

Public Agenda Pack



EXECUTIVE

Wednesday, 8 November 2023

10.00 am

**Council Chamber, Council Offices, Brympton
Way, Yeovil BA20 2HT**

SUPPLEMENT TO THE AGENDA

To: The members of the Executive

We are now able to enclose the following information which was unavailable when the agenda was published:

Agenda Item 4 Public Question Time (Pages 3 - 12)

The Chair to advise the Committee of any items on which members of the public have requested to speak and advise those members of the public present of the details of the Council's public participation scheme.

For those members of the public who have submitted any questions or statements, please note, a three minute time limit applies to each speaker and you will be asked to speak before Councillors debate the issue.

We are now live webcasting most of our committee meetings and you are welcome to view and listen to the discussion. The link to each webcast will be available on the meeting webpage, please see details under 'click here to join online meeting'.

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Executive 8 November 2023 – Public Questions

Name of person submitting question		Question
Nigel Behan		<p><u>Agenda Item 7 - Financial Strategy Update</u></p> <p>Icebergs, Black Holes and Doom Loops</p> <p>I wish to make a statement/ask a few questions in relation to Item 7 Financial Strategy Update - Nov 23 (somerset.gov.uk)</p> <p>Public Finance reported that Short-termism leaves public services in 'doom loop' noting the problems (funding and workforce shortages etc) in Adult Social Care. As noted, there are also Funding issues in Childrens Social Care (and SEND) and some Local Authorities are at risk because of housing matters (homelessness and no housing stock apart from using the private sector etc). [Statutory provision.]</p> <p>The report referred to, also suggested: "A relationship "reset" with staff, with improved working conditions, workforce planning and pay negotiations."</p> <p>It was announced at the recent Audit Committee that: "we can see the iceberg".</p> <p>Black holes: Council looks to address £100m 'black hole'</p> <p>It was reported that: "Deputy leader and lead member for resources Liz Leyshon said: 'No one wants to be in this position, but we are well aware of the implications of a Section 114 notice.'</p> <p>She said Somerset intended to take 'difficult decisions' now with the benefit of local knowledge, rather than leaving government commissioners to find an answer."</p> <p>Question 1</p> <p>Does this mean that Somerset Council (SC), is in effect, doing the work that (unelected) Commissioners would be expected to do if a S114 Notice was to be issued?</p> <p>Question 2</p>

	<p>a) As reported earlier in the year (BBC): <u>Plans to increase council tax in Croydon by 15% have been approved by the government</u></p> <p>“Croydon Council sought permission to impose the rise without a referendum after declaring itself bankrupt for the second time in three years in November. Elsewhere, Thurrock and Slough councils, have also had requests approved to raise council tax by 10%.”</p> <p>Is SC considering (and modelled - including the proportionate increase in the ASC precept) raising Council Tax (CTAX) to a level that would “balance the budget” and, if so, what is the approximate CTAX increase (figure & %) -over the 4.99% increase “allowed” without a referendum”?</p> <p>b) Since many other Councils are facing similar issues – Districts: Housing etc and Upper Tier/Unitary (as the County Council Network reported): Adults and Childrens Social Care etc – how are Councils working together to pressurise the Government (for realistic increases in the Local Government Settlement) to meet the existing needs of service users rather than further rationing of local government services?</p>
<p>Eva Bryczkowski</p>	<p><u>Agenda Item 7 – Financial Strategy Update</u></p> <p>Out of the 21 councils across Britain who have funding gaps, Somerset County are 16th on the list.</p>

Councils funding gap

Rank	Council	Region	Funding gap (£m)
1	Birmingham City	West Midlands	£164.8m
2	Thurrock	Eastern	£156.5m
3	Manchester City	South East	£82m
4	Sheffield City	Yorkshire Humber	£72.7m
5	Bradford City	Yorkshire Humber	£72m
6	Liverpool City	North West	£67m
7	Leeds City	Yorkshire Humber	£59.2m
8	Nottingham City	East Midlands	£50.9m
9	Shetland Islands	Scotland	£47.1m
10	Kirkcaldy	Yorkshire Humber	£47m
11	Highland	Scotland	£46.7m
12	Norfolk County	Eastern	£45.9m
13	Bournemouth	South West	£44.4m
14	Christchurch & Poole		
15	Leicester City	East Midlands	£44.2m
16	Somerset County	South West	£41.6m
17	Warrington Borough	North West	£39m
18	Medway	South East	£38.7m
19	Glasgow City	Scotland	£37.7m
20	Edinburgh City	Scotland	£37.6m
21	Caerphilly/Caerffili	Wales	£37.4m

As we are all aware, Birmingham City is at the top of the list, with a funding gap of £164.8 million, and Thurrock next on the list with £156.5 million.

