

Public Agenda Pack



Minutes of a Meeting of the Full Council held in the The County Room - Somerset County Cricket Club, on Wednesday, 12 February 2025 at 1.00 pm

Present:

Cllr Mike Best (Chair)
Cllr Lee Baker (Vice-Chair)

Cllr Steve Ashton
Cllr Marcus Barr
Cllr Alan Bradford
Cllr Burt
Cllr Simon Carswell
Cllr Norman Cavill
Cllr Mandy Chilcott
Cllr Peter Clayton
Cllr John Cook-Woodman
Cllr Adam Dance
Cllr Dawn Denton
Cllr Lance Duddridge
Cllr Habib Farbahi
Cllr David Fothergill
Cllr Tony Grimes
Cllr Pauline Ham
Cllr Bente Height
Cllr Ross Henley
Cllr Edric Hobbs
Cllr John Hunt
Cllr Helen Kay
Cllr Andy Kendall
Cllr Tim Kerley
Cllr Liz Leyshon
Cllr Martin Lovell
Cllr Matthew Martin
Cllr Harry Munt
Cllr Mike Murphy
Cllr Graham Oakes
Cllr Sue Osborne
Cllr Oliver Patrick
Cllr Tom Power
Cllr Steven Pugsley
Cllr Wes Read
Cllr Bill Revans
Cllr Diogo Rodrigues
Cllr Peter Seib
Cllr Brian Smedley

Cllr John Bailey
Cllr Brian Bolt
Cllr Hilary Bruce
Cllr Theo Butt Philip
Cllr Mike Caswell
Cllr Nicola Clark
Cllr Barry Clarke
Cllr Simon Coles
Cllr Nick Cottle
Cllr Hugh Davies
Cllr Martin Dimery
Cllr Caroline Ellis
Cllr Bob Filmer
Cllr Andrew Govier
Cllr Andy Hadley
Cllr Mark Healey
Cllr Alistair Hendry
Cllr Mike Hewitson
Cllr Henry Hobhouse
Cllr Dawn Johnson
Cllr Val Keitch
Cllr Jenny Kenton
Cllr Christine Lawrence
Cllr Tony Lock
Cllr Dave Mansell
Cllr Kevin Messenger
Cllr Tessa Munt
Cllr Frances Nicholson
Cllr O'Donnell
Cllr Connor Payne
Cllr Evie Potts-Jones
Cllr Hazel Prior-Sankey
Cllr Faye Purbrick
Cllr Leigh Redman
Cllr Mike Rigby
Cllr Jo Roundell Greene
Cllr Heather Shearer
Cllr Fran Smith

Cllr Federica Smith-Roberts
 Cllr Mike Stanton
 Cllr Andy Sully
 Cllr Sarah Wakefield
 Cllr Richard Wilkins
 Cllr Rosemary Woods
 Cllr Ros Wyke

Cllr Jeny Snell
 Cllr Claire Sully
 Cllr Lucy Trimnell
 Cllr Martin Wale
 Cllr David Woan
 Cllr Gwil Wren

68 Apologies for Absence - Agenda Item 1

Apologies were received from Councillors Suria Aujla, Jason Baker, Adam Boyden, Shane Collins, Tom Deakin, Andy Dingwall, Michael Dunk, Ben Ferguson, Philip Ham, Susannah Hart, Marcus Kravis, Steven Page, Kathy Pearce, Emily Pearlstone, Derek Perry, Rob Reed, Tony Robbins, Jill Slocombe and Andy Soughton.

Although apologies had been received, Councillors Suria Aujla, Philip Ham and Tony Robbins attended the meeting online.

69 Chairs Announcements - Agenda Item

The Chair paid tribute to Professor John Sharp, former Councillor at South Petherton Town Council and to Terry Hall former Councillor of Taunton Deane Borough Council and former Mayor of Taunton. Both had died recently. The Chair thanked them each for their services and the meeting observed a moment of silence.

70 Declarations of Interest - Agenda Item 2

Councillors present at the meeting declared the following interests in their capacity as a Councillor of a Town or Parish Council or any other Local Authority:-

SOMERSET COUNCILLOR	CITY, TOWN AND/OR PARISH COUNCIL
Steve Ashton	Crewkerne Town Council / Hinton St George Parish Council / West and Middle Chinnock Parish Council
Suria Aujla	Bridgwater Town Council
Jason Baker	Chard Town Council
Lee Baker	Cheddon Fitzpaine Parish Council
Marcus Barr	Wellington Town Council
Mike Best	Crewkerne Town Council
Alan Bradford	North Petherton Town Council
Theo Butt Philip	Wells City Council
Simon Carswell	Street Parish Council

