisation can and will bring.

If anyone needs reminding I outlined them earlier in my opening remarks to Council:

Reduce duplication and inefficiencies

Invest more in our communities

Devolve funding and responsibilities below remote district councils, to town and parish councils and direct to our communities wherever possible

End confusion over which council delivers which service - the current system is a nonsense.

And of course everything we do must ***improve lives for our residents.***