

# Public Agenda Pack



Minutes of a Meeting of the Full Council held in the The County Room - Somerset County Cricket Club, on Wednesday, 5 March 2025 at 12.00 pm

## Present:

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

Cllr Steve Ashton  
Cllr John Bailey  
Cllr Brian Bolt  
Cllr Alan Bradford  
Cllr Burt  
Cllr Simon Carswell  
Cllr Mandy Chilcott  
Cllr Peter Clayton  
Cllr Shane Collins  
Cllr Nick Cottle  
Cllr Hugh Davies  
Cllr Dawn Denton  
Cllr Andy Dingwall  
Cllr Caroline Ellis  
Cllr Ben Ferguson  
Cllr Tony Grimes  
Cllr Pauline Ham  
Cllr Mark Healey  
Cllr Alistair Hendry  
Cllr Mike Hewitson  
Cllr Henry Hobhouse  
Cllr Dawn Johnson  
Cllr Andy Kendall  
Cllr Marcus Kravis  
Cllr Liz Leyshon  
Cllr Martin Lovell  
Cllr Matthew Martin  
Cllr Harry Munt  
Cllr Mike Murphy  
Cllr Graham Oakes  
Cllr Sue Osborne  
Cllr Connor Payne  
Cllr Emily Pearlstone  
Cllr Evie Potts-Jones  
Cllr Hazel Prior-Sankey  
Cllr Faye Purbrick  
Cllr Leigh Redman  
Cllr Bill Revans

Cllr Suria Aujla  
Cllr Marcus Barr  
Cllr Adam Boyden  
Cllr Hilary Bruce  
Cllr Theo Butt Philip  
Cllr Norman Cavill  
Cllr Barry Clarke  
Cllr Simon Coles  
Cllr John Cook-Woodman  
Cllr Adam Dance  
Cllr Tom Deakin  
Cllr Martin Dimery  
Cllr Michael Dunk  
Cllr Habib Farbahi  
Cllr Bob Filmer  
Cllr Andy Hadley  
Cllr Susannah Hart  
Cllr Bente Height  
Cllr Ross Henley  
Cllr Edric Hobbs  
Cllr John Hunt  
Cllr Val Keitch  
Cllr Tim Kerley  
Cllr Christine Lawrence  
Cllr Tony Lock  
Cllr Dave Mansell  
Cllr Kevin Messenger  
Cllr Tessa Munt  
Cllr Frances Nicholson  
Cllr O'Donnell  
Cllr Stephen Page  
Cllr Oliver Patrick  
Cllr Derek Perry  
Cllr Tom Power  
Cllr Steven Pugsley  
Cllr Wes Read  
Cllr Rob Reed  
Cllr Mike Rigby

Cllr Tony Robbins  
 Cllr Jo Roundell Greene  
 Cllr Heather Shearer  
 Cllr Fran Smith  
 Cllr Jeny Snell  
 Cllr Mike Stanton  
 Cllr Andy Sully  
 Cllr Martin Wale  
 Cllr David Woan  
 Cllr Gwil Wren

Cllr Diogo Rodrigues  
 Cllr Peter Seib  
 Cllr Brian Smedley  
 Cllr Federica Smith-Roberts  
 Cllr Andy Soughton  
 Cllr Claire Sully  
 Cllr Lucy Trimnell  
 Cllr Richard Wilkins  
 Cllr Rosemary Woods  
 Cllr Ros Wyke

## 77 Apologies for Absence - Agenda Item 1

Apologies were received from Councillors Jason Baker, Mike Caswell, Nicola Clark, Lance Duddridge, David Fothergill, Andrew Govier, Philip Ham, Helen Kay, Jenny Kenton, Kathy Pearce, Gill Slocombe and Sarah Wakefield.

Although apologies had been received, Councillors Mike Caswell and Helen Kay attended the meeting online.

## 78 Minutes from the Previous Meeting - Agenda Item 2

Resolved that the minutes of Full Council held on 18 December 2024 be confirmed as a correct record.

## 79 Declarations of Interest - Agenda Item 3

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:-

<b>SOMERSET COUNCILLOR</b>	<b>CITY, TOWN AND/OR PARISH COUNCIL</b>
Steve Ashton	Crewkerne Town Council / Hinton St George Parish Council / West and Middle Chinnock Parish Council / Merriott Parish Council
Suria Aujla	Bridgwater 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
Pauline Ham	Axbridge Town 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	Ilminster Town Council
Andy Kendall	Yeovil 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
Nick O'Donnell	Taunton Town Council
Sue Osborne	Ilminster 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
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

**80 Public Question Time - Agenda Item 4**

Public questions were received from:-

- Neil Guild and Micheál Duffy – Union Submission – Funding and Staffing
- David Orr – Budget
- David Preece – Budget
- Rosa Kell – Budget and Car Parks
- Nigel Behan – Budget
- Keith M Bevan – Council finances
- Alan Debenham – Council funding
- David Redgewell – Transport

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

**81 Chair's Announcements - Agenda Item 5**

The Chair of Council, Councillor Mike Best, referred to the events detailed on the Chair's Information Sheet, circulated and published with the agenda.

**82 Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Revenue Budget for 2025/26, Capital Budget for 2025/26 to 2029/30, Medium Term Financial Plan Update and 30-Year Business Plan Update - Agenda Item 6**

The Lead Member for Communities, Housing Revenue Account, Culture, Equalities and Diversities, Councillor Federica Smith-Roberts, introduced the report which the Executive considered and endorsed at its meeting on 3 March 2025.

The report detailed both the Annual Revenue Budget for 2025/26 and the Capital Programme for 2025/26 to 2029/30 for the Housing Revenue Account (HRA). The report also provided an update on the 5-year Medium Term Financial Plan and the 30-year Business Plan Review.

Council was also reminded that the Rent Setting and Fees and Charges were approved by Full Council on 12 February 2025.

The Lead Member concluded that the report included proposals that would enable the Council to set a balanced budget which would satisfy its legal duty.

During the discussion, the following points were raised:-

- Councillors highlighted comments raised by the Corporate Peer Challenge which stated that the long-term viability was not achievable. Concern was raised that the HRA would be left in a vulnerable position.
- Councillors were in favour of buying extra homes but were concerned on where the funds would come from to support the purchases.  
*The Lead Member for Communities, Housing Revenue Account, Culture, Equalities and Diversities advised that they would look at each purchase on its own merits and that the right to buy options could be used.*

- Councillors raised concern on the lack of 4-bedroom properties across the county and hoped that more stock would be forthcoming.  
*The Lead Member for Communities, Housing Revenue Account, Culture, Equalities and Diversities advised that the Capital Programme detailed the different projects and what type of properties they would generate.*
- Councillors highlighted that the delegation detailed in the recommendations did not mention the inclusion of scrutiny.  
*The Lead Member for Communities, Housing Revenue Account, Culture, Equalities and Diversities was happy to include scrutiny in the consultation.*
- Councillors requested clarification on the strategy for purchasing properties and queried how many had been purchased over the past 12 months.  
*The Lead Member for Communities, Housing Revenue Account, Culture, Equalities and Diversities advised that she would provide a written answer.*
- Councillors requested clarification on the developers 20% target for social housing and whether it was now for the Council or the registered providers.

Councillor Federica Smith-Roberts proposed the recommendations, which were seconded by Councillor Suria Aujla.

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

- 1) The HRA Annual Revenue Budget for 2025/26 as set out in Section 3 and in Appendix A.
- 2) The Capital Programme of £304.638m including new additions of £213.587m and budget deletions of £4.738m as detailed in Section 4 and Appendix B.
- 3) Delegated authority to the Chief Finance Officer (Section 151 Officer) to approve the final capital financing of the capital programme annual spend.
- 4) Delegated authority to the Chief Finance Officer (Section 151 Officer) and the Executive Director of Community, Place and Economy, in conjunction with the Deputy Leader of the Council and Lead Member for Finance, Procurement and Performance and the Lead Member for Communities, Housing Revenue Account, Culture and Equalities and Diversity to approve the tenure (social vs affordable rents) of each social housing scheme.
- 5) Delegated authority to the Executive Director of Community, Place and Economy and the Chief Finance Officer (Section 151 Officer), in conjunction with the Lead Member for Communities, Housing Revenue Account, Culture and Equalities and Diversity, to acquire dwellings in accordance with the HRA Capital Programme for 2025/26 to 2029/30 and updated Business Plan 2025/26.
- 6) The minimum balance for the HRA General Reserves at £5.863m, the equivalent of 10% of revenue for 2025/26 and approximately £600 per property.
- 7) To note the updated Medium Term Financial Plan 2025/26 to 2029/30.
- 8) To note the updated 30-Year Business Plan in Section 7 and Appendix C.