Norman Cavill	West Monkton Parish Council
Peter Clayton	Burnham Highbridge Town Council
Nick Cottle	Glastonbury Town Council / St Edmunds Parish Council
Adam Dance	South Petherton Parish Council
Tom Deakin	Taunton Town Council
Andy Dingwall	Westonzoyland Parish Council
Caroline Ellis	Taunton Town Council
Ben Ferguson	Axbridge Town Council
Bob Filmer	Brent Knoll Parish Council
Andrew Govier	Wellington Town Council
Pauline Ham	Axbridge Town Council
Philip Ham	Coleford Parish Council
Alastair Hendry	Burnham on Sea and Highbridge Town Council
Ross Henley	Wellington Town Council
Edric Hobbs	Shepton Mallet Town Council
John Hunt	Bishop's Hull Parish Council
Val Keitch	Iminster Town Council
Andy Kendall	Yeovil Town Council
Jenny Kenton	Chard Town Council
Tim Kerley	Somerton Town Council
Marcus Kravis	Minehead Town Council
Tony Lock	Yeovil Town Council
Martin Lovell	Shepton Mallet Town Council
Mike Murphy	Burnham Highbridge Town Council
Graham Oakes	Yeovil Town Council / Yeovil Without Parish Council
Sue Osborne	Iminster Town Council
Kathy Pearce	Bridgwater Town Council
Evie Potts-Jones	Yeovil Town Council
Tom Power	Wincanton Town Council
Wes Read	Yeovil Town Council
Leigh Redman	Bridgwater Town Council
Mike Rigby	Bishops Lydeard and Cothelstone Parish Council
Tony Robbins	Wells City Council
Diogo Rodrigues	Bridgwater Town Council
Peter Seib	Brympton Parish Council / Chilthorne Domer Parish Council
Heather Shearer	Street Parish Council
Gill Slocombe	Bridgwater Town Council

Brian Smedley	Bridgwater Town Council
Federica Smith-Roberts	Taunton Town Council
Jeny Snell	Yeovil Town Council / Brympton Parish Council
Andy Soughton	Yeovil Town Council
Richard Wilkins	Curry Rivel Parish Council
Dave Woan	Yeovil Town Council
Ros Wyke	Westbury-sub-Mendip Parish Council

71 Public Question Time - Agenda Item 3

Public questions were received from:-

- Neil Guild and Micheal Duffy – Union Submission with reference to the Council’s Workforce Restructure
- Nigel Behan – Workforce Restructure and Audit Report
- David Orr – Council Transformation

The questions and responses provided are attached to the minutes in Annex A.

72 Council Organisation Structure - Agenda Item 4

This report by the Chief Executive set out the organisational structure proposals that would become effective on 1 April 2025. The proposals would form a critical part in helping to achieve the ‘Vision for a sustainable Somerset Council’ as set out in Appendix E of the report.

There were no proposals to stop services, but the reduction in capacity would require a sharp focus, in line with corporate priorities, to prioritise resource on those things that mattered most.

The organisational restructure was part of the Council’s Improvement and Transformation Programme that was endorsed by Executive in February 2024 and would deliver total General Fund savings of £34m. The programme was rapidly accelerating the pace of change towards delivering a radically different way of working as a Council, operating with fewer staff, whilst increasing our influence and impact.

The Lead Member for Transformation, Human Resources and Localities, Councillor Theo Butt Philip, was invited to speak. He thanked the Chief Executive for the report and re-iterated it was essential the Council become stable and sustainable.

The Leader of the Council, Councillor Bill Revans, was invited to speak. He thanked the Officers and Unions for their work in preparing the report.

During the discussion the following points were raised:

- With regard to the planning service, Members said the quarterly report which had been considered by the Strategic Planning Committee recently was concerning with regard to staffing numbers. This included staff in other departments that supported the planning officers. There was concern there was a risk to the Council of the cost of appeals and cost of applications which were not being determined on time. Such a risk could cost the Council more money in the long term. Members noted there were a number of vacancies in the planning department and associated departments which the Council was trying to recruit to. Also changes in the way applications were considered such as triaging may help to reduce the pressure on colleagues.
- Members wished public facing services such as planning to be prioritised for investment. Members noted the Council would have a pay review in the future which may help.
- With regard to adult services members noted one-off grant money would be used to recruit officers. Members queried how many staff were involved in this and whether it was sustainable.
- Members noted the workforce had contributed to the restructure and that should give Members confidence the services would be set up in a sustainable way.
- With regard to impact assessments, some members said it seemed older people and those with reduced mobility would be hardest hit by the changes to the services. Thus, potentially breaking some of the Council's own priorities. Members noted that some services may be delivered differently, but no protected group should be unacceptably impacted upon.
- Some Members believed the Council was underfunded. There was concern the Council was changing and that it would not be better in future. Members were pleased to see some posts had been reinstated as a result of the consultation. But a reduction of in the region of 500 posts was regrettable. Of particular concern was a reduced enforcement service, a reduced SEND service, changes to the waste services, a reduced climate control service and a reduced rights of way service.
- Members said the Council should continue to work with partners including parish councils and take opportunities to devolve some services.
- With regard to financial services, Members noted the vast amount of work they had had to do. There was concern whether there were enough senior finance officers. Members noted the vacancies available throughout the Council which would mean the structure would be effective.
- There was concern some of the workforce were reliant on external funding, and whether such funding would continue.
- There was concern each officer would be asked to do more work. Although Members noted the proposed structure had been designed to avoid such a situation.
- Members noted the Council would need to rely more heavily on AI.
- Some Members were concerned whether the ombudsman would be able to report be favourably on the Council given the reductions that were being proposed.
- Members said it was regrettable they had been put in a position of having to agree such a reduction to the structure.
- Some Members were concerned that if the restructure failed it would be too

late to reverse the decision. However, it was noted that the Council would continue to evolve and address any problems.

