

Public and Member Questions County Council 23 February 2022

Public Questions

PQ	From	Topic	Question/statement
PQ1	Sigurd Reimers	Climate Change Policy	<p>Last week it was three years since the five Councils in Somerset declared a climate emergency, and it is good to note that the climate strategy of both Somerset County and Somerset West and Taunton Councils featured at the top of the ranking of over 300 Councils by <i>Climate Change UK</i> (www.councilclimatescorecards.uk).</p> <p>In the County Council document "What we are already doing" there are examples of a number of climate change initiatives that have already been carried out. With the annual budget being debated today, I wonder when the County Council will be publishing a detailed timeline for all its climate change policies leading up to its Net Zero commitment in 2030.</p>

Response – Cllr David Hall

I would like to thank Mr Reimers for his kind words, Somerset County Council, as he has pointed out, having been assessed by Climate Change UK, as having the most robust strategy of any County Council in the country. We are justifiably proud of this achievement.

As you suggest, there are a significant number of projects currently underway across the County which are aimed at delivering on our ambitious goals to make Somerset resilient to the impacts of Climate Change. Somerset County Council is investing significantly in our own decarbonisation agenda, and we are also investing £1.5m through our Climate Investment Fund, in supporting a wide range of projects and schemes proposed by local communities to tackle the effects of Climate Change. Progress towards Strategy Goals and Outcomes is continuous, and we do not intend to rest on our laurels. We will continue to chart our progress against ambitious targets, and we will revisit our strategy and supporting policies as new thinking and government guidance emerge.

With regard to when we might publish a detailed timeline for all our climate change related policies leading up to our 2030 Net Zero commitment, that target date is well beyond the scope of the budget being debated here today. You will be aware we are moving towards a single Unitary Authority in Somerset. This will mean the creation of a new organisation, that will be responsible for the development and delivery of all Strategies, Policies and Services. Following the elections in May the leadership on the new Somerset Council will be developing the timeline for all future actions, and these will no doubt include Somerset Councils drive to achieve our 2030 goal.

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PQ2	Nigel Behan	Contract Tender Procedure	<p>In Contract Procedure Rules and Standing Orders (Item 8 Report of the Monitoring Officer Appendix 2) it is stated:</p> <p>"27. Most Economically Advantageous Tender</p> <p>27.1. In selecting a preferred supplier, the Council must comply with the general principles of proportionality, mutual recognition, transparency, non-discrimination and equal treatment. In doing so all contract awards must be based on the Most Economically Advantageous Tender (the "MEAT").</p> <p>27.2. The MEAT may be identified by using a price-quality ratio and the default position for such evaluations is a ratio of 60:30:10, 60% price, 30% quality and 10% social value.</p> <p>27.3. However, in discussion with Commercial and Procurement, Officers must ensure the approach used to achieve MEAT is by the best means, using a methodology which is relevant and proportionate to the particular procurement being undertaken."</p> <p>The ratios don't include environmental and climate change factors explicitly – should this be revisited – perhaps 50:30:10:10 - the remaining 10% to include climate change and the environment?</p>
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Response – Cllr Mandy Chilcott

As well as the revision to the weightings for the Most Economically Advantageous Tender within the Contract Procedure Rules and Standing Orders (CSOs), Cabinet has also approved a revised Social Value Policy (policy) this month. The policy provides greater direction on the evaluation of social value through the procurement process and complements the CSOs.

Within the revised policy, detailed consideration was given to the social value priorities for Somerset and whilst the County Council has declared a climate emergency, there are a number of identified priorities;

- Support for Somerset Armed Forces Covenant
- Improved employability of young people in Somerset.
- More Somerset people in employment
- Improving Supplier diversity

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- Creating a healthier community in Somerset.
- Carbon Emissions Reduced
- Reduced Waste.

These factors will receive higher weighting to other social benefits through the procurement process, furthermore the 10% for social value within the Contract Procedure Rules and Standing Orders is the default (i.e. starting) position. Commissioners will determine, together with colleagues in procurement, what is the appropriate percentage weighting for social value on a case by case basis. Therefore, the percentage of social value will be higher in some instances, where this is proportionate and relevant to that specific procurement.

This approach will be reviewed annually.

