

Name	Appendix A Public Questions – SCC Full Council 20 July 2022
Mr Nigel Behan	<p>Q1 a) Bus services cut by 16 per cent in a year Campaign For Better Transport</p> <p>The Campaign for Better Transport reported that: "When employment advisers were asked what would most improve job opportunities specifically in rural areas, better public transport was the number one priority." - From a blog by Sarah Welfare, Head of Policy and Research at Reed in Partnership And "In the longer term, the Government must move away from its current, fragmented and competitive way of funding and replace it with a long-term funding settlement for all councils. And a greater proportion of bus funding should be revenue funding (to enable more frequent buses and cheaper tickets) rather than capital funding (for one-off projects like bus stations). How can the Government afford to give every community the bus service it needs? Well, it should start by reallocating money from carbon intensive transport, like road building, into a single funding pot for all local authorities to spend on buses. And with vital services at risk and households struggling, it should act quickly." Does the Council agree and what steps and measures (including consideration of a County-wide Travel Pass -similar to an Oyster card in London) are being considered to turn these type of priorities and proposals into reality? b) What plans are being considered to re-open Taunton Bus Station (fully functioning)?</p> <p>Q2 This question relates to Item 10 Requestioned Items B. Cost of Living (Emergency)</p> <p>It concludes that: "Finally, Council joins other local councils in calling for a local Cost-of-Living Emergency Summit, with stakeholders, including Citizens Advice, Food Banks, Local Trades Unions, and Chambers of Commerce and will invite local MPs to attend this hybrid meeting."</p> <p>The opportunity to engage is welcome, and assuming this item is "carried" will the "Local Trade Unions" also include Taunton and West Somerset Trades Union Council (TUC) - also known as "Trades Councils", Bridgwater and District TUC, Mendip TUC and Yeovil TUC?</p>
	Response from Cllr Mike Rigby
	<p>Q1 a): Somerset has been allocated indicative Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) funding of £11.9 million and has submitted proposals for a combination of capital and revenue initiatives (in-line with the DfT funding rules) to deliver schemes to improve public bus provision and drive-up patronage. This forms part of a longer-term ambition to secure additional funding from government to deliver the wider BSIP proposals which could not be funded within the current indicative allocation. I agree that to tackle our rural</p>

	<p>transport issues, a greater proportion of bus funding would ideally be revenue funding for services, and we have written to Government setting this out. Unfortunately, Government roads funds are capital funds, much of which come to us to maintain our rural roads, so would not help us run bus services if Government budgets were to be reallocated.</p> <p>Q1 b): We have recently submitted a bid to the Department for Transport (DfT) as part of the Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) process, to create a mobility hub to act as a transport interchange facility within Taunton. Following a feasibility study the former bus station site has been identified as the most appropriate location for a mobility hub. We are currently awaiting the outcome of the funding bid but in the meantime, we are working with colleagues from Somerset West and Taunton to develop proposals in relation to the facilities and requirements for a mobility hub on the former bus station site</p>
<p>Ms Linda Snelling</p>	<p>My name is Linda Snelling, and I am making this statement on behalf of Yeovil citizens.</p> <p>I'd like to highlight the impact of recent cuts in Yeovil's public transport, and the effects it has had mentally and physically upon citizens.</p> <p>Since the 6th June, the reduction of bus service has had a dramatic impact, three areas are now without a service. These areas have a high proportion of elderly, vulnerable people with health issues, low-income families, people with mobility or learning disabilities who relied heavily on those public transport options.</p> <p>The cuts have quite literally divided rich from poor, young from old and the able from the disabled. We live in a democratic society where non-discrimination/ equal opportunities are paramount. This should not be occurring! Yeovil's bus network needs proper, consistent funding, and revising to make it more inclusive.</p> <p>I ask whether an assessment regarding social impact was carried, what consultations were there? And Was this published?</p> <p>What is happening in Yeovil runs completely goes against the aims of the Government 's "Bus Back Better" National Bus Strategy. Yeovil's bus service needs attention and rerouting, and by not addressing these issues in favour of just concentrating on Taunton gives a strong clear indication that you are willing to let the people of Yeovil and surrounding areas suffer mentally and physically, without any regard to your duty of care towards them.</p> <p>Key Issues are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Now many residents are unable to access basic essential services that are fundamental to survival. • Increased depression of citizens due to isolation/the inability to engage in society, Quote "I no longer have a reason to get out of the house - Because I can't get anywhere". "I'm unimportant, I don't matter!" - And so on.