The Lead Member for Transformation, Human Resources and Localities was invited to speak again. He agreed that care services were proving to be very costly and he wished the Government to review the way such services were funded.

The Chief Executive said, after the restructure, the Council would reconsider how the services were carried out.

Councillor Henry Hobhouse proposed an amendment to the recommendation, namely the removal and the reinstatement of the Rights of Way Officer

Members noted the purpose of the report was to endorse the structure and the Chief Executive would note the content of the discussion above including the proposed amendment before his final decision was made. The Chief Executive would discuss the detail of the proposed amendment with Councillor Hobhouse outside of the meeting.

As the discussion continued, the following points were made:

- It was noted the Section 151 Officer would no longer be a Service Director level member of the workforce. However, there was considerable concern about the costs involved in letting the previous post holder go, only to have to re-recruit another officer.
- The Chief Executive agreed to let Councillor Faye Purbrick details on the costs of letting certain officers go and the costs of hiring again.
- Members were disappointed they were being asked to endorse the restructure rather than have an opportunity to scrutinise the new structures in their committees. However, members noted they would have regular reports and regular opportunities to get involved in the Council's structure.
- Members thanked the workforce for the way they had handled such an uncertain time.
- In response to queries the Chief Executive said, as head of paid services, he was tasked with delivering a restructure which met the budget which had been set by Councillors.
- The Chief Executive said lots of alternative structures for each team had been considered as part of the process including the consultation.

The Lead Member for Transformation, Human Resources and Localities was invited to speak again. He said the workforce had lived with the uncertainty of a new Unitary Council and a restructure since 2019. He thanked the workforce for their continued support. He said it was sad to have lost valued staff because of the changes. However, it was essential that the Council become stable and sustainable.

The Leader of the Council was invited to speak. He also thanked the workforce, and he thanked the Council for a useful debate.

Councillor Theo Butt Philip proposed that the Council accept the

recommendations. This was seconded by Councillor Bill Revans.

Having been duly proposed and seconded, the Council Resolved:-

1. To endorse the proposed organisational structure as set out in the report and its appendices, ahead of the decision by the Head of Paid Service.
2. To note that where any proposed changes to service delivery, as a result of the organisation structure proposals, would impact on existing approved service standards, Executive have delegated authority to the relevant Service Director to revise the service standards and also complete a review of any impacted plans and policies (in consultation with their Executive Lead Member) before the end of May 2025. These were set out in Appendix B of the report.

73 Housing Revenue Account Rent Setting and Fees and Charges 2025-26 - Agenda Item 5

The Lead Member for Communities, Housing Revenue Account, Culture and Equalities and Diversity, Councillor Federica Smith-Roberts introduced the report.

This report presented to Members the Housing Revenue Account (HRA):

- a. Rent Setting for 2025/26
- b. Fees and Charges for 2025/26

The proposals included in this report would enable the Council to set a balanced budget for the HRA for 2025/26.

The report asked Members to note that the Revenue Budget for 2025/26, Capital Budget for 2025/26 to 2029/30, MTFP Update and 30-Year Business Plan Update would be presented to the Executive / Full Council in February 2025.

The report stated the Council had a legal duty to set the Rents and Fees and Charges for the Housing Revenue Account prior to the start of the financial year to which the budget related. To note that these proposals would contribute towards the Council being able to set a balanced budget for 2025/26.

Members were asked to note the report had been considered by Homes in Sedgemoor, the Tenants Committee and the Scrutiny Committee.

During the discussion the following points were raised:

- Where the report mentioned percentages, members wished to know what this meant in terms of cost increases.

Councillor Federica Smith-Roberts proposed the Council accepted the recommendations in the report. This proposal was seconded by Councillor Mandy

Chilcott.

Having been duly proposed and seconded, the Council Resolved:-

1. Rent Setting for 2025/26

- a. An increase of 2.7% on Dwelling Rents for 2025/26 in line with the Governments Rent Standard.
- b. An increase of 2.7% for Sheltered and Extra Care housing rents in line with the dwelling rents increase.
- c. An increase of 2.7% for Shared Ownership properties.
- d. An increase of 2.7% on affordable rental tenures, with the rent being reviewed at relet based on 80% of open market rent capped at the LHA rate.

2. Fees and Charges for 2025/26

- a. The Service Charges for 2025/26 as shown in Appendix A of the report for Homes in Sedgemoor and Appendix B of the report for the In-House Service.
- b. An increase of 2.7% for garage rents in the North.
- c. A freeze on garage rents in the West.
- d. An increase of 1.7% on temporary accommodation daily rates.
- e. An increase of 1.7% for Meeting Hall hourly rental rates.
- f. An increase of 1.7% for Guest Room charges.
- g. To discontinue the lifeline subsidy from 1 April 2025 for all new tenants (whereas existing tenants will still benefit from this protection).