As of Friday 29th, of September 2023, Somerset County's funding gap was £41.6 million.

Councillors and officers, you will know what the more up to date figures are, with the biggest overspends being adult social care, children and families, and highways.

This situation that the council, and council tax payers are in is: a local, a Somerset county, and a NATIONAL EMERGENCY.

I am not a Lib Dem member, and profoundly disagree with the choices they made when they were in coalition with the conservative government in 2010, but I think that since they have led Somerset council, they've done a fairly good fist of prioritising and looking after the most vulnerable people in our county.

However, they are not deeply rooted in the trade union and labour movement, unlike other parties. This matters, because if they were, this would profoundly influence the decisions they have to make regarding the funding gap.

I don't envy what all you councillors need to do now, and as soon as possible in order to avoid insolvency. You have at the very least two directions you can go in:
You can do the usual things that governments and councils do, and say something like, "We have difficult decisions to make....." Same old, same old. Or you could do something radically different.

THE ROOT CAUSE

Starting from the premise that the root cause of Somerset being strapped for cash, with council tax payers enduring the brunt of savage cuts having to be made since 2010, the root cause is:
The drastic underfunding imposed by the coalition originally, and now the Conservative government.

Austerity has damaged the economy, with destitute people spending little, leading to less tax revenue, and local authorities burdened with more responsibilities but less cash to be able to fund these obligations. The root cause lies at the door of number ten Downing Street.

OTHER ALTERNATIVE COURSES OF ACTION ARE POSSIBLE

One course of action is to stand shoulder to shoulder with the people you represent.
i.e. Us council tax payers, the unions who are trying to save jobs & working conditions, and particularly, the most vulnerable people in Somerset.

CONTRAST BEFORE AND NOW

When I was a steward coordinator for Learning Disabilities, members in Unison local government branch would march outside county hall against cuts in funding, lobby councillors as they walked into full council meetings, and made sure the media knew about how much we were against the decisions the Tory led council were planning to make. Circumstances are different now. As a member of both Unite the Union and Unison, I know that you can't balance the books at this moment in time because we haven't got the money. Simple. Either you tackle in a united way the root cause of this underfunding or go forward forever in misery further cutting into the bone of services and witnessing even greater destitution than before.

SOCIAL SCARE, (deliberate misspelling).

Reading the figures we can see how much social care is affected, with costs spiralling. For example, the price of residential care shooting up exponentially.

Plus other services - children and families, Special Educational Needs children, highways, e.g. potholes, essential repairs, and many other statutory commitments the council have to fulfil.

THE ROLE OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ASSOCIATION

As I see it, the LGA is supposed to campaign against the years of drastic underfunding and help local authorities to get more funding. But all I can see is that they announce all the worrying figures, (which we already know anyway from the Institute of Fiscal Studies). And they occasionally moan about the dire situation. This is unhelpful to me and other council tax payers, unions fighting deterioration in many directions, and frankly, local authorities themselves.

SUCCESSFUL CAMPAIGNS

Mick Lynch and the RMT led the campaign against the closure of ticket offices. Going on strike, making sacrifices and losing money as a result of all this, led to making the general public aware of what was happening, who then voted a resounding No to the government's proposal. The LGA should act more like trade unions and campaign groups that are successful in achieving their aims, getting the public on their side and fully aware of the situation. Like the paramedics and NHS staff who walked out earlier this year. The attention grabbing headline in the Daily Mirror was,

	<p>WE ARE DOING THIS FOR YOU! Somerset council, and maybe eventually the rest of the councils in Britain, could respectfully stand shoulder to shoulder with the people you are meant to serve. Frankly, you haven't done a bad job so far. Do something different. Like marching on Westminster, or a variety of other actions you think might be successful. That'll wake people up - your voters, (take them with you to London or elsewhere), the media and the rest of the country. No time to waste. Coaches, and other forms of transport, need to be organised. Listening to council tax payers and trade unions as part of this process.</p> <p>Question 1</p> <p>Councillors, are you going to go down the usual predictable route, telling council tax payers you have difficult choices to make, in order to justify savings/cuts in vital services and jobs, or are you going to do something different?</p> <p>Question 2</p> <p>Are you going to stand shoulder to shoulder with your people, the people you represent?</p> <p>Question 3</p> <p>If Yes to the second question, how soon are you going to do it?</p> <p>One final thought, regarding belief systems we may hold, 'Whether you think you can or can't, you are right.' Henry Ford. 'I cannot accept not trying.' Michael Jordan, successful baseball player. So go for it, I humbly suggest.</p>
David Redgewell	Question 1 - <u>Agenda Item 7 - Financial Strategy Update</u>

Whilst we agree with the disposal of Council assets we want to be sure that no public transport infrastructure assets are being put for sale. Such as the county's Bus and coach stations and interchanges facilities including Bridgwater bus and coach station, Wells bus and coach station, Yeovil bus and coach station leased. For a For the Northern Irish property Group. Frome Cork Street coach station, street coach station, Glastonbury coach station and coach parks, Wellington coach park and car park. Minehead coach park, Shepton Mallet interchange and Chard interchange, Wincanton memorial hall bus and coach station and car park. the Future Taunton Transport hub former bus and coach station.