- Nearest bus stops for isolated citizens are 15/20-minute walk uphill, not an option for many, but those trying to remain independent, its causing great physical strain. Come winter, this extra burden will have impact increasing the likelihood of falls, broken bones, chills and pneumonia or worse!
One elderly gent said "it is causing pain and exhaustion when I return home with my shopping after walking an extra 15 minutes uphill from the bus stop".
- The marooned no longer have direct and frequent access to the hospital and GP surgeries. Yet many of these citizens have severe health conditions i.e., cancer. People should not have to endure more stress and anxiety regarding transport in addition to their health. Many are now having to rely on family from elsewhere, which is making them feel a burden! Community cars are oversubscribed. Whilst NHS staff struggle to reach work.
- Learning disabilities lives are in chaos, changes to buses are detrimental to their wellbeing, disrupting social integration and volunteering, making it difficult to attend such activities. Nine Springs volunteering group have members with learning difficulties. Cuts have meant that some can no longer participate, whilst others are struggling to get to grips with timetables and a change of bus. This is traumatic, and affecting their mental health and quality of life, a problem highlighted by support workers.
- Stroke victims can no longer access groups and services that are vital for health and wellbeing, just as the elderly can no longer reach the Day centre, and parents are unable to reach baby groups.
- Parents on low-income are unable to fund cars, so a bus service is vital. children are suffering anxiety and stress because of difficulties in reaching schools and preschools, no longer supported by transport, Taxis are not an option.
- People's jobs have been disrupted due to the changed bus times and routes.
- The recently split Yeovil to Taunton bus service is leaving people stranded in Somerton due to buses not connecting, and workers abandoned after work as the last bus leaves Taunton too early.
- Extra private cars are forced to take to the roads causing more congestion at peak times. This adversely affects the environment and the health of pedestrians, who are now expected to wait at bus stops on main roads inhaling toxic fumes.
- By reducing public transport availability, it significantly reduces footfall into the town. The Elderly support our economy due to less online purchases.
- Elderly are being excluded due to disparagement of technical online knowledge meaning they cannot access vital transport information.

Yeovil Bus Users Group and Somerset Bus Partnership

Response from Cllr Mike Rigby

With regard to the recent changes to the bus network, these are decisions that have been taken by the commercial bus operators as part of their network reviews. Their decisions are based solely on the viability of the routes and due notice was served in line with the

	<p>requirements of the Traffic Commissioner whose role it is to regulate the provision of local bus services. As per the requirements of the Enhanced Partnership, these changes were discussed with both Somerset County Council and the Bus Advisory Board members ahead of the changes taking place. The operators have not taken these decisions lightly, but they are based on a review of the network and patronage levels. Unfortunately, in some instances, despite allowing time for services to try and recover from the covid pandemic the numbers returning to travel just are not sufficient to make these routes viable.</p> <p>Somerset County Council has used Local Transport Fund (LTF) funding from Central Government to restore service 68 Yeovil to Barwick and Stoford via Yeovil Junction Station and extend the route to the Highfield Road to cover part of the withdrawn 53 Yeovil Town Service to allow further time for passenger numbers to continue to recover and minimise the impact to users. Buses of Somerset also amended the route of their remaining 51 Town Service in order that this service operates closer to other parts of the withdrawn 53 Bus Service to limit the impact. Discussions with local operators are continuing to see if anything else can be done with the limited resources available to further close the gap in areas where service 53 used to operate.</p>
Mr David Redgewell	<p>Currently, Somerset County Council and Somerset West and Taunton Council have been looking at enhancements through the bus service improvements plan.</p> <p>Recently there was a meeting between the Somerset Bus Partnership, Somerset Catch the Bus Campaign, Railfuture, Southwest Transport Network, a representative from Travel Watch Southwest, Southwest Coach Operators and the Confederation of Passenger Transport.</p> <p>At this meeting the group came to the conclusion that Taunton needed three transport hubs:-</p> <p>One at the railway station with bus interchange for more services,</p> <p>A second one by reopening the existing bus and coach station as a transport hub with a cafe, waiting room, toilets, provision for bicycles and an e-scooter hub serving local, regional and National Express coaches along with Flixbus and Berry's Coaches with parking for tourist coaches.</p> <p>The Department for Transport is looking at national roads at the A38 / M5 coach stops, one at Gateway Park and Ride site or at Riverside for Megabus Stagecoach and Falcon Coaches.</p> <p>We felt that a bus boulevard was difficult to build in the Parade and North Street without the removal of private car use, widening pavements, new shelters and investment.</p>

Question 2

What action is the County Council taking to restore Somerset commuter bus network?