3. To note that the Revenue Budget for 2025/26, Capital Budget for 2025/26 to 2029/30, MTFP and 30-Year Business Plan Update will be presented to a later Executive / Full Council in February 2025.

4.

74 Interim External Auditor's Annual Report for 2023-24 - Agenda Item 6

The Chair of the Audit Committee, Councillor Mike Hewitson, introduced this report.

This report stated the External Auditor's Annual Report for 2023/24 had been reported to the Audit Committee on 30 January 2025 (see Appendices 1 and 2 of the report). It detailed the Auditors' findings on arrangements in place at the Council to secure economy, efficiency, and effectiveness in its use of resources during 2023/24.

The Auditor's report included two Statutory Recommendations in relation to serious concerns over the Council's financial sustainability that had been issued to the Council, by its External Auditors Grant Thornton, exercising their powers under Schedule 7 of the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014.

In accordance with the Act, a meeting of the Full Council was required within one

month to consider the two statutory recommendations, to decide:

- (a) whether the report required the authority to take any action or whether the recommendation was to be accepted and
- (b) what, if any, action to take in response to the report or recommendation.

The Auditor in addition to the two Statutory Recommendations had also raised nine Key Recommendations and eight Improvement Recommendations addressing perceived weaknesses in the Council's arrangements for financial sustainability, governance and securing economy, efficiency, and effectiveness. The management response and planned actions would be overseen by the Audit Committee.

This report informed all Councillors of the background framework and the next steps to ensure that the external auditor's statutory recommendations were addressed promptly and satisfactorily.

Statutory Recommendation 1 (SR1) The Council should develop detailed savings plans at pace to deliver the savings targets set out in the MTFS in order to reduce reliance on one-off resources and rebase the Council's budgets to a financially sustainable level.

Statutory Recommendation 2 (SR2) The Council should develop the overarching transformation business case and detailed business cases for individual workstreams that will deliver service transformation and contribute to delivering the Council's ambitious savings targets. The funding required to deliver transformation, and the new target operating model, should be identified and a funding plan developed. This should be undertaken at pace in order to deliver the savings required to balance the 2025/26 budget.

During the discussion the following points were raised:

- Members of the Audit Committee said they accepted the findings by the Auditors.
- There was some concern the Council had been slow to respond to the findings of the Auditors, and some felt there may have been a lack of humility shown in accepting them.
- Members said it was important to note the recent unusual circumstances for local councils including the LGR, COVID, and financial pressures.
- Members noted the strength of the findings of the Auditors and how they should be taken very seriously.
- The Chair of Audit said the auditors would be giving careful consideration to the direction the Council was moving as it worked to improve.
- The Director said it may be necessary for the Council to engage with external support in order to make good progress.
- Members noted they would receive more reports as progress was made.
- Members noted the capital receipts would be the main source of funding for the transformation.
- Members were uncertain how the restructure of the workforce would play out over the next few years.
- There was concern about future budget gaps in the forthcoming years.

The Chair of the Audit Committee said, he could see no savings the Council could make which would be sufficient to close the future budget gap. In his opinion the only option was to grow the Council Tax Base. It was noted the Council Tax in Somerset was low in comparison with other counties.

- With regard to delivery of savings, the Interim 151 Officer said savings were being constantly monitored. Pressure was being put on all areas of the Council that had predicted overspends.
- Currently all of the Council savings were mitigated.
- To bridge the budget gap the Council would need permission for a capitalisation directive and to increase the Council Tax. News from the government approving such a capitalisation directive was expected by the end of the month.

Members suggested the recommendations set out in the report be taken separately.

If they were to be taken together anyone voting against the recommendation would be noting the two Statutory Recommendations in the Auditor's Report but not endorsing the management responses.

Councillor Mike Hewitson proposed that the Council accept the recommendations in the report. Councillor Liz Leyshon seconded this proposal.

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Having been duly proposed and seconded, the Council Resolved:-

1. To note the two Statutory Recommendations in the Auditor's Report and
2. Endorse the management responses and proposed actions set out in the report to Council.

75 Somerset Council Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act - Agenda Item 7

The Leader of the Council introduced the report.

This report stated the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000 ("RIPA") governed the acquisition of communications data and the use of covert surveillance by local authorities.

Public Authorities such as Somerset Council in respect of whom RIPA applied were subject to periodic inspections by the Investigatory Powers Commissioner's Office (IPCO) who provided independent oversight on the use of investigatory powers, as outlined in the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000.

By conducting robust, evidence-based inspections of the use of investigatory powers, the Inspectorate ensured that those public bodies authorised to use investigatory powers were doing so lawfully and in line with best practice.

Somerset Council had received an in-person inspection by one of the IPCO inspectors on the 3 April 2024 and subsequently online on the 10 May 2024.

On 2 September 2024 the Executive had agreed the following recommendations:

1. To note the contents of the report to the Executive.
2. To note the outcome of the Inspection by the Investigatory Powers Commission.
3. To note the use of the Authorities' powers under RIPA for the period of 3 years prior to the formation of the unitary Council, for the period 2023/24 and thereafter that the use of the powers be reported to the Executive on an annual basis.
4. Recommended to Full Council that the former County Council's Covert Surveillance (RIPA) Policy be re-adopted as amended, as the RIPA Policy for Somerset Council.
5. Agree and note the Council's Policy as recommended above would be reviewed annually by the Executive.

