

## Appendix A

### Public and Members Questions – Executive 6 September 2023

Question submitted from	Question
Mr Alan Debenham	<p>Current level of Care spending could put Council viability at risk within 2 years warns Somerset Council” so heads-up this week’s Council press release followed by an explanatory statement from Financial Executive Councillor, Liz Leyshon, all somewhat in line with 28 Aug. Guardian article about up to some 26 councils at such risk. Last April Government announcement said:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Building on the People at the Heart of Care white paper, the government has set out plans to further digitise the social care sector and bolster the workforce ( issuing 55,000 visas for people to take up care-worker roles, and increasing uptake of digital social care records by 10%, plus launching new improved data collections ).</li><li>• Alongside the plan, the Better Care Fund framework, published today, will ensure at least £16.8 billion is spent to make sure people receive the right care in the right place at the right time ( this fund joins health, social care and housing to help older people and those with complex needs live at home for longer, increasing from £7.7 billion in 2022 to £8.1 billion in 2023 and £8.7 billion in 2024. The total fund includes £1.6 billion to improve hospital discharge arrangements - £600 million next year and £1 billion the following year.</li></ul> <p>This follows the Autumn Statement 2022, in which the Government previously allocated up to £2.8 billion in 2023/24 and £4.7 billion in 2024/25 to help support Adult Social Care and hospital discharge, creating Social Care – so it sounds - awash with new funding</p> <p><b>Question 1</b> How much of this seemingly generous new money and support has found, or is finding, its way to this Council’s funds and/or staffing and how much of this is direct grant, as opposed to the Council being</p>

allowed to raise hypothecated Adult Care funds from the up to 2% Council Tax levy previously established?

Last February the Government pledged to transform Children's Social Care, with ambitious plans to put families at the heart of Children's Social Care whereby vulnerable children will be better supported with families in safe and loving homes:-

- Backed by £200 million over the next 2 years for a new, ambitious and wide - ranging Children's Social Care implementation strategy to transform the current care system to focus on more early support for families, reducing the need for crisis response at a later stage.
- Families will receive local early help and intervention with challenges such as addiction, domestic abuse or mental health, to help families to stay together where possible and overcome adversity. This will start in 12 local authorities and is backed by £45 million to embed a best practice model that will then be shared more widely.
- Kinship care, where a child is placed with a relative or close family friend, will be prioritised by simplifying the process and providing more support to extended families, such as grandparents, aunties, uncles and others : recognising the transition within a family can be challenging for all involved, the government will also provide training and support to kinship carers.
- Foster carers will also see an above-inflation increase in their allowance to help cover the increasing costs of caring for a child in their home, in recognition of the brilliant care they provide to children, this running alongside £25 million over the next 2 years on a recruitment and retention programme, which is the largest investment in recent history, helping to attract more people to offer a loving home for children in need. Depending on local need, foster care recruitment will focus on areas where there is a particular shortage of placements for children such as sibling groups, teenagers, unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC), those that have suffered complex trauma or parent and child foster homes.

**Question 2** (repeat of question 1 but for Childrens Social Care)

How much of this seemingly generous new money and support has found, or is finding, its way to this Council's funds and/or staffing and

how much of this is direct grant, as opposed to the Council being allowed to raise hypothecated Children's Social Care funds from the up to 2% Council Tax levy previously established?

### **Question 3**

When is this Council, in loyal Liberal Democrat historical tradition, going to take-up again its old fight for financially independent, non-Westminster dominated 'real' Local Government – along the lines of the 1979 Layfield Royal Commission Report's proposals for new Local Income and Local Sales Taxes etc.?

### **Question 4**

Where does this Council stand on this important environmental issue, also with its current bid in mind for over £10m of government funding to finance its own special 'nutrients mitigation' project to help release present delays in Somerset house building?

"Rather than weakening regulations, we need firmer controls on private water companies and the hugely profitable large-scale housebuilders, who have seen a massive increase in their share value as a result of this government's latest announcement to ditch 'nutrient neutrality", so commented a Green Party leader.