We believe that the early morning and evening services should be restored especially on the following routes :-

1. Taunton to Yeovil bus station via Langport and Somerton.

All other journeys have to change at Somerton to service 77 Wells bus and coach station, Glastonbury and Street.

2. Somerton, Ilchester and Yeovil bus station. The last bus service departs at 17.10 which is no good for commuters. People are now having to use the First Group Great Western Railway from Taunton to Yeovil Penn via Castle Cary and a bus from Yeovil Pen Mill station.

But were not sure the level of service in December 2022 railway timetable.

3. The last bus from Bridgwater bus station to Street, Glastonbury and Wells bus and coach station is 16:40. Previously, the last service used to be the 18:15 to Street with all services going via Bridgwater Hospital. Now the 16:50 service is the last one to Bridgwater hospital. Services 1 and 75 used to run in the evening to the hospital.

4. Service 21 Burnham on Sea, Highbridge, Bridgwater and Taunton now start later. There also needs to be a later bus service from Burnham on Sea to Berrow, Brean, Uphill hospital railway station and Weston Super Mare bus and coach station number 20 Sunday service in the winter, along with connections from Taunton and Bridgwater bus and coach stations, Highbridge, Burnham on Sea service number 21

5. Service 30 Taunton to and from Axminster via Chard now starts later as do services 75 and 99 to Taunton to Chard

6. Services from Wells bus and coach station to Bridgwater bus and coach station now starts from Glastonbury Town Hall and there are poor connections with the 376 service from Wells bus and coach station.

7. Service 29 from Wells bus and coach station now starts from Glastonbury Town Hall with poor connections from Wells bus and coach station.

8. Also, we now have a 2 hourly service 25 Taunton Town Centre via Bampton and Dulverton instead of hourly.

9. There is no longer any evening or Sunday services on the 126 from Well bus and coach station to Cheddar and Weston Super Mare bus and coach via Draycott, Axbridge, Winscombe, Banwell, Locking.

10. Yeovil and Bridgwater have lost most of their town services with the one in Yeovil being very limited now. Services are run by First Group South West Buses and South West Coaches.

Question 3

Across the county, with the District Council going, very little bus stop shelter and timetable display maintenance is taking place. Yeovil has very few updated timetables in place and no bus shelters are being cleaned by District Council contractors. Similarly in Mendip District Council area there are some broken shelters on the highway.

In the Sedgemoor District Council, Axbridge Estate, Somerset West and Taunton Council areas, public transport user groups are putting up many timetables. In the County Council and North Somerset Council area, public transport user groups are cleaning shelters in Glastonbury, Frome station and in part of Frome itself.

Response from Cllr Mike Rigby

Question 1:

Thank you for the feedback on mobility hub requirements within Taunton, which we have noted. As per the response to Question 1 submitted by Nigel Behan, we have recently submitted a bid to the Department for Transport (DfT) as part of the Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) process, to create a mobility hub to act as a transport interchange facility within Taunton. Following a feasibility study the former bus station site has been identified as the most appropriate location for a mobility hub. We are currently awaiting the outcome of the funding bid but in the meantime, we are working with colleagues from Somerset West and Taunton to develop proposals in relation to the facilities and requirements for a mobility hub on the former bus station site.

Bus/rail interchange at the rail station will become operational once the new access to the rail station and Firepool is completed later this year.

Question 2:

Operators have indicated that passenger numbers are still struggling to recover post Covid, with patronage levels only reaching 65-70% of pre-covid levels in many instances. As a result operators have had to review their commercial networks and make changes to their services where they were no longer financially viable. With the final tranche of covid bus support due to end at the beginning of October we are anticipating further changes to the commercial network to follow in October. We will continue working with operators to understand these changes in more detail as they develop and agree any mitigating action where appropriate.