Members noted the report and agreed the use of covert surveillance by local authorities was very powerful should it ever be necessary.

Councillor Bill Revans proposed that the recommendation set out in the report be approved. This was seconded by Councillor Mandy Chilcott.

Having been duly proposed and seconded, the Council Resolved:-

To agree that the former Somerset County Council's Covert Surveillance (RIPA) Policy attached to the Report be re-adopted as amended, as the RIPA Policy for Somerset Council.

76 Questions from Councillors to the Executive - Agenda Item 8

The Chair of the Council, Councillor Mike Best, invited questions from Councillors for the Leader and the Executive.

Member questions were received from:-

- Councillor Diogo Rodrigues – Support for Businesses. And Bus and Rail Links
- Councillor John Hunt – The proposed disposal of the Mary Street/High Street Car park, Taunton

The questions and responses provided are attached to the minutes in Annex B.

(The meeting ended at 4.50 pm)

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CHAIR

Special Full Council – 12 February 2025 – Public and Member Questions

Annexe A – Public Questions	
Name of person submitting	Question
<p>Neil Guild and Micheál Duffy</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Page 13</p>	<p>Union Submission</p> <p>UNISON have repeatedly raised concerns with Somerset Council through the Joint Consultative Forum about the lack of detail within the consultation documentation. We have outlined concerns that there has been no costed business case outlining how functions of Somerset Council will continue post restructure. Key projects required for the delivery of the proposed restructure including transformation, IT and AI solutions have not been developed or costed in a business case for this transformation programme. Our members are concerned that services will suffer as there is no capacity to take on work of colleagues who are made redundant and a robust transformation programme has not been implemented. We would like to recognise that the external audit published at the Audit Committee on the 30th January 2025 raised similar concerns.</p> <p>While recognising the need for urgency, the implementation of the staff restructure before a costed transformation programme has been developed presents a significant risk. This risk is namely that the reductions and the new structures being developed without this robust planning could adversely impact on the Council’s capacity to deliver vital services to the people of Somerset.</p> <p>UNISON recognise that the Council must create a comprehensive and sustainable plan for the future. However, UNISON has raised repeated concerns about the lack of a detailed, costed business case and the inadequacy of detail on the projects required to implement these changes.</p> <p>Question 1a – How does the Council intend to address this issue to ensure that vital services are not compromised when the new structure is implemented early in the next financial year?</p> <p>Response from the Lead Member for Transformation, Human Resources and Localities, Councillor Theo Butt Philip</p>
<p>Full written response</p>	<p>Thank you for your question. Joint Consultation Meetings have been held fortnightly throughout the duration of the Council Restructure Programme. All requests from recognised Trade Unions have been responded to verbally at the meetings, and where written questions have been submitted, full written responses have been provided. This question repeats similar questions raised recently at Scrutiny (Corporate and Resources) and Audit Committee, and responses have been provided.</p>

Special Full Council – 12 February 2025 – Public and Member Questions

A Workforce Programme Risk Register and Service Impact Assessments have captured all risks identified by the Programme Team and raised by Stakeholders. When new organisational structures go live on 1st April 2025, work will be prioritised, and resources allocated accordingly. Local Government Reorganisation, bringing five Councils into one in Somerset in April 2023, was intended to reduce revenue costs associated with management overlap and duplication. The restructure and new organisational designs were not based on digital transformation and AI, although some improvements have been made this year to improve productivity, with the introduction of Microsoft Copilot. Transformation will follow in the next three years and will continue to drive organisational improvement.

Staffing levels have been reduced by decreasing the number of layers of management from the top to the front-line and increasing spans of control to more suitable levels (for example, removing one manager to one employee reporting lines). Reducing the cost of the paybill by reducing inefficient and duplicated organisational structures was always an aim of the LGR business case; however, due to the financial emergency, this work has been accelerated, including full and meaningful consultation with Unions and staff.

Service Impact Assessments have been undertaken, details of which, along with the proposed mitigating actions, are included in the papers for this meeting. These impacts have been identified by the relevant directors for each service and have been reviewed by both Scrutiny and Executive. We accept that there will be challenges in implementing the changes required to work with a reduced workforce and agree that there will be a level of investment required in our systems to support this change. The transition required in working with a reduced workforce is being planned for and worked through with Directors and their teams. There will need to be some changes to services, as identified in the report, and we will closely monitor the impact of these changes and adapt our mitigating actions as required.

It is clear that the activity of the last year, in readiness for the forthcoming financial year, has been about improvement and change and LGR, and less about true transformation of how we can deliver services in the future. A Transformation and Improvement Business Plan will be developed for future years, based on data, evidence and a robust business case to demonstrate a return on investment.