PQ	From	Topic	Question/statement
PQ3	Nigel Behan	District Council Reserves	Given that the budget shortfalls (from Agenda Item 7 Report of the Leader and Cabinet) in Paper A for the respective councils forming the unitary are:

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Table 5 – Projected Budget Gaps of the five authorities in Somerset

Authority	2022/23 Estimated Net Budget £'m	2023/24 Estimated Budget Gap £'m	% of Net Budget
Somerset	376.3	14.2	3.8%
Mendip	16.7	1.9	11.4%
Sedgemoor	17.4	2.8	16.1%
South Somerset	19.6	4.1	20.1%
Somerset West & Taunton	16.7	5.5	32.9%
Total	446.7	28.5	6.4%

Can you provide the combined “reserves” position as well for the respective Local Authorities (general and earmarked)? And as percentages of the respective revenue budgets?

Response Cllr Mandy Chilcott

All of these details were included in the report to the LGR Joint Committee Report on 4 February and each of the councils budget reports to their February full Council meetings.

PQ	From	Topic	Question/Statement
PQ4	Nigel Behan	Local Government Pay	Many commissioned contract(s) annual uplifts are based on the Retail Price Index (RPI) – will the proposed budget calculations take account of the current inflation rates and the fact that in real terms Local Government Pay has reduced over the last 10 years (by over 20%).

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Therefore will SCC (and the new Unitary Councillors) propose at the Local Government Association (LGA) a pay offer for 2022/23 that, at least, exceeds (RPI?) inflation (noting the NI increase, energy, food price increases etc etc) – since staff are valued?

Response Cllr Mandy Chilcott

- We value greatly all staff across Somerset County Council and our colleagues in Somerset's district councils. They play an essential role in the lives of our residents, in often very demanding circumstances as we have seen notably during the pandemic. We remain committed to partnership working, collective bargaining and national pay agreements;
- We are analysing our pay and rewards package, to ensure it remains fair and competitive in what is currently a very tight labour market;
- We have a number of mechanisms to address specific areas of concern, such as recruitment & retention premia;
- Inflation and cost of living increases are a concern. The majority of staff are still saving money due to hybrid working and subsequent lower commuting costs. We pay an allowance to staff who are losing money because of the increased cost of utilities (due to working at home) are greater than any savings from reduced commuting
- We have put a provisional figure of 2.5% for pay increases in our budget for next year and will continue our discussions with the Local Government Association on what a reasonable pay award would look like. We ask that any increase above our budgeted figure is fully funded by central government;
- Local government finances remain vulnerable. Somerset County Council has presented a truly balanced budget for next year, however, and this will help the new Somerset Council start on a sound financial footing.

PQ	From	Topic	Question/Statement
<u>PQ5</u>	Alan Debenham	Cost of Debt	<p>In the Leader's latest election address to Somerset residents, he lambasts the Liberal Democrats when last in power in 2008 for running -up a debt of £324 million costing £42,000 a day to repay., further arrogantly saying that other parties cannot be trusted to run our public services and it is his party which can deliver what Somerset needs.</p> <p>How can any of this stand-up to any sort of honest scrutiny when the history of Tory government since 2010 has seen nothing but severe austerity and cuts imposed on County Council's by complete decimation of central government revenue support funding, loss of hundreds of Council jobs, and loss of so many much needed services a list of which would fill</p>

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			<p>the rest of this paper ?</p> <p>If Conservatives are so good at delivering services and espousing the virtues of the new Somerset Unitary (which over 60% of Somerset residents voted against) when are we likely to see the restoration of all the services lost through this period of mindless ideological austerity against local government services, especially when we see the estimated cost of this latest badly timed and unessential re-organisation at tens of millions?</p> <p>What is the total debt for the council as it stands today and what is the daily cost to service it?</p>
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Response Cllr David Fothergill

2022/23 has seen one of the largest increases in councils funding nationally, with Core Spending Power increasing by 6.9%. This means we are able to put forward significant increases in funding for all of our major services as part of today's budget proposals.

The external debt in 2008/09 was actually £353.750m and this has been reduced down to £324.55m of debt as per Table 1 in section 11 of the Treasury Management Strategy Statement 2022-23. The interest cost on this debt is £15.134m per annum, equivalent to £41,463.01 per day.

PQ	From	Topic	Question/statement
PQ6	David Redgewell	Levelling up	With the government 12 priorities for leveling up what case is Somerset county council and Somerset west and Taunton council making to improve public transport in the economic growth area and corridor of Wellington, Taunton Bridgwater Highbridge and Burnham on sea. with improvements in bus and coach services in these town and corridor. not just opening Wellington Railway station or link up Taunton to Minehead via watchet.