### **Question 5**

On what basis does Finance Executive Councillor, Liz Leyshon, say in her latest press released statement (29 Aug) :“Somerset looks poised to become Britain's green energy powerhouse with Hinkley Point C coming on stream and the proposed new gigafactory, but the next two years will be very, very difficult. The Council's challenge will be to make sure we are in a the right place to make the most of these opportunities, while taking care of those most in need” when all green environmentalists I've ever known, viewing nuclear power from uranium mining to 60-year decommissioning and 25,000 year geological subterranean disposal of radioactive waste, would vehemently demand withdrawal of this latest Tory nuclear-obsessed greenwash fraud?

Also viewing the hopeless budget overruns and reactor failures of what's happened at EDF's similarly designed twin EPR reactors at Flamanville and Olkiluoto – now seriously the same for Hinkley C with more long delays to 2028's 'one reactor only' operation and hopeless escalating construction costs from original £17bn to latest £36bn plus –

	<p>currently there's little real expectation of an actual date for electricity production and, if there was, the cost of the 'nuclear levy' to be added to all electricity bills will be unaffordably massive and the first ever high-level radioactive waste on-site storage, next to the sea wall, an untenable threat in the light of likely global sea-level chaos from 3 degree temperature rise.</p> <p>Lastly, everyone knows that so-called 'renewable energy' in the form of solar panels, wind and wave turbines, electric vehicles etc.- all needing lithium battery storage capacity - is not in reality truly renewable because overall, considering the thousands of new lithium and other metals mines and the manufacturing/ retailing industry needed in support, it has a very negative impact on global emissions, albeit much less than coal, oil, or gas. Lesser impact or not, the proposed gigafactory is still indirectly an increased emissions 'killer'</p>
Response	<p><b>Question 1 – Lead Member for Adult Social Care, Cllr Dean Ruddle</b> Somerset Council received the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discharge Fund - £3.3m in current year and will receive a further £5.3m in 2024/25</li> <li>• Market Sustainability - £5.8m in the current year and a further £8.8m in 2024/25</li> <li>• Workforce Fund - £3.8m in the current and a further £2.1m in 2024/25</li> </ul> <p>There is also the Social Care Fund that is split between Adults and Childrens Social Care of £39.2m in the current year and rising to £45m for 204/25</p> <p><b>Question 2 – Lead Member for Children, Families and Education, Cllr Tessa Munt</b> The Social Care Grant from Government for the year from April 2023 to March 2024 is £14.6m more than the previous year. This funding is shared between Adult Social Care and Children's Social Care.</p> <p>Children's Social Care is not able to benefit from a Council Tax levy under the Government's current legislative arrangements.</p> <p><b>Question 3 – Leader of the Council and Lead Member for Governance and Communications, Cllr Bill Revans</b> I don't believe the Liberal Democrats have ever stopped!</p>

People in Somerset clearly value our approach to running local government which is why we have the largest elected Liberal Democrat group in the country here and we have made stellar gains in the 2023 council elections, from Windsor and Maidenhead to Hull.

We will continue to campaign for political and economic power to be devolved and decentralised to the lowest level and the empowerment of communities and remain committed to local government financed through a local income tax and site value rating for business.

After the 2024 LibDem Landslide election our majority government will undoubtedly put this into effect.

Local Government has a whole has consistency campaigned for the capping limits on council tax imposed by the government to be removed and for local government to be properly funded with multi-year financial settlements.

As a History teacher I do need to point out that Frank Layfield's Committee reported in 1976 and not 1979.

**Q4 - Lead Member for Economic Development, Planning and Assets, Cllr Ros Wyke**

We are currently reviewing the Government's proposed changes to the approach to nutrient neutrality and their plans to unblock development. However, until the proposed amendments are made to the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill the current legal framework has not changed and mitigation to ensure that developments are nutrient neutral are therefore still required. The Council will continue to work with partners to deliver live projects in advance of any changes coming into effect.