### **83 Section 25 Report - Section 151 Officer Report on the Robustness of the Budget Estimates and the Adequacy of Reserves - Agenda Item 7**

The Section 151 Officer, Maria G Christofi, introduced the report which detailed the statutory requirement made under Section 25 of the Local Government Act 2003, which required the Section 151 Officer to report on the following matters to Council when agreeing the annual budget and Council Tax levels:-

- the robustness of the estimates made for the purposes of the budget calculations, and
- the adequacy of the proposed financial reserves.

She further highlighted that the report formed part of the legal requirement to ensure that councillors had regard to the professional advice provided by the Chief Financial Officer when debating the annual budget.

The Section 151 Officer reminded councillors that this was the second year that the Council had been unable to balance the budget without assistance from the Exceptional Financial Support from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. The Council had also received approval to raise the Council Tax by an additional 2.5% without the need of a local referendum, along with an 'in principle' approval for a Capitalisation Direction.

Having taken all of the additional support into account, the Section 151 Officer considered that the proposed budget was robust and constituted a balanced and lawful budget and that the level of Reserves was adequate. However, she did raise serious concerns on the critical financial position of the Council and its financial viability.

During the discussion, the following points were raised:-

- The Deputy Leader and Lead Member for Finance, Procurement and Performance advised that the figure stated in recommendation c should be 5% not 10%.
- Councillors highlighted the letter received by the Minister and the level of support for the Council detailed within.
- Councillors raised concern that the report only provided assurance on the budget for the upcoming year and not beyond.
- Councillors raised concern that the Council was reliant upon assistance provided by the Exceptional Hardship Fund.  
*The Section 151 Officer advised that although it was the second year of support from the Exceptional Hardship Fund, it had meant that the Council had not drawn from the reserves.*
- Councillors suggested that some of the details in the report were contradictory and that one of the appendices appeared to show the reserves being depleted with no plans to regain.
- Councillors queried the risks and scoring contained within the report and that there were concerns on the mitigation measures.  
*The Section 151 Officer advised that the risk scores referred to the Medium Term Financial Plan and not the Budget.*
- Councillors requested assurance that there was a robust method in place for the collection of Council Tax, Community Infrastructure Levy and Section 106 monies. They further suggested that a review be carried out on the process to ensure that all monies 'due' to the Council were collected.
- Councillors raised concerns that commercial assets had been sold at a loss, some of which had been making a profit.  
*The Section 151 Officer gave clarification on the commercial assets.*
- Councillors thanked the Finance Team for all their hard work carried out on the report and budget.

- Councillors thanked the Section 151 Officer for their detailed report.

Councillor Liz Leyshon proposed the recommendations, which were seconded by Councillor Bill Revans.

Having been duly proposed and seconded, the Council **Resolved** to consider and acknowledge:-

- a) The advice of the Council's Interim Chief Finance Officer (Section 151 Officer) in their Section 25 report (Appendix A) in relation to the robustness of the Budget estimates and the adequacy of the level of Reserves for 2025/26, as required by Section 25 of the Local Government Act 2003.
- b) The Section 151 Officer's warning about the critical financial position of the Council, the £101.384m 2026/27 Budget gap increasing to £190.041m over the medium term, inadequate reserves and the lack of financial sustainability over the period 2026/27 to 2029/30.
- c) The minimum level of Reserves was set at 5% of the Net Revenue income stream on 1 April 2025 which was £33.254m (excluding the use of EFS to meet the Net Revenue Budget). The appropriate level of General Fund Balance be set at £60.000m for 2025/26.
- d) The responsibility of Council Members under Section 31A of the Local Government Finance Act 1992, to have regard to this report when making decisions on agreeing the Budget and setting the Council Tax for the financial year 2025/26.

*Meeting adjourned at 1.50pm*

*Meeting restarted at 2.40pm*

#### **84 Revenue and Capital Budget and Council Tax 2025/26 and Medium Term Financial Strategy 2025/26 - 2029/30 - Agenda Item 8**

The Deputy Leader and Lead Member for Finance, Procurement and Performance, Councillor Liz Leyshon, introduced the report which the Executive considered and endorsed at its meeting on 3 March 2025.

The report detailed the Council's financial position and included several supporting documents which provided information on the following:-

- Revenue Budget 2025/26
- Capital Programme 2025/26
- Treasury Management Strategy 2025/26
- Council Tax Setting 2025/26
- Medium Term Financial Plan and Strategy 2025/26 to 2029/30.

All of the above documents were part of the Council's Budget and Policy Framework and formed part of its statutory responsibility in setting a Balanced Budget and Council Tax.

The Deputy Leader and Lead Member for Finance, Procurement and Performance highlighted the vast amount of work that had gone into the report and supporting documents and the serious position the Council faced. She thanked all officers who had worked on the report and for their continued support.

During the discussion, the following points were raised:-

- The Leader of the Council thanked the Lead Member for Finance, Procurement and Performance for all her hard work on the budget and her knowledge and understanding of the financial position faced by the Council.
- Councillors wanted a sustainable future for Somerset and to ensure that the right provisions were in place for the residents of the county.
- Councillors raised serious concerns on the funding model used by Central Government and called for an urgent reform of the system.
- The Leader of the Conservative Group advised that they had not submitted an alternative budget due to the tight timescales for the budget cycle of meetings along with the lateness of the reports.
- Councillors raised concerns on the critical financial situation which included two statutory recommendations from the external auditors, the lack of pace on the Transformation Project and the low Council Tax base.
- Councillors raised concerns on the increased fees and charges along with the disposal of commercial assets and that this was not a sustainable option for the future.
- Councillors raised concerns on the parking proposals contained within the report and that mitigations would be required in certain areas.
- Councillors raised concerns on the reliance on redundancies, devolution of services to the Parish Councils and the cutting of Council Tax support and services to be able to produce a balanced budget.
- Councillors had hoped that the budget would provide some certainty and assurance for the medium term, but sadly they did not believe that had been achieved.
- Councillors queried when the letter from the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) would be published.  
*The Section 151 Officer advised that officers were carrying out some fact checking ahead of responding to the Minister and that the Council were not permitted to publish until the MHCLG had.*
- Councillors highlighted that although there were concerns on the budget, there had been no other suggestions put forward on how to avoid a Section 114 Notice.
- Councillors wanted assurance that work would be done to continue to review services and the budget over the upcoming year.
- Councillors wanted all parties to work together and to take responsibility for the future of Somerset Council.
- Councillors thanked the work of the Finance Team on the report and supporting documents.

In accordance with Standing Order 18(2)(i), the Chair called for a recorded vote to be taken and recorded in the minutes.

Councillor Liz Leyshon proposed the recommendations, which were seconded by Councillor Bill Revans. A vote followed and the recommendations were agreed with fifty-nine for, thirty-four against and two abstaining, votes cast:

Those voting FOR: Councillors Steve Ashton, John Bailey, Lee Baker, Mike Best, Adam Boyden, Theo Butt Philip, Simon Carswell, Simon Coles, Nick Cottle, Adam Dance, Tom Deakin, Caroline Ellis, Habib Farbahi, Ben Ferguson, Pauline Ham,



Ross Henley, Mike Hewitson, Edric Hobbs, Henry Hobhouse, Dawn Johnson, Val Keitch, Andy Kendall, Tim Kerley, Marcus Kravis, Christine Lawrence, Liz Leyshon, Tony Lock, Martin Lovell, Matthew Martin, Kevin Messenger, Harry Munt, Tessa Munt, Mike Murphy, Nick O'Donnell, Graham Oakes, Stephen Page, Oliver Patrick, Emily Pearlstone, Derek Perry, Evie Potts-Jones, Hazel Prior-Sankey, Wes Read, Rob Reed, Bill Revans, Mike Rigby, Tony Robbins, Jo Roundell Greene, Peter Seib, Heather Shearer, Fran Smith, Federica Smith-Roberts, Jeny Snell, Andy Soughton, Mike Stanton, Andy Sully, Claire Sully, Richard Wilkins, David Woan and Ros Wyke.