The Council has given serious consideration to the External Auditor's report and has provided a management response. In 2024/25 we accelerated the Somerset Council Improvement and Transformation Programme to deliver £34m of workforce savings compared to the target of £12m as outlined in the original Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) business case. This reduction in General Fund has been made in advance of the 2025/26 financial year to help close the budget gap which was originally forecast in excess of £100m. The pressures on our Council budget are severe, with demand for social care services far

Special Full Council – 12 February 2025 – Public and Member Questions

	<p>in excess of income levels, so in addition to action taken in line with the Medium-Term Financial Strategy the Council has needed to request Exceptional Financial Support from Government for 24/25 and 25/26. This is a national problem affecting all Local Authorities and not a reflection of our plans. Without taking this action in 24/25 the S151 Officer may have needed to issue a Section 114 notice and more draconian measures, including stopping services, would be a consequence.</p>
<p style="writing-mode: vertical-rl; transform: rotate(180deg);">Nigel Behan</p> <p style="writing-mode: vertical-rl; transform: rotate(180deg);">Page 15</p>	<p>I am speaking about Item 4 Workforce Restructure - Head of Paid Service Section 4 Report.pdf and Item 6 Somerset Council External Auditors Annual Report 2023-24.pdf (including Appendix 1 report to the Audit Committee 30 January 2025.pdf and Appendix 2 Local Government Auditor's Annual Report 2023/24)</p> <p>We highlighted at the Audit Committee some of the concerns raised by Grant Thornton (External Auditors): The annual audit report from Grant Thornton raises concerns that Trade Unions have been raising for some months but without satisfactory answers to maintain the confidence and trust of our members. Their critical reports states that: <i>"the Council is delivering the workforce reduction programme before the development of the detailed transformation programme business case and before key enabler projects, relating to ICT, data and process improvement, have been implemented"</i>. <i>"the implementation of the staff reduction programme presents a significant risk that reductions in staff will impact on the Council's capacity to deliver services before they are effectively transformed"</i> And</p> <p>Grant Thornton made a key recommendation that <i>"the Council should mitigate the risk of implementing the organisational restructure before the development of the wider transformation business case"</i></p> <p>These concerns are before you today within Item 6 and the appendices.</p> <p>In Item 4 you are being recommended to 1 "Endorse the proposed organisational structure as set out in this report and its appendices, ahead of the decision by the Head of Paid Service." And 2 "Note that where any proposed changes to service delivery as a result of the organisation structure proposals will impact on existing approved service standards, Executive have delegated authority to the relevant Service Director to revise the service standards and also complete a review of any impacted plans and policies"</p> <p>Question 3a – Does the council feel (believe) that significant attention has been given to the external auditor's critical comments and that changes to service delivery should have been planned prior to a rushed job cull?</p>

Special Full Council – 12 February 2025 – Public and Member Questions

	Response from the Lead Member for Transformation, Human Resources and Localities, Councillor Theo Butt Philip
Full written response	<p>Thank you for your questions.</p> <p>Joint Consultation Meetings have been held fortnightly throughout the duration of the Council Restructure Programme. All requests from recognised Trade Unions have been responded to verbally at the meetings, and where written questions have been submitted, full written responses have been provided. This question repeats similar questions raised recently at Scrutiny (Corporate and Resources) and Audit Committee, and responses have been provided.</p> <p>A Workforce Programme Risk Register and Service Impact Assessments have captured all risks identified by the Programme Team and raised by Stakeholders. When new organisational structures go live on 1st April 2025, work will be prioritised, and resources allocated accordingly. Local Government Reorganisation, bringing five Councils into one in Somerset in April 2023, was intended to reduce revenue costs associated with management overlap and duplication. The restructure and new organisational designs were not based on digital transformation and AI, although some improvements have been made this year to improve productivity, with the introduction of Microsoft Copilot. Transformation will follow in the next three years and will continue to drive organisational improvement.</p> <p>Staffing levels have been reduced by decreasing the number of layers of management from the top to the front-line and increasing spans of control to more suitable levels (for example, removing one manager to one employee reporting lines). Reducing the cost of the paybill by reducing inefficient and duplicated organisational structures was always an aim of the LGR business case; however, due to the financial emergency, this work has been accelerated, including full and meaningful consultation with Unions and staff.</p> <p>Service Impact Assessments have been undertaken, details of which, along with the proposed mitigating actions, are included in the papers for this meeting. These impacts have been identified by the relevant directors for each service and have been reviewed by both Scrutiny and Executive. We accept that there will be challenges in implementing the changes required to work with a reduced workforce and agree that there will be a level of investment required in our systems to support this change. The transition required in working with a reduced workforce is being planned for and worked through with Directors and their teams. There will need to be some changes to services, as identified in the report, and we will closely monitor the impact of these changes and adapt our mitigating actions as required.</p>