But money can be made through Cafes Kiosks bike hire e scooter hire and Retail activities at these transport hubs. Can we be assured that no public transport infrastructure is being sold off

Question 2 – Agenda Item 12 Award of contract for Highway Services

At the Somerset place scrutiny commission meeting Somerset catch the bus campaign and South west transport Network

We raised the concern about how these contracts would work with regards to the public transport Network infrastructure that has been transferred from the former District Councils.

So that the council owned Bus and coach station and coach park have proper maintenance contracts With repair contracts to cover the Bus and coach stations at Wells bus and coach station, Yeovil bus and coach station lease from the shopping centre company. Frome Cork Street coach station, Wincanton bus and coach station, Glastonbury coach station and coach park, street coach park Bridgwater bus and coach station Shepton Mallet interchange Chard interchange Wellington coach park, Minehead Coach Park Minehead Bank Street Minehead railway station Transport interchange.

The county bus stops and shelters. Many of which have been transferred from the former District Councils. With the new Highway contracts, we want to assure that these contracts are Design to cover all the Highway and Transport Department assets not just the footways but kerbs, drop kerbs and bus and coach stops and interchanges.

Would the council not have been better to taking the service in House like Cormac in Cornwall,

		<p>With the unity council taking over all the public transport, car parks coach parks, public transport interchanges and Bus and coach stations. We are looking for assurance for bus and coach and public transport users that Somerset council has maintain contracts in place.</p> <p>Question 3 – <u>Agenda Item 7 - Financial Strategy Update</u> With the county looking to sale assets Which we support the Sale of the portfolio of shops shopping centres, Offices across the county and in Bristol. Including leasing buildings to commercial organisations like Gloucester City Council Bath and North East Somerset council and Bristol city council who lease a lot of buildings in theses 3 city's We are looking for assurance that the Trackbed and Railway infrastructure will not be sold to a Private Railway company including the west Somerset railway company Ltd But remain public ownership under Somerset unitary council to be able to develop a future public transport railway service between Minehead Dunster Blue Ancor Washford, Watchet, Dunsford Beach willton Stogumber Crowcombe Heathfield Bishop Lydeard Norton Fitzwarren and Taunton along with a steam Tourist railway.</p>
Rossa Kell		<p><u>Agenda Item 12 Award of contract for Highways Services</u></p> <p>As part of the new Highway contracts will the council new Highways and Transport Department contracts take over the maintenance and cleaning of bus and coach station in Wells. The Transport interchange at Shepton mallet, Glastonbury, street and Frome coach stations. And the bus and coach shelter bus stops and timetables information display formerly owned by Mendip District council. We would also support hypothecation of car and coach parking charges into funding the bus and coach services and public transport infrastructure.</p>
David Mears		<p><u>Agenda Item 9 Policy for the Disposal of Assets</u></p>

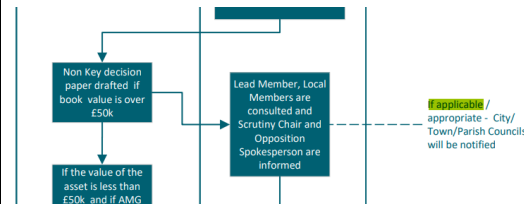
How town and parish councils can assist with some of the financial pressures to protect service delivery and the need for Somerset Council to speak with one voice on devolution and the need to invest in devolution and highlight delays with the Bridgwater Pilot.

Raise positive areas of agenda item 9 'Policy for the Disposal of Assets' and raise the following concerns/points:

Page 121 of the public report pack

Delete - "If applicable/appropriate city, town and parish councils will be notified."

and replace with "City, town and parish councils will be consulted prior to any decision to dispose of any asset identified as surplus."



Disposals of Small Sites Process Map			Appendix B
Service Department	Strategic Asset Management Department	Members	Notes

After the heading "Small Sites"

Insert "City, town and parish councils will be consulted prior to any decision to dispose of any asset identified as surplus."

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