Those voting AGAINST: Councillors Suria Aujla, Marcus Barr, Brian Bolt, Alan Bradford, Hilary Bruce, Hayward Burt, Norman Cavill, Mandy Chilcott, Barry Clarke, Peter Clayton, Hugh Davies, Dawn Denton, Martin Dimery, Andy Dingwall, Bob Filmer, Tony Grimes, Andy Hadley, Susannah Hart, Mark Healey, Bente Height, Alastair Hendry, John Hunt, David Mansell, Frances Nicholson, Sue Osborne, Connor Payne, Tom Power, Steven Pugsley, Diogo Rodrigues, Brian Smedley, Lucy Trimnell, Martin Wale, Rosemary Woods and Gwil Wren.

Those ABSTAINING from voting: Councillors Shane Collins and Michael Dunk.

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

**In respect of the Robustness of the Budget**

- a. Confirm that it has had regard to the report of the Council's Interim Chief Finance Officer (Section 151 Officer) (Appendix A) as to the robustness of the estimates made for the purposes of the calculations of the budget in making the calculation of its budget requirement confirming the robustness of the Budget estimates and the adequacy of the financial reserves, noting in particular their warning about the forecast deficits and the lack of Financial Sustainability over the period 2026/27 to 2029/30, as required by Section 25 of the Local Government Act 2003;

**In respect of the General Fund Revenue Budget 2025/26**

- b. Having considered the detailed Equalities Impact Assessments **Appendix L**, approve the Savings and Income generation plans outlined in **Appendices B(i) B(ii) and B(iii)**.
- c. Approve the additional funding for new Growth requirements set out in **Appendix C**.
- d. Approve the General Fund Net Revenue Budget for 2025/26 of £622.089m and the individual Executive and Service Directorate Budgets for 2025/26 as outlined in **Appendix D**.
- e. Note the MTFP Movements set out in **Appendix E** from the report that was presented to Executive in October 2024.
- f. Approve the MTFP for the next five years set out in **Appendix F** and the MTFP 2025/26 – 2029/30 Strategy Document set out in **Appendix G**.
- g. Approve the changes to the Fees and Charges schedule for 2025/26 set out in **Appendix H**.
- h. Note the Specific Revenue Grants Schedule 2025/26 set out in **Appendix I**
- i. Note the Parking Account for 2025/26 set out in **Appendix K**
- j. Note the MTFP Cumulative Equalities Impact Assessment set out in **Appendix L**
- k. Note the 2025/26 Budget Consultation Feedback set out in **Appendix M**
- l. Note and agree that the 2025/26 Budget had been balanced. The budget

includes £43.000m of Exceptional Financial Support from MHCLG in the form of a Capitalisation Direction which enabled operational expenditure to be capitalised as set out in **Appendix AA** and **Appendix D**.

- m. Note and accept the conditions set out in the Minister's 'minded to approve' Exceptional Financial Support letter dated 20 February 2025 set out in **Appendix A, Annex A(i)**, that Somerset Council would need to accept and fulfil in order to secure the Capitalisation Direction of up to £43.000m.

#### **In respect of the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG)**

- n. Note that the forecast spending on the Dedicated Schools Grant, set out in **Appendix J(i)** was forecast to exceed the funding provided by government by £33.914m in 2025/26 and was projected to reach a cumulative deficit of £99.125m by 31 March 2026.
- o. Note the overall Dedicated Schools Grant allocation of £481.393m for 2025/26 and breakdown by block set out in **Appendix J(ii)**.
- p. Approve the distribution of the Schools Block of £416.883m in compliance with the National Funding Formula and as recommended by Schools Forum on 15 January 2025 and agree that any changes to the budget reasonably required as a result to the 2025/26 DSG settlement were delegated for decision to the Chief Finance Officer (Section 151 Officer) **Appendix J(i) and J(ii)**.

#### **In respect of the Earmarked Reserves**

- q. Note the annual review of reserves and that the level of General Reserves was maintained within the risk-based assessment range of £33.254m minimum to £60.000m appropriate level.
- r. Note the Earmarked Reserves reprofiling as set out in **Appendix N**.
- s. Note the overall estimated position of Earmarked Reserves outlined in **Appendix AA, Table 17** and the proposed use of reserves detailed in **Appendix N** which included the estimated use of Earmarked Reserves during the year.

#### **In respect of the General Fund Capital**

- t. Consider and approve the Capital Investment Strategy for 2025/26 to 2029/30 set out in **Appendix O**
- u. Approve the £235.103m new Capital proposals 2025/26 to 2029/30 set out in **Appendix P**
- v. Approve the revised Capital Programme of £1,077.384m 2024/25 to 2029/30, as set out in **Appendices Q(i) and Q(ii)**
- w. Approve the Flexible use of Capital Receipts Strategy 2024/25 and 2025/26 as set out in **Appendix S**.

#### **In respect of the Treasury Management Strategy and Prudential Indicators 2025/26**

- x. Approve the Treasury Management Strategy 2025/26, the Treasury Management Policy Statement 2025/26, the Prudential Indicators and the Annual Investment Strategy 2025/26 as set out in **Appendix R(i)**
- y. Approve the Minimum Revenue Provision 2024/25 & 2025/26 set out in **Appendix R(ii)**
- z. Approve the Non Treasury Investment Strategy 2025/26 set out in **Appendix T**

## In respect of Council Tax

- aa. Approve the calculations for determining the Council Tax requirement for the year 2025/26 in accordance with the Local Government Finance Act 1992 set out in the Council Tax Resolution in **Appendix U**.
- bb. Agree to continue the Council Tax precept of £14.65, included in the overall Band D Council Tax for the shadow Somerset Rivers Authority (representing no increase for 2025/26). This resulted in a Council Tax Requirement of £3,112,887 for the Somerset Rivers Authority.
- cc. Approve the increase in Council Tax for a Band D property for Somerset Council, including the Somerset Rivers Authority Precept, by £129.43 for 2025/26, giving a Band D Council Tax of £1,857.61 per year, being:
  - i) The General Band D Council Tax by 5.49%, £94.87, being the maximum 2.99% permitted without a referendum and the additional 2.5% permitted by the Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government as part of the Local Government Finance Settlement for 2025/26; and
  - ii) The Adult Social Care Precept by 2.00%, £34.56.
- dd. Approve a Special Expenses rate of £151,509 as detailed in **Appendix U**.
- ee. Approve the precept requirement of £394,863,503 (including Special Expenses Rate) £394,711,994 (excluding Special Expenses Rates).
- ff. Approve the 7.49% increase formal Council Tax resolution, in **Appendix U**, for Council Tax incorporating:
  - 5.49% General Council Tax (including an additional 2.5% EFS) and
  - 2.00% Adult Social Care Precept and
  - Note the precepting bodies precepts as below:

	2024/25 £	2025/26 £	Increase %
Somerset Council	1,498.80	1,593.67	5.49
Somerset Council – Social Care	229.38	263.94	2.00
<b>Somerset Council Total</b>	<b>1,728.18</b>	<b>1,857.61</b>	<b>7.49</b>
Police and Crime Commissioner	279.20	293.20	5.01
Devon and Somerset Fire Authority	99.68	104.68	5.02
<b>Sub-Total</b>	<b>2,107.06</b>	<b>2,255.49</b>	<b>7.04</b>
Special Expenses Average	1.11	0.71	(36.04)
City, Town and Parish Council (average)	158.86	182.42	14.84
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,267.03</b>	<b>2,438.62</b>	<b>7.57</b>

- gg. Note the Council Tax Scenarios set out in **Appendix V**
- hh. Approve the formal Council Tax resolution below:
  - The Council Tax Base for the year 2025/26 was calculated in accordance with the provisions of the Local Authorities (Calculation of Council Tax Base) (England) Regulations 1992 as amended and made under Section 33 (5) of the Local Government Finance Act 1992, (referred to hereinafter as “the Act”).