We have a bid in through the Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) process to trial evening and weekend services. The locations are yet to be determined but are likely to be services

	<p>feeding into the Taunton area to form part of the transformational bus town initiative. We are awaiting the outcome of this bid before proposals can be developed in more detail.</p> <p>Question 3: Bus stops and bus shelters are currently the responsibility of the District Councils and they have various different maintenance arrangements in place. In many instances the parish or town councils have taken on responsibility for managing and maintaining the shelters in their area. As part of the move to unitary, the approach to managing bus stops and bus shelters will be reviewed under the assets and infrastructure workstreams.</p> <p>In terms of bus timetable information, if you have any specific issues with timetables not being available at the stop or incorrect information please notify the public transport team Transport@somerset.gov.uk and they will work with the operator to agree a resolution.</p>
<p>Mr Ian Beckey</p>	<p>What progress is being made on reopening Chard junction railway station and the Exeter central to Yeovil junction and Salisbury and London Waterloo main line with the Southwest Transport Board, Heart of the west local Enterprise partnership, Western gateway transport Board, Department for transport, Network rail Wessex route and First group MTR Southwestern railway.</p> <p>As Chard is a fast-growing Town and in need of both good bus/coach and train links to London and the South west Region.</p>
<p>Response from Cllr Mike Rigby</p>	
	<p>There are no firm plans at present for a re-opening of Chard Junction station. However, we have recently begun discussions with local representatives about the process that might be followed to build a high level strategic and economic case. This would examine the current transport issues and identify whether rail is the preferred option for solving them. It would also examine the potential value for money that a rail solution might deliver, based on an assessment of future demand, capital and operating costs. There is currently no funding identified for carrying out this work (estimated at between £30,000 and £60,000) or any clear funding pathways for a new station if that is decided by DfT and the rail industry as the way forwards (estimated at £15 - 20m).</p>
<p>Mr Andrew Lee</p>	<p>Over the past decade the process of asking questions to Somerset County Council has had a look and feel that is redolent of North Korea.</p> <p>District Parish and Town councils hold their meetings in the early evening when most (I accept not all) members of the public can attend. By contrast SCC hold meetings at 10am on a Wednesday more or less guaranteeing that the only members of the public who can attend are shift workers or retirees.</p>

In all other councils, District, town or parish, when public questions are called, the public need only raise their hand and then speak freely for no more than 3 minutes. By contrast to ask this question I am required to contact Democratic Services 3 clear working days before the meeting, no later than 5pm. I will then be "invited" to submit a written statement or question.

This will only be able to be asked if approved (though I agree I have only once had a question refused).

If approved, my question can be asked, but when I speak, I will be told to stick to the script and not wander into any other territory. By contrast, the person from the council responding is free to wander far away from the question and on more than one occasion has chosen to effectively answer a different one or at least not address the nub of the question asked.

If this happens, there is no redress or comeback. the questioner has no opportunity afforded to them to point out that the question has not been properly answered, or to come back on the answer.

With a new administration in place, may I ask if it is not time to have a more open and transparent engagement with members of the public who wish to ask questions of their council

Response from Cllr Bill Revans

Thank you for your question, Mr Lee though I must express my bafflement at you comparing the Council's public participation in meetings with North Korea. I am not sure the comparison is fair to our 3,500 staff and 110 members.

North Korea has no Public Question time. Reporters Without Borders rank it as the worst country in the world for press freedom. Journalists have been arrested, deported, sent to forced labour camps, and killed for deviating from the party's narrative. In 2017, the government sentenced Korean journalists to death in absentia for only commenting on the country's economic and social situation. However, I am pleased to reassure Mr Lee that we do not have no intention of operating in such a way at Somerset County Council....

It is very rare for any public questions or statements to be refused and the grounds for that are set out in section 4.11 of the Council's Constitution. The main reasons for questions to be rejected or amended are when they relate to matters which are not in the Council's functions and are the responsibility of another organisation or contain statements which are defamatory, offensive or vexatious.

The procedures for public questions and statements are published with the agendas for each meeting so that everyone is aware of how to participate.

Many of our new members won't be aware that the current rules for public questions and statements were agreed by the Council in July 2018 following recommendations from the former Constitution and Standards Committee. Those recommendations were as a result of work undertaken to compare the council's rules with other peer councils such as Devon County Council and Wiltshire Council. For context it should be highlighted that there had been 33 public representations at the council meeting in February 2018.

The Council recognises that there can be a challenge in striking an appropriate balance between maximising the time for debate by members on scheduled items of business at council meetings and the time allocated for public questions at meetings.

Looking forward, the Council will be reviewing its public question time procedures and its meeting arrangements, including timings, as part of the transition to the new Somerset Council when the new Constitution and democratic arrangements are considered at the County Council meeting in February 2023. Our Constitution and Governance Committee will be considering these issues with a view to maximising the opportunity for the public to ask questions of their elected representatives and allow democratic procedures to take place in the new unitary council.