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			<p>But to provide a new bus and coach station on the Tower street bus and coach station. joint with First group plc National Express coach ltd and other operators.</p> <p>with Somerset west and Taunton council in view of the scrutiny commission meeting at Somerset west and Taunton council is their clear commitment to the regeneration of the bus and coach station.</p> <p>which is required with urgently by passengers waiting for bus and coaches with very very poor waiting facilities in Taunton.</p> <p>in Bath Somerset a temporary bus and coach station was set up with Porta cabins whilst a new transport interchanges was building built this could be the case in Taunton with a temporary provision.</p>
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Response Cllr John Woodman

I note that similar issues were raised by Mr Redgewell at last weeks Bus Advisory Board meeting and I will provide the same response now that I provided him with then. Somerset's ambitious Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) includes proposals to expand the core network across the County from 7am to 7pm, 7 days a week and to increase frequency of services, particularly on some key corridors, including the Wellington – Taunton- Bridgwater corridor. A funding request for Taunton Bus Station has also been included in the BSIP 'ask' for funding.

Therefore, we really need to wait and see what money is available from government for these developments in the first instance. The current bus station facility is owned by Somerset West and Taunton, District Council, although we are ensuring any discussions about the bus station include them to provide a joined-up approach.

PQ	From	Topic	Question/statement
PQ7	David Redgewell	Bus Services	With covid 19 bus operators recovery grant due to end on the 4th April 2022 with bus operators planning to cut services by 30 % 40 % if further covid 19 bus service recovery grant is not paid beyond April 2022 as bus service are only carrying 60 % of pre covid 19 levels.

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			<p>what progress is being made? with the Department for transport and Baroness Vere of Norberton the bus minister to protect Somerset bus Network and services in to Weston super Mare Bristol and Bath. Will Somerset county council follow the West of England mayoral combined Authority and North Somerset council and put some money to one side to protect the county bus network.</p> <p>With bus service improvements plan funding allocation with the enhanced quality partnership not coming into being to later in the year by the Department for transport it is very important that bus service improvements move forward in the county and including new bus and coach stations at Bridgwater, Taunton new facility Wells, Yeovil, Wincanton and Shepton Mallet interchange.</p> <p>Improvements to interchanges in Minehead town centre and Railway station and coach facilities for intercity coaches at Gateway park and ride.</p> <p>or improvements to waiting facilities at riverside.</p> <p>What progress is being made to invest in the county bus station and Transport interchange?</p>
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Response Cllr John Woodman

Somerset County Council has written to Baroness Vere expressing our concerns that the Bus Recovery Grant (BRG) is due to end 5th April 2022 and have asked her to consider the options for extending this. We have also written to the Treasury to raise our concerns with them as well. To date we have not received a response to either letter.

This correspondence is in-line with the ATCO position who have also written to Baroness Vere and the Treasury and have urged all Local Authorities to do the same.

As mentioned in response to the first question, a funding request for Taunton Bus Station, and other bus interchanges in Somerset, has been included in the BSIP ask, so we really need to wait and see what money is available from government for this in the first instance.

In the interim, we have commissioned WSP to undertake a further study in terms of facilities required within a bus station provision and accessibility to the site. They will also develop a 'commercial strategy' in respect of the bus station operation and they will review the interim

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proposals for utilisation of the bus station currently being progressed by Somerset West and Taunton Council, to ensure they are compatible with the preferred future scheme insofar as this is possible.

PQ	From	Topic	Question/statement
PQ8	David Redgewell	Public Transport	It is very important that provision is made to budget to maintain public transport bus service and lobby MP's members of the House of Lords and South West and Western Gateway Transport Board. and minister for an allocation of bus back better bus service improvements plan grant to Somerset and South west England. What progress is being made with the Region MP's on bus services?

As previously stated, the current facility is owned by Somerset West and Taunton, so we are working closely with our District colleagues to ensure they are involved in the study by WSP.

Response Cllr John Woodman

Our BSIP proposal includes £13.2m Somerset County Council revenue funding over 3 years, and £144k one-off SCC capital funding for new vehicles. This assumes a continuation of current (21/22) levels of SCC revenue funding for public transport. The bid also included £400k of match funding for electric vehicles.

We need to wait for the outcome of the BSIP settlement before we can consider the financial implications for the council. A balanced budget is proposed for 2022/23 and any further budget for public transport will need to be considered and approved by the unitary council.

We have taken the opportunity when writing to Baroness Vere and the Treasury to highlight Somerset as an ideal test-bed for transforming rural bus services, when considering the allocation of BSIP funding.

MEMBER QUESTIONS – NONE

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