	Legislation	Plain English

1	a	212,483.78	The Council Tax Base 2025/26 for the whole Council area [Item T in the formula in Section 31B (3) of the Local Government Finance Act 1992, as amended (the "Act")] and, for dwellings in those parts of its area to which a Parish precept related as in <b>Appendix U(iii)</b> .	The Tax Base for the whole District and the Tax Base for each City/Town/Parish.
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- Calculate that the Council Tax requirement for the Council's own purposes for 2025/26 (excluding Parish precepts) was:

		£	Council Tax Requirement
2	a	391,599,107	(excluding Parish precepts)
		3,112,887	with an additional requirement for the Somerset Rivers Authority

- That the Council calculated the following amounts for 2025/26 in accordance with Sections 31B and 34 to 36 of the Act (as amended by the Localism Act 2011 and Local Government Regulations 2012).

		£	Legislation	Plain English
3	a	1,375,125,232	being the aggregate of the amounts which the Council estimates for the items set out in Section 31A (2) of the Act, taking into account all precepts issued to it by Parish Councils.	The estimated gross revenue expenditure (including transfers to reserves and deficits on the collection fund) for the General Fund, Special Expenses account, other General Fund revenue reserves and Parish/City/Town precepts
	b	941,500,138	being the aggregate of the amounts which the Council estimates for the items set out in Section 31A (3) of the Act	The estimated gross revenue income (including the transfer of the surplus on the Collection Fund, formula grant and transfers from reserves) for the

				same funds as mentioned above.
	c	433,625,094	Being the amount by which the aggregate expenditure at 3(a) above exceeds the aggregate income at 3(b) above, calculated by the Council, in accordance with Section 31A (4) of the Act; as its Council Tax requirement for the year. [Item R in the formula in Section 31B of the Act.]	The net (expenditure less income) funding requirement for the General Fund and Special Expenses accounts plus the Parish precepts issued for the year.
	d	2,040.74	Being the amount at 3(c) above (Item R), all divided by Item T (1(a) above), calculated by the Council, in accordance with Section 31B (1) of the Act, as the basic amount of its Council Tax for the year.	The average Band D Council Tax across Somerset inclusive of parish precepts and Special expenses. It is not actually charged anywhere in Somerset but must be calculated by law as part of the Council Tax setting process.
	e	38,913,100	Being the aggregate amount of all special items referred to in Section 34(1) of the Act.	The total of Parish precepts received for the year and the net Special expenses.
	f	1,857.61	Being the amount at 3(d) above less the result given by dividing the amount at 3(e) above by Item T	This is the Band D Council Tax for Somerset Council (including the Somerset Rivers Authority) only.

			(2 above), calculated by the Council, in accordance with Section 34(2) of the Act, as the basic amount of its Council Tax for the year for dwellings in those parts of its area to which no special items relates.	
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- To note that the Police Authority and the Fire Authority have issued precepts to the Council in accordance with Section 40 of the Local Government Finance Act 1992 for each category of dwellings in the Council's area as indicated in the table below.
- That the Council, in accordance with Sections 30 and 36 of the Local Government Finance Act 1992, hereby set the aggregate amounts shown in **Appendix U** as the amounts of Council Tax for 2025/26 for each part of its area and for each of the categories of dwellings.

*Meeting adjourned at 4.40pm  
Meeting restarted at 4.55pm*

## 85 Regional Devolution Proposals - Agenda Item 9

The Leader of the Council and Lead Member for Governance and Communications, Councillor Bill Revans, introduced the report which the Executive considered and endorsed at its meeting on 3 February 2025.

The report detailed the incentives contained within the devolution white paper released in December 2024.

The Leader of the Council had joined with Leaders from Wiltshire, Dorset and Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole Councils to indicate interest in the creation of a mayoral strategic authority on the basis that it was the most appropriate approach due to the shared economic and wider strategic interests. They also indicated that they would be open for other authorities to join the proposal.

During the discussion, the following points were raised:-

- Councillor Diogo Rodrigues proposed the inclusion of some additional wording to recommendation i, which was seconded by Councillor Mandy Chilcott:
  - while remaining open to working with other authorities outside the Wessex area where it was demonstrably beneficial to Somerset.

The proposal was accepted by Councillor Bill Revans and became part of the substantive recommendations.
- Councillors queried whether the recommendations had received cross party

support.

*The Leader of the Council advised it was similar proposal to the previous Government's devolution proposals, which had received cross party input. The Chief Executive gave clarification and spoke on the differences between national and regional powers.*

- Councillors raised concerns that the recommendations had not received adequate scrutinisation due to the restricted timing of the committee meeting. They requested that the report be taken back to the Scrutiny Committee for further debate, preferably ahead of the proposal being submitted to Government.
- Councillors queried what other steps had been explored.  
*The Leader of the Council advised that he had explored other options with the other Leaders at the Local Government Association conference.*
- Councillors queried where the funding would come from to support the recommendations.  
*The Chief Executive advised that they had not been given clarity on the funding at this stage of the process.*

Councillor Bill Revans proposed the recommendations, which were seconded by Councillor Mandy Chilcott.

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

- i. endorse the principle of Somerset Council working with partner local authorities (including Dorset, Wiltshire and BCP Councils) to secure a devolution settlement for the Wessex area and the ambition of the partners to be part of Government's Devolution Programme, while remaining open to working with other authorities outside the Wessex area where it was demonstrably beneficial to Somerset.
- ii. accept that Wessex had agreed to be available to Swindon Borough Council and North Somerset Council should they wish to join Wessex at a later stage.
- iii. recognise that the geographies of authorities within the Devolution Programme were identified as areas for the creation of a new MSA.
- iv. note the potential opportunities to promote economic growth, skills and prosperity alongside the financial benefits and strategic and operational implications for Somerset Council arising from a devolution settlement and the creation of a MSA.

## **86 Somerset Council Redundancies Requiring Full Council Approval - Agenda Item 10**

The Chief Executive, Duncan Sharkey, introduced the report which detailed the proposed dismissals by reason of redundancy in relation to employees who occupied posts that it was proposed to delete from the Council's structure as part of the Workforce Restructuring Programme where the costs exceeded £100,000.

During the discussion, the following points were raised:-

- Councillors requested assurance that proper handovers would be carried ahead of any officers leaving the Council.
- Councillors queried what assurances were in place to ensure that the posts would not be filled in the future.  
*The Chief Executive advised that the posts would not be reappointed to,*

*however, there were likely to be more restructures in the future, the details of which were unknown.*

- Councillors queried if there were any delays in the redundancies being made. *The Chief Executive advised that there was flexibility in the notice periods due to the changes of date for the meeting to approve them.*

Councillor Theo Butt-Philip proposed the recommendations, which were seconded by Councillor Bill Revans.

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

- 2.1 Approve the redundancy costs for the 12 posts as set out in Appendix A, as Full Council approval was required for costs that exceeded £100,000.
- 2.2 Delegate authority to the Chief Executive to agree the final date of dismissal and the final redundancy packages, noting that such settlements would not exceed contractual redundancy pay or the payment required under statute to the Local Government Pension Scheme.

## **87 Member Scheme of Allowances - Agenda Item 11**

The Leader of the Council and Lead Member for Governance and Communications, Councillor Bill Revans, introduced the report that detailed proposals put forward by the Somerset Independent Remuneration Panel for the Members Scheme of Allowances 2025/26.

The Monitoring Officer advised that all councillors present at the meeting had signed a form for dispensation to be able to take part in the debate and vote on the item.

Councillor Bill Revans proposed the recommendations, which were seconded by Councillor Mandy Chilcott.

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

- i. Thank the Panel for its report and recommendations set out in Appendix 1;
- ii. Consider the Panel's recommendations prior to determining the Scheme of Members' Allowances 2025/26 and the draft Scheme of Members' Allowances 2025/26 (set out in Appendix 2);
- iii. Authorise the Monitoring Officer to finalise and publish the Scheme of Members' Allowances 2025/26 to reflect the Council's decision.