Special Full Council – 12 February 2025 – Public and Member Questions

	<p>It is clear that the activity of the last year, in readiness for the forthcoming financial year, has been about improvement and change and LGR, and less about organisational-wide transformation of how we will need to deliver services in the future. A Transformation and Improvement Business Plan will be developed for future years, based on data, evidence and a robust business case to demonstrate a return on investment.</p> <p>The Council has given serious consideration to the External Auditor’s report and has provided a management response. In 2024/25 we accelerated the Somerset Council Improvement and Transformation Programme to deliver £34m of workforce savings compared to the target of £12m as outlined in the original Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) business case. This reduction in General Fund has been made in advance of the 2025/26 financial year to help close the budget gap which was originally forecast in excess of £100m. The pressures on our Council budget are severe, with demand for social care services far in excess of income levels, so in addition to action taken in line with the Medium-Term Financial Strategy the Council has needed to request Exceptional Financial Support from Government for 24/25 and 25/26. This is a national problem affecting all Local Authorities and not a reflection of our plans. Without taking this action in 24/25 the S151 Officer may have issued a Section 114 notice and more draconian measures, including stopping services, would be a consequence.</p>
<p>David Orr</p>	<p>A reminder that you were elected in 2022 and have had one year to plan and nearly two years to implement the rationalisation savings from 5 councils into 1. For those Councillors who think this ask is Day 1, then a reminder it is Day 689. The financial emergency was declared 18 months in from you being elected in 2022.</p> <p>The key business-as-usual rationalisation savings on Day 689 have attracted a trenchant criticism in two Red cards from the government-appointed auditor, for activities that need to be in place in just 7 weeks time, when the 2025/26 year begins.:</p> <p><i>“The Council should develop the overarching transformation business case and detailed business cases for individual workstreams that will deliver service transformation and contribute to delivering the Council's ambitious savings targets. The funding required to deliver transformation, and the new target operating model, should be identified and a funding plan developed. This should be undertaken at pace in order to deliver the savings required to balance the 2025/26 budget.”</i></p> <p>This Council’s response to this unusual statutory recommendation from the government-appointed auditor is a veritable “word salad”, with no explanation as to how, on Day 689, key plans and an operating model appear to be absent or incomplete.</p>

Special Full Council – 12 February 2025 – Public and Member Questions

<p style="writing-mode: vertical-rl; transform: rotate(180deg);">Page 18</p>	<p>Actual implementation and delivery are lagging well behind any commercial timetable, with a plethora of aspirational “management-speak” reports.</p> <p>The government-appointed auditors Grant Thornton last week raised yet another Red flag about the vital 'transformation' work:</p> <p><i>"The Council is delivering the workforce reduction programme before the development of the detailed transformation programme business case and before key enabler projects, relating to ICT, data and process improvement, have been implemented"</i></p> <p><i>"The implementation of the staff reduction programme before the transformation programme has been developed presents a risk that reductions in staff will impact on the Council's capacity to deliver services".</i></p> <p>Without a full staffing plan identifying the skills requirements, based on a detailed service plan, it is difficult to see how the new organisation could be efficient and cost effective</p> <p>Councillors know all about failed transformation programmes. They have been a source of chaos and concern at Somerset County Council with Southwest One and then at both Taunton Deane and South Somerset District Councils with Ignite.</p> <p>Question 2a - Will we in the coming year see yet another failed transformation programme at this new unitary council? Sadly, and now unavoidably, I think we will.....</p> <p>Response from the Lead Member for Transformation, Human Resources and Localities, Councillor Theo Butt Philip</p>
<p>Full written response</p>	<p>Thank you for your question. In 2024/25 we revised the Somerset Council Improvement and Transformation Programme to deliver £34m of workforce savings compared to the target of £12m as outlined in the original Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) business case. We disagree about your statement of a future failed transformation programme. The pressures on our Council budget are severe, with demand for social care services far in excess of income levels, so in addition to action taken in line with the Medium-Term Financial Strategy the Council has needed to request Exceptional Financial Support from Government for 24/25 and 25/26. This is a national problem affecting all Local Authorities and not a reflection of our transformation plans.</p>

Special Full Council – 12 February 2025 – Public and Member Questions

	<p>Service Impact Assessments have been conducted, and the proposed mitigating actions are included in the meeting papers. These impacts, identified by service directors and reviewed by Scrutiny and Executive, acknowledge the challenges of working with a reduced workforce. Investment in systems will be required to support this change. The transition is being planned with Directors and their teams, and service changes will be monitored and adapted as needed.</p> <p>It is clear that the activity of the last year, in readiness for the forthcoming financial year, has been about improvement and change and LGR, and less about organisational-wide transformation of how we will need to deliver services in the future. A Transformation and Improvement Business Plan will be developed for future years, based on data, evidence and a robust business case to demonstrate a return on investment.</p> <p>We have given serious consideration to the External Auditor's report and have provided a management response.</p>
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<p>U Name of Person submitting</p>	<p>Annexe B – Member Questions Question</p>
<p>Mr Diogo Rodrigues</p>	<p>Question 1a - "What support is Somerset Council considering to assist businesses across Bridgwater that have experienced reduced footfall and loss of trade due to the cumulative impact of multiple roadworks occurring simultaneously?"</p> <p>Questions 1b - "Current road configuration prevents buses from using the designated bus stop at Bridgwater Train Station. Given the importance of linking bus and rail services to improve transport options, when will Somerset Council carry out the necessary works to enable buses to stop at the train station?"</p> <p>Response from Lead Member for Economic Development, Planning and Assets, Councillor Mike Rigby (Q1a) and Lead Member for Transport and Waste Services, Councillor Richard Wilkins (Q1b)</p>