## **88 Summary of key decisions taken since the last Full Council meeting - Agenda Item 12**

The Leader of the Council, Councillor Bill Revans, introduced the report which included a summary of the key decisions taken by the Leader and Executive between 6 December 2024 and 3 March 2025.

The Council noted the report.

## **89 Questions from Councillors to the Executive - Agenda Item 13**

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



Member questions were received from:-

- Councillor Diogo Rodrigues – Planning Enforcement
- Councillor Diogo Rodrigues – Employees working remotely, outside of the UK
- Councillor Sue Osbourne – Exceptional Financial Support/Capitalisation Direction
- Councillor Sue Osbourne – Planning Service/production of a Local Plan

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

**(The meeting ended at 5.30 pm)**

.....  
**CHAIR**

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## Budget Setting Full Council – 5 March 2025 – Public and Member Questions

Annexe A – Public Questions	
Name of person submitting	Question
Page 19	<p><b>Neil Guild and Micheál Duffy</b></p> <p><b>Union Submission</b> Somerset Council staff have endured over a decade of uncertainty, below inflation pay rises and job losses. Somerset Council was created, in part, to provide greater resilience for local government services in the county. UNISON challenged this and other assertions at the time, noting the limited overlap between district and county council services. Our predictions have been proven accurate. Its creation has led to years of disruption, with little evidence of any material improvement in actual services for the public of the county. Instead, it has meant that what were previously district council services and staff have joined the basket of services that are having their funding consumed to pay for increasing costs in Adult Social Care. As a consequence, council staff, who we note are residents and voters themselves, have little confidence in councillors to grapple with the challenges facing Somerset. Staff morale is low. and the Council routinely struggles to recruit to essential roles due to below market rates of pay and that Somerset is not seen as an attractive proposition by prospective employees. This in turn leads to increased agency and consultancy costs to fill these roles. UNISON recognises that the Council must provide a comprehensive and sustainable plan for the future. However, the current set of cuts and job losses will lead to reduced services for residents and still will not guarantee that Somerset will avoid a Section 114 being issued in the future.</p> <p><b>Question 1a</b> - How does the Council intend to address these challenges and ensure that funding for all essential services, not just Adult Social Care, is safeguarded in the medium to long-term, while also maintaining a resilient workforce and improving staff morale?</p> <p><b>Response from the Leader of the Council, Councillor Bill Revans and Lead Member for Transformation, HR and Localities, Councillor Theo Butt Philip</b></p>
<b>Full written response</b>	<p>Firstly, I would like to thank Trade Union colleagues for their question, and indeed for all their support during the recent workforce restructuring programme. The point about council budgets is well made and we have been vocal about the challenges facing all councils as the costs and demand for core services, such as adults and children’s social care continue to rise. We have taken a number of decisions locally to protect non-statutory services, but the</p>

## Budget Setting Full Council – 5 March 2025 – Public and Member Questions

<p style="writing-mode: vertical-rl; transform: rotate(180deg);">Page 20</p>	<p>system is clearly broken on a national level, and the planned reform of social care funding cannot come soon enough.</p> <p>Here locally, the Somerset Council Improvement and Transformation Programme must enable the delivery of the Somerset Council Plan 2023-2027 and support our Medium-Term Financial Strategy. The objective of the programme is to improve service delivery and achieve financial sustainability over the period 2025-2030 as we implement our council plan. We will invest in our capacity for change and establish robust governance and delivery frameworks to meet the challenges outlined in our medium-term financial strategy.</p> <p>A clear People Strategy is essential to underpin a whole council transformation plan, ensuring that the workforce is equipped to meet current and future challenges. A robust people strategy will focus on driving organisational success through workforce planning, skills development, employee engagement, fair and equitable reward, employee performance, and streamlining organisational culture.</p> <p>Our Council Workforce Development Plan will help to identify and address skills gaps, promote continuous learning and succession planning, and foster a culture of innovation and adaptability. By investing in the development of our staff, our Council can enhance service delivery and support staff development and morale.</p> <p>Additionally, a well-defined people development plan ensures that employees are prepared for, and can adapt to, new processes and technologies. Ultimately, this approach leads to a more resilient and capable workforce, driving the successful implementation of the council's transformation plan.</p>
<p>David Orr</p>	<p><b>Question 3a</b></p> <p>The Government issues this council with a £63m “capitalisation direction”. <b><i>There is no new money.</i></b> Instead, this Council, as a distressed seller in a poor commercial market, is flogging off investment assets (often at a loss); foregoing the income generated, whilst retaining debt repayments for decades to come (but with no asset behind the loan).</p> <p><i>Before continuing with this short-term and damaging investment asset disposal policy, will you hold a named vote at Full Council to re-ratify it?</i></p> <p>Back in 2008, reckless investment bankers created junk bonds, wrecking economies around the world. Governments (that is taxpayers) had to step in to save the private Banks, heralding years of austerity, which continue to damage key public services today.</p>

## Budget Setting Full Council – 5 March 2025 – Public and Member Questions

<p style="writing-mode: vertical-rl; transform: rotate(180deg);">Page 21</p>	<p>From 2010 to 2015, a coalition Government of Tories and Lib Dems imposed austerity cuts, falling principally on Councils. £31 billion of council funding was cut to just £13 billion. The seeds of the “financial emergency” were sown back in your own coalition government. The Somerset Tories compounded things by freezing Council Tax for 6 years (over two elections). That long Council Tax freeze stopped this Council’s base budget from rising with inflation and spending power has been critically undermined.</p> <p>The greatest responsibility for the “financial emergency” lies with our entire political class in Westminster. They have failed to address predictable adult social care pressures for 14 years after Dilnot issued his report. Since 2011, every administration has “kicked the can [of adult social care reform] down the road”. Labour has broken their pre-election commitment to a care cap by delaying adult social care reform until 2029.</p> <p>Increasing numbers of local authorities require emergency funds or have declared themselves effectively bankrupt. The National Audit Office says increasing costs of social care, special educational needs provision, and temporary housing require a long-term solution from across government.</p> <p><i>By April 2026, this Labour government needs to take responsibility for their delay to reforming adult social care, by providing bridging funding until 2029, for large councils with those responsibilities.</i></p> <p>We elect national and local administrations to be in charge and to solve problems. Running a unitary Council is complex and without much discretionary funding, can large Councils only ever be Officer-led? If so, why vote locally, as “nothing changes”</p> <p>We are in a crisis of confidence and trust in our democratic politics. <i>Do we stop voting because “what’s the point” or do we, like America, vote for a disrupter?</i></p> <p><b>Response from the Deputy Leader and Lead Member for Finance, Procurement and Performance, Councillor Liz Leyshon</b></p>
<p><b>Full written response</b></p>	<p>Thank you for your statement, Mr Orr. I would like to reassure you that Full Council is required by law to carry out a named vote on the budget.</p> <p>You cover a range of issues in your comments that I will take as rhetorical.</p> <p>On the substantive point about capitalisation, you are correct this is not additional funds for the Council. It is permission to use our own capital funds (whether income from asset sales or additional borrowing) to subsidise our revenue spend in 2025-26.</p> <p>I appreciate this is a complex area but the portfolio of commercial properties that Somerset Council inherited is no longer achieving the financial surplus that was possible at the time of purchase (pre-Covid and when interest rates were much lower). The Council has the option of selling assets and commercial investments or taking out more</p>