Special Full Council – 12 February 2025 – Public and Member Questions

<p>Full written response</p> <p>Page 20</p>	<p>(Q1a) For businesses affected by roadworks in connection with the Celebration Mile project, potential options including temporary business rate relief and waiving of pavement licences are being considered. The project contains provisions for some marketing support once the project has been completed</p> <p>The wider works in the highway around Bridgwater are part of various organisations' programmes including utility companies, private developers and the Council to invest in essential infrastructure for the town. Once we became aware of the huge amount of work necessary in such a short period, we worked with those organisations on a program of dovetailing works as best as possible. We have challenged all the contractors, which has in many cases, resulted in better traffic management than was initially proposed, and insisted on 24hr working on some works so reducing overall work programmes, such as the recent development related works on the A39 Bath Road and A30 Puriton Hill. The aim of much of this investment is to regenerate and improve the economy in Bridgwater and will have long-lasting benefits to business once completed.</p> <p>Utilities have statutory rights to provide service such as a new water or gas supply, and can pursue roadworks without prior consultation due to safety reasons for instance gas leak or electricity outage. If and when this does occur we move fast to see what mitigations we can put into place.</p> <p>Unfortunately we are not able to provide compensation to businesses during the construction of this wide-ranging programme of improvements. Successive governments have taken the view that businesses should not have the right in law to any given level of passing trade, and that traders must take the risk of loss due to a temporary disruption of traffic flows along with all the other risks of running a business.</p> <p>(Q1b) The council is very aware of the issue with the bus stop at Bridgwater Railway Station and keen to resolve the situation. The existing stop is on land owned by Network Rail and leased to Great Western Railway (GWR) under their franchising agreement. The Lead Member for Transport and Waste and council officers met with GWR representatives in the autumn to understand the options for making improvements to the bus access. Council officers have also met with representatives from Bridgwater Town Council about the matter. The council has agreed to facilitate work to develop proposals for an improvement and seek funding to support its delivery. However, constructing the improvements on railway property is complex due to the franchising arrangements and further work will be needed with GWR to understand the most appropriate route for delivery once a solution is agreed.</p>
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Special Full Council – 12 February 2025 – Public and Member Questions

<p>Cllr John Hunt</p> <p style="writing-mode: vertical-rl; transform: rotate(180deg);">Page 21</p>	<p>Question 2a – The proposed disposal of the Mary Street/High Street Car Park in Taunton.</p> <p>Back in September last year I highlighted the amount of public concern over the loss of this vital facility, supporting the calls of residents and businesses asking for the Mary Street/High Street Car Park to be withdrawn from sale by Somerset Council. It became clear that the council were not going to budge, so I went along to November’s meeting of Taunton Town Council to ask them for their support. Following their own agenda item on the subject, it was pleasing to see that they were going to write to Somerset Council asking for this Car Park to be retained.</p> <p>In January, I also attended the Town Council’s meeting to find they had not yet received a reply to their letter. They wrote again and have now received a reply, basically saying little more and certainly not giving much hope of a change of heart from Somerset Council.</p> <p>At last week’s Somerset Council Executive meeting, I was pleased to see the Town Council’s deputy clerk Marcus Prowse speaking in support of retaining the Car Park and showing his disappointment in the in the content of the letter. He asked for a meeting between the two councils to find a way forward in favour of retaining this asset.</p> <p>Of course, I realise the council needs to sell assets, however, based on the figures provided to me back in September, selling this Car Park will undoubtedly damage our county town’s economy, whilst making no financial sense whatsoever.</p> <p>During the day, this car park is used mostly by shoppers and commuters, as well as visitors to the very popular Vivary Park and the many local Churches. In the evening, the ground floor is used by the many people taking advantage of the thriving local entertainment facilities, such as the Creative Innovation Centre (CICCIC), The Lawns and the many restaurants and public houses nearby.</p> <p>We are trying to attract people to Taunton, if they cannot park, they will not come. Yes, in a perfect world they’d all use the Park and Ride, cycle or walk. However, in the real world, they want to drive. Losing these 269 conveniently situated spaces(including 12 disabled), will hugely affect Taunton’s already fragile economy.</p> <p>I therefore ask yet again, that this car park is removed from the list of proposed disposals.</p> <p>Response from Lead Member for Economic Development, Planning and Assets, Councillor Mike Rigby</p>
<p>Full written response</p>	<p>NEW response: As Lead Member for Ec Dev, Planning and Assets I issued a press release yesterday confirming my intention to reverse the decision made by Executive on 5th August 2024. The process to do so will be an Executive Member Key Decision, 28 days from publication on the forward plan.</p>

Special Full Council – 12 February 2025 – Public and Member Questions

My position follows significant feedback from businesses, local members and Taunton Town Council concerned by the likely impact of selling this asset for development.

This Council has to be sustainable in these extremely tough financial times, but we also have to listen. The message we've heard loud and clear is that the impact of the sale of the High Street car park is such that we need to reconsider.

We thank everyone who has taken the time to let us know their views.