## Budget Setting Full Council – 5 March 2025 – Public and Member Questions

	<p>borrowing. We are working hard to keep cost of servicing and repaying our debt to no more than 10% of our budget unlike some councils that have much higher percentages. I appreciate very much the timing of the publication of the National Audit Office report last Friday and hope that it can guide the Government in taking decisions that will create more sustainable councils, whether they are already Unitary or will shortly be undergoing Local Government Reorganisation.</p>
<p>Page 22</p>	<p><b>David Preece</b></p> <p><b>Question 4a</b> Where are the audited accounts for 2024-25?</p> <p><b>Question 4b</b> Why can other councils bring their budgets in within estimates - yet again you fail - despite your promises last year ! which your own 151 financial officer - doubted was achievable! Especially speaking out against your cut to the reserve emergency fund £70m plus to £43m- this being required by all governments to local authorities - in order to be able to cover immediately any requirement for potential disasters- ie floods - (fluvial - rain deluge) as we are having year on year since the devastating floods here in Somerset 2014 - moorland village - and other. community area's due to building on previous almost flood plains ! with excess water unable to permeate ground soil..... hence causing run off and flooding.</p> <p><b>Question 4c</b> AFTER PROPOSED Staff cuts 555 - Leaving " SLIMMED DOWN 4000 ! STILL EMPLOYED how many of these staff WORK ONLY 3 Days a week or less ! Or do not even Go into the Council Offices - STAFF WORKING FROM HOME - Not part of Team or under Direct MANAGEMENT STRUCTURE Accountable for work STRUCTURE - Attendance since Covid ! ? "The Press release - Put out to Us LAST WEEK " reportedly in the Gazette - Mercury - Stated these jobs would go April 5 Th...But the SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - Said that had not been yet FORMALLY AGREED WITH UNIONS AND STAFF .... So OCTOBER BEING THE TIME WHEN THESE JOBS MAY GO ?! 6 months SALARIES &amp; Pension Contributions - HOLIDAY ENTITLEMENTS WILL NEED TO PAID .??? So EVEN MORE ADDITIONAL COSTS - Against BUDGETS! Set</p> <p><b>Question 4d</b></p>

## Budget Setting Full Council – 5 March 2025 – Public and Member Questions

	<p>I would like to CALL FOR A named COUNCILLOR VOTES or ABSTENTION's - on this Budget set for 2025-26 year.</p> <p><b>Response from the Deputy Leader and Lead Member for Finance, Procurement and Performance, Councillor Liz Leyshon</b></p>
<p style="writing-mode: vertical-rl; transform: rotate(180deg);">Full written response</p> <p style="writing-mode: vertical-rl; transform: rotate(180deg);">Page 23</p>	<p>4a. The financial year for 2024/25 closes on the 31<sup>st</sup> March 2025, and the financial statements will be produced by the deadline of the 30<sup>th</sup> June 2025 ready for public inspection and auditing by our external auditors.</p> <p>4b. The Q3 budget monitoring report was published for Scrutiny on 24<sup>th</sup> Feb and Executive on 26<sup>th</sup> Feb and showed a Revenue forecast underspend of £20.005million, which includes the £6million corporate contingency. This would mean a reduced draw on MTFP earmarked reserves, thereby strengthening our position. This is a credit to the staff of the Council, and we should congratulate them for this strong performance.</p> <p>4c. The restructuring of the workforce is underway as we speak and those who are leaving the Council will be doing so over March and April. I do not recognise the picture your question suggests.</p> <p>4d. The Council Budget Resolution is by law a named vote.</p>
<p><b>Rosa Kell</b></p>	<p>Somerset has declared a climate emergency. It has a financial crisis that's being managed it's laudable that it's finding alternative revenue streams. One of the proposed budget income is from Car Parks and road side parking. This is laudable too as it might discourage car use for short journeys, encourage more walking, bicycling and bus usage and hopefully improve health and reduce traffic a win win.</p> <p>The proposed parking roadside and car and coach park charges realignment, lets call this "a car dissentive" initiative, and/or an increase on car running throughout Somerset. However one might object to this there is revenue that Somerset badly needs and this revenue is included in the proposed Budget presented today 3rd March and Wednesday 5th March.</p> <p><b>Question 5a –</b> Can the public be assured that the revenue recovered from this initiative be ringfenced and be spent on roadside and bus infrastructure and thus benefit the communities from where it's recovered ie Somerset Transport</p>

## Budget Setting Full Council – 5 March 2025 – Public and Member Questions

	<p><b>Response from the Deputy Leader and Lead Member for Finance, Procurement and Performance, Councillor Liz Leyshon and Lead Member for Transport and Waste, Councillor Richard Wilkins</b></p>
<p><b>Full written response</b></p>	<p>Thank you for your question, parking income associated with enforcement activity is regulated by the Road Traffic Regulation Act 1984 which means that parking income can be applied to eligible expenditure of the council. I am satisfied that the income created by the on street parking proposals will be used for transport related initiatives.</p> <p>Surpluses from off road parking in car parks can be used for general Council expenses once all other car park provision has been satisfied.</p> <p>As an Administration we continue to work on Active Travel routes in both urban and rural areas of Somerset as a priority, and public transport as funding allows.</p>
<p><b>Nigel Behan</b> Page 24</p>	<p><b>Question 6</b></p> <p>Agenda Item 7 <a href="#">Report of the Section 151 Officer Section 25 Statement.pdf</a></p> <p>And Agenda Item 8 <a href="#">Appendix AA - Revenue and Capital Budget and Council Tax 202526 and MTFS 202526 - 202930.pdf</a></p> <p>The government -by not offering the council any additional money but merely the flexibility to borrow and capitalise for day to day running costs known as Exceptional Financial Support (EFS) - has at least helped you avoid a (potentially embarrassing) council tax referendum in “allowing ”Somerset Council to increase council tax by 7.49% - and of course, don’t forget the parish/town add-ons (precepts).</p> <p>(“The Council’s financial position is critical, given its inability in 2024/25 and 2025/26 to set a balanced Revenue Budget without reliance upon Exceptional Financial Support (EFS). This has been in the form of additional Council Tax increase of 2.5% above the referendum limit and a Capitalisation Direction of £43.000m for 2025/26 to set a balanced Budget 2025/26.”)</p>



## Budget Setting Full Council – 5 March 2025 – Public and Member Questions

It states within the “Implications of Failure to Achieve a Balanced Annual Budget and MTFP” that “The alternative to an application for EFS, is for the Section 151 Officer to issue a Section 114 Notice. This would have extremely serious implications and would result in a range of onerous actions to suspend all but the most essential expenditure.”.

Public Finance noted that: “A record number of councils asked the government for exceptional financial support for 2025-26, and 30 requests have been approved – but CIPFA has expressed serious worries about the system.”

The numerous comments (“bleats” etc) and reports made by the LGA and other bodies that the local government (finance) system is broken and unsustainable (LGA: “...in desperate need of reform, describing the current arrangements as “opaque, overly complex and out of date”.)

If 30 Councils – or more accurately 30 (courageous?) Chief Finance Officers (S151) - prepared S114 reports (“effective bankruptcy”) at the same time then perhaps the government will probably be forced into adopting a different approach to that of sending in government appointed commissioners?

It is also noted that: “There is a significant Budget gap for 2026/27 that will need to be addressed at pace with significant savings and transformation. The reserves are forecast to be exhausted during 2026/27 unless urgent management action is taken to develop further transformation and savings plans at pace during 2025/26 for Member approval and implementation in 2026/27. If this budget gap is not closed the Council will again be reliant on Exceptional Financial Support in the form of additional Council Tax above the referendum threshold and/or Capitalisation Direction.”

So, the method so far appears to be, act as if a S114 notice has been issued -repeated EFS (which means more borrowing, selling off public assets, continuing reductions in services and further job culls), whilst electors, service users, residents and council taxpayers receive even more limited and rationed services at significant cost!

The Head of Paid Services said recently “...our Council must balance the needs of our most vulnerable residents with the broader needs of the community, of which we are all a part.”

## Budget Setting Full Council – 5 March 2025 – Public and Member Questions

	<p>Councillors could be bolder and consider prioritising a budget based on need and create a meaningful campaign to demand (rather than asking them to flog public assets and go into more debt) the money from central government?</p> <p><b>Response from the Deputy Leader and Lead Member for Finance, Procurement and Performance, Councillor Liz Leyshon</b></p>
<p><b>Full written response</b></p> <p>Page 26</p>	<p>Thank you for your questions/statements.</p> <p>It is only by working differently, within the Council and with our partners, that we will find ways of delivering services while increasing efficiency. The My Life My Future work has been a fine example of how we can work with adults, and the Homes and Horizons project has ensured children and young people can stay in Somerset, where appropriate.</p> <p>There are many examples of effective transformational work underway in Somerset. We do need an overarching Transformation Plan that sets the vision and direction and pulls together all the good work that the officers of Somerset Council are working on, at different stages. That work can be funded by Flexible Use of Capital Receipts and, in the longer term, I believe that will serve the people of Somerset.</p> <p>I do not believe that we can take risks, asking others to work with us in a certain way, where others' actions cannot be guaranteed and where the potential impact on Somerset could be much greater than it already is.</p>
<p><b>Keith M Bevan</b></p>	<p><b>Question 7</b></p> <p>Somerset Council March 2023 "identified £40 million of Savings"</p> <p>April 2023 has identified £18.5 million every year to deliver financial sustainability.</p> <p>February 2024 has a financial projected gap of £100 million for 2024- 2025.</p> <p>After less than a year, Somerset Council delivered exciting financial news to the residents, then delivered a financial deficit wide enough to face bankruptcy. These figures do not add up.</p>

## Budget Setting Full Council – 5 March 2025 – Public and Member Questions

	<p><b>Response from the Deputy Leader and Lead Member for Finance, Procurement and Performance, Councillor Liz Leyshon</b></p>
<p><b>Full written response</b></p>	<p>Since Vesting in April 2023, Somerset Council’s Revenue Budget is now in excess of £600million per year delivering services to the residents, and businesses of Somerset. The gross budget is in excess of £1billion, including the maintained schools and capital programme.</p> <p>If you simply consider inflation and higher interest rates you can see that whilst the savings predicted on the move from five councils to one were useful, but they were nowhere near adequate to cope with the economic climate we have endured since 2022. For context a 5% increase in council tax generates something in the order of £18m per annum. Inflation has hit over 10% in recent years. Although it has now settled around 2.5% or 3% we all realise that when inflation reduces this doesn’t bring prices down. The Council has delivered very significant savings since April 2023, and as part of our transformational activity we will need to continue to do so until a new sustainable local government finance settlement is implemented nationally.</p>
<p><b>Alan Debenham</b></p> <p style="writing-mode: vertical-rl; transform: rotate(180deg);">Page 27</p>	<p><b>Question 8</b></p> <p>Bearing in mind how Somerset Council, especially through its Leader, Councillor Bill Revans, and his Liberal Democrat team, and my Green Party Councillors, have for a a long time now spoken of the existential crisis in local government being caused by being tied to a very out of date model regarding its chronic underfunding in relation to its statutory functions, particularly those of adult and children’s social care.</p> <p>What new model, if any, has this Council campaigned for with the public, the LGA, the government and elsewhere, and under what remodelling design and plans especially with regard to :-</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The ridiculous outdated, unfair and regressive Council Tax and its property bands based on 1991 valuations, with a highest to lowest payments ratio of 9 to 1 - replacing an old General Rates one of roughly 25 to 1.</li> <li>• The comprehensive Layfield Royal Commission report of 1979 and its attempt to furnish primary local authorities with much more fund-raising powers – particularly using new local income and sales taxes - and new statutory functions to make them almost completely free from central government domination.</li> <li>• New and fairer property taxation in relation to site and land values over and above that of just considering buildings and other commercial facilities.</li> </ul>

## Budget Setting Full Council – 5 March 2025 – Public and Member Questions

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Complete review and overhaul of present anomalous and unfairly burdensome business and commercial rates.</li> <li>• Introducing a banded scale of tax reliefs based upon how environmentally friendly, in their designs and usages, all properties are with regard to the Council’s climate emergency strategy and policies..</li> </ul> <p><i>( Note re the last sentence I recommend all Councillors to become followers of Professor Richard Murphy- <a href="mailto:www.richard.murphy@taxresearch.org.uk">www.richard.murphy@taxresearch.org.uk</a> of Sheffield University, Public Accountant Lecturer &amp; Consultant who supplies an excellent free daily/ weekly newsletter)</i></p> <p><b>Response from the Deputy Leader and Lead Member for Finance, Procurement and Performance, Councillor Liz Leyshon</b></p>
<p><b>Full written response</b> Page 28</p>	<p>Thank you Mr Debenham for your good points on the failings of Council Tax as a way of funding the needs of residents of this county and other council areas.</p> <p>The National Audit Office report, published on 28<sup>th</sup> February, is informative and will hopefully guide Government in the right direction as more Councils continue towards a cliff edge.</p> <p>We also acknowledge that businesses are eagerly awaiting reform of Business Rates but it will take a very bold Government to reform both Business Rates and Council Tax at this extremely challenging time.</p> <p>We must not forget that the previous Government used up a great deal of the borrowing headroom for this country by unwise decisions during the Covid years, with a small number of businesses and individuals benefiting from public monies that would have been far better directed to local authorities for services such as track &amp; trace, and purchase of PPE.</p> <p>Thank you for your suggestion of the newsletter published by Prof Richard Murphy, much appreciated.</p>
<p><b>David Redgewell</b></p>	<p><b>Question 9a</b></p> <p>With Somerset unity council being allowed to raise council tax by 7 % by UK government.</p> <p>But the council is still like many other councils like North Somerset council</p> <p>Have finances difficult.</p> <p>We welcome the Bus service grant from UK government.</p> <p>But we welcome the Somerset bus service improvement funding 2025 2026 £6.849 .778 for £2.9 million pounds for revenue support and £3.3 million pounds for capital programmes</p>

## Budget Setting Full Council – 5 March 2025 – Public and Member Questions

Which will allow bus and coach service and infrastructure improvements in Yeovil and south Somerset and West Dorset with Dorset Council.

On Town service in the Evenings and in Sundays links from CR 6 Yeovil bus and coach station to Bridport bus and coach station.

58 Yeovil bus and coach station to Yeovil pen mill station to Sherborne Town Sherborne, Railway station Templecombe Wincanton bus and coach station.

Sunday and Evening services from Yeovil bus and coach station to Ilchester Somerton Street, Glastonbury Wells bus and coach station to Bristol bus and coach station.

New services in Bridgwater Town services In the Evenings and Sundays  
Including links improvements in Link from Taunton Transport hub to Bridgwater bus and coach station to Highbridge and Burnham on sea.

For service 20 to weston super mare. Bus and coach station.

Service 25 26

Improvements to Taunton Transport hub to Taunton Railway station, Codford St lakes, Wiveliscombe with connection

For Bampton Devon and Dulverton.

The £ 5 million pounds in revenue support for supported bus services in the county.

and 126 Weston super mare bus and coach station to cheddar and Wells bus and coach station.

But we are concerned with the local Transport plan the need for more revenue support for sustainable transport and the Public transport

Network bus priority measures in Taunton Bridgwater and Yeovil towns with economy growth jobs and Employment and new homes

But we were surprised that the council scrutiny commission still want free car parking in many parts of unity council and not bring into a council wide parking charges policy.

For car parking coach parking and bus and coach station access charges.

What is council doing to continue to Devop and Somerset wide parking charges policy with money going into Taunton park and ride service.

But also in sustainable transport like the cheddar valley shewberry line and Somerset circle line.

**Question 9b**

What money has been allocated in Somerset budget to reopen Wellington Railway station along with Cullompton station in Devon as part Devon and Somerset Metro .

## Budget Setting Full Council – 5 March 2025 – Public and Member Questions

	<p>With bus rail sustainable transport cycling and walking facilities          As Wellington is taking economy growth and housing Development plus new jobs and health facilities          And money towards reopening Taunton to Minehead Railway line joint with First group plc Greater Western trains company limited GWR Network rail Western route and West Somerset railway company and Peninsula Transport Board and First group plc South buses for integration with railway services.</p> <p><b>Response from the Lead Member for Transport and Waste Service, Councillor Richard Wilkins</b></p>
<p><b>Full written response</b></p> <p>Page 30</p>	<p>Question 9a) Thank you for your question David and for your ongoing work with us in helping promote public transport use in the County. I can confirm that the Council took a decision in December 2023 to implement a more financially sustainable model for the provision of park and ride and reduce the need for subsidy from the Council's general budget. We will look for opportunities to draw closer linkages between our parking and public transport strategies as we roll out our new local transport plan which will shortly be available for consultation.</p> <p>Question 9b) The Government has currently placed the Wellington and Collumpton Rail Station projects on-hold pending the outcome of its infrastructure review. Wellington Station remains a high-priority project for the Council, and we have been working with local stakeholders, MPs and the Department for Transport to promote continued investment in the scheme; and have been working with local developers to progress the adjacent residential development and access road. We have also submitted the West Somerset Railway business case to Government on behalf of the stakeholders promoting that scheme. We will consider in due course what appropriate financial provision is necessary should these schemes progress further; but the business cases currently assume that financial support from the Council will not be required. I can confirm that the Council will continue to fund our contribution to the Peninsula Transport Body for the coming financial year.</p>

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Annexe B – Member Questions	
Name of person submitting	Question
<p><b>Cllr Diogo Rodrigues</b></p> <p style="writing-mode: vertical-rl; transform: rotate(180deg);">Page 3</p>	<p><b>Question 1a</b> – How many enforcement cases are currently in the backlog in area North, and how many new cases have been received in the last six months?</p> <p><b>Question 1b</b> - How many full-time equivalent (FTE) staff are currently working in enforcement in area North, and what is the estimated timeframe for clearing the backlog with this staff number?</p> <p><b>Question 1c</b> - In the case of River Lane, Dunwear, enforcement was first contacted in October 2024, yet unauthorised work has continued for months. Bridgwater Without Parish Council feels held to ransom by the system as delays mean that, by the time enforcement acts, the damage is already done. They are also concerned that enforcement across the parish is ineffective, with other cases similarly stalled. What will Somerset Council do to ensure enforcement action is timely and effective in cases like this</p> <p><b>Response from the Lead Member for Economic Development Planning and Assets, Councillor Mike Rigby</b></p>
<p><b>Full written response</b></p>	<p>Thank you for your questions</p> <p>Q1a &amp; b There is currently 0.8 FTE with an additional 1 FTE starting a phased return from long term sick. Current number of cases on hand (which does not include general queries that are triaged and shut down before generating cases) is 183. The time to clear will be case dependant in terms of the complexity of the issues and the compliance of the individuals in breach of planning control.</p> <p>Q1c Site visits have been undertaken to this site on two different occasions by Enforcement Officers covering the north and wider area of Somerset over the Christmas period. They confirmed they would be submitting a planning application and had a planning agent engaged. In accordance with the Councils Enforcement Procedure the Council will look to negotiate to resolve impacts at the first point and submission of an application could aim to mitigate or address the planning harm as a result of the development. At the conclusion of any application process if the development is</p>

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	<p>unacceptable a notice can be served and the applicant has the right to appeal. All of these steps are required for the site to demonstrate that any action the Council takes is proportionate to the harm and cannot be overcome by other means.</p>
<p><b>Cllr Diogo Rodrigues</b></p>	<p><b>Question 2</b></p> <p>Are there currently any Somerset Council employees working remotely from outside the UK? If so, how many, in which departments, and what is the council's policy on staff working from abroad?</p> <p><b>Response from the Lead Member for Transformation, Human Resources and Localities, Councillor Theo Butt Philip</b></p>
<p><b>Full written response</b></p> <p style="writing-mode: vertical-rl; transform: rotate(180deg);">Page 32</p>	<p>Thank you for your question.</p> <p>We do not have a policy on staff working overseas, however Somerset Council provides robust guidance and procedural advice from Information Governance, Information Security and Cyber Security teams regarding accessing the network abroad or taking devices abroad. Any attempt to login to Somerset Council network from overseas is blocked unless appropriate authorisation is granted in advance of travel. Approval is only granted in exceptional circumstances.</p> <p>Somerset Council currently has 5 staff who are currently based overseas in hard to recruit roles.</p> <p>Departments:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Legal (Lawyer) x 2</li> <li>• Highways (Engineer) x 1</li> <li>• Adults (Social Care) x 2</li> </ul>
<p><b>Cllr Sue Osbourne</b></p>	<p><b>Question 3</b></p> <p>Within the Section 151 Officers written Section 25 report to Full Council she has included as Appendix A, Annex Ai the 2025/26 Exceptional Financial Support 'in principle' agreement for a capitalisation directive.</p> <p>Within this letter there is a paragraph that reads as follows:-</p>



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<p style="writing-mode: vertical-rl; transform: rotate(180deg);">Page 33</p>	<p>' If you are considering financing capitalisation support through capital receipts, I want to make clear at this stage that it is my expectation that councils should avoid the disposal of community heritage assets where possible to protect the public ownership of locally significant sites to ensure residents can continue to benefit from them'</p> <p>The August 2024 Executive meeting agreed to dispose of 22 assets of which 2, The Market House Taunton, grade 2 listed and the Cornhill Complex, Bridgwater, grade1 listed were included for disposal.</p> <p>Will these assets, if not already done so, now be withdrawn from this list?</p> <p>How many grade 1, grade 2* and grade 2 heritage assets does the council own? In addition, how many 'non designated' heritage assets does the Council own?</p> <p>What is the likely financial impact of this condition on your ability to finance this capitalisation directive from 'non operational' asset sales and how will you mitigate this?</p> <p>What changes will you now be making to your assets disposal policy to comply with this part of the proposed capitalisation directive?</p> <p><b>Response from Lead Member for Economic Development, Planning and Assets, Councillor Mike Rigby</b></p>
<p><b>Full written response</b></p>	<p>We are currently considering the implications of the reference to 'community heritage assets' contained in the letter from the Secretary of State. We do not believe this refers only to land and buildings but also artefacts, artwork and other assets, none of which the Council are planning to sell.</p> <p>Excluding closed Church yards, where the Council has responsibility for the land, we have 58 listed properties on our records, a full list of our assets is available online. However, just because a property is listed under the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 does not automatically mean it would fall under the definition of a 'community heritage' asset as the property itself is protected by the fact that it is 'listed' and therefore it automatically benefits from the statutory protections granted by its listing.</p> <p>We need to determine whether the assets the Council have currently declared surplus are community heritage asset, this is not a clearly defined designation. The Council will most likely need to seek further clarification from the Secretary</p>

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	<p>of State on this point. The Council can then review all potential asset sales against the clarified definition and request to 'avoid the disposal of community heritage assets where possible'. Once we have clarity over the definition, any property that is considered a community heritage asset will be withdrawn from the sale process.</p> <p>The Council are shortly planning to commence the marketing process for the Market House, Taunton but any potential sale would be several months away and would not complete unless and until the Council has satisfied itself that the asset does not fall under the category as defined (and subject to the clarifications needed). It should also be noted that the Cornhill Complex is not currently due to be listed for sale until later in the year and we would expect to have clarity over the definition of community heritage assets before any marketing.</p>
<p><b>Cllr Sue Osbourne</b></p> <p style="writing-mode: vertical-rl; transform: rotate(180deg);">Page 34</p>	<p><b>Question 4</b></p> <p>Budget Assurance Statement - Community, Place and Economy, Table 1 - Planning.          In 2024/25 the Planning service had a base budget of £5,402m. Despite a Growth Bid of £1,990, it is expected to save £2,501 leading to a proposed total budget for 2025/26 of £5,108. This means a reduction in the planning budget of £384,000.</p> <p>What assurance can you give to members already concerned about the performance of this service, particularly Enforcement, that it can continue to discharge its planning function effectively, especially if the government remove the allowance of 'extension of time' to the targets for time taken to process the different categories of planning applications? The target for producing a local plan is April 2028 yet it is being forecasted that this won't be ready till April 2029, so how is the local plan going to get back on track when the growth figure of £0.771m (table 2) that has been allocated for this work is cancelled out by the amount of savings that have to be made?</p> <p><b>Response from the Lead Member for Economic Development Planning and Assets, Councillor Mike Rigby</b></p>
<p><b>Full written response</b></p>	<p>Thank you for your questions</p> <p>The planning budget changes referenced in the assurance statement give a clear intent to support the planning service with the ongoing permanent resources needed. The workforce restructure initially sought to reduce Enforcement Officer roles as this is a non-statutory service, however following consultation a growth bid has been submitted which reinstates the 2 roles that would otherwise have been deleted.</p>

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	<p>The local plan budget reference in the assurance statement is an additional amount to be combined with a current budget for 25/26. Collectively this is sufficient funding to meet with the local plan business case the service has put forward. This will not get the timeline “back on track” but will deliver for Somerset Council the two local plans it is required to deliver.</p> <p>I cannot give an assurance based on future changes that government might make, should the extension of time option be removed we will look workload and resource impacts.</p>
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