The Council has been campaigning for change in the nutrient neutrality regulations for some time. We've long felt that the restrictions on new housing were disproportionate in Somerset where new housing has a limited impact in comparison to other sources of pollution and that other measures are required. We currently have approximately 16,000 new homes held up by these regulations.

In addition to the proposed amendments to the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill, the Government now plans to tackle the underlying sources of nutrient pollution by announcing an environmental package of further investment in nutrient reduction measures. The Council has been advised that this has shifted the focus from the proposed Nutrient

	<p>Mitigation Fund and will now provide this additional funding to Natural England to take a more strategic approach to site restoration on a catchment wide basis. We understand that Natural England will seek to partner with local planning authorities to deliver nutrient reductions and associated environmental co-benefits and we expect to receive further details on this new approach in the next few weeks including the engagement with local leaders.</p> <p><b>Q5 -Deputy Leader and Lead Member for Resources and Performance, Cllr Liz Leyshon (answer given by Lead Member for Economic Development, Planning and Assets, Cllr Ros Wyke)</b></p> <p>Regarding HPC, the siting and funding model for new nuclear is prescribed by central government and whilst I understand why you have raised this, the Council's role focusses on the delivery of the requirements contained in the agreed Development Consent Order and associated documents. You are indeed correct that there have been formal delays to the commissioning of Units 1 and 2 of the station. EDF have a number of community fora where you would be able to air the concerns you have raised in the correspondence.</p> <p>We are aware of the negative environmental impacts of mining lithium and other scarce materials for the use in batteries and other renewable energy solutions, but almost all alternative energy options have a negative environmental impact to some degree. The imperative to reduce carbon emissions and move away from fossil fuels means that the least-worst options must be our considered preference. We are also aware that renewable energy is not a net-zero panacea and reducing energy consumption is also crucial to attaining our carbon reduction ambitions. Like so many aspects of addressing the climate emergency, there is no one solution and there are many nuances to be considered.</p>
<p>Cllr Leigh Redman</p>	<p><b>Reinforced Autoclaved Aerated Concrete (RAAC)</b></p> <p>It has become apparent over the past week that this Government may have failed to issue sufficient guidance or funding to local authorities with regard to the School estate around RAAC and its potential impact on the safety of our young people when learning, along with the poor</p>

	<p>oversight during the building and handover process for Haygrove school.</p> <p>The uncertainty and concern around this accumulated failure has meant that some of our young peoples education is being impacted again, while parents are rightly concerned about their child's education and more importantly in some cases their safety while learning.</p> <p>I understand that non Local authority school properties will be the responsibility of the MAT or trust they sit under, I am aware that our amazing officers have been reaching out to help where they can, despite no responsibility to do so.</p> <p><b>Question 1</b> Can the Executive Members provide an urgent update on the position for LA and where known Academy schools in Somerset?</p> <p><b>Question 2</b> Can the Executive Members provide an indication of current plan of action where we have a responsibility and for those where we do not?</p> <p><b>Question 3</b> Can we understand any financial impact on the council that this may have?</p> <p><b>Question 4</b> The wider Council property estate, can the exec member for property please provide an indication of where in our wider estate RAAC may be present?</p>
Response	<p><b>Question 1 – Lead Member for Children, Families and Education, Cllr Tessa Munt</b></p> <p>As a local authority we have responsibility for the condition of local authority-maintained school buildings. Academy Trusts and the DfE have responsibility for many schools in the county, and the Diocese of Bath and Wells has responsibility for a small number of ‘Voluntary Aided’ school buildings.</p> <p>When the risk of RAAC became clear at the end of the last decade, the then county council reviewed our school building records in line with Department for Education guidance at that time. This review concluded that there was low probability of RAAC being present in Somerset’s local authority-maintained schools.</p>

In the light of new guidance that came from the Department for Education last academic year, a new programme of on-site investigation began across LA maintained schools to test this earlier study with the intentions of demonstrating conclusively that no RAAC is present. This programme covers 108 of the schools that we are responsible for and has not yet concluded, but to date all the on-site surveys, where they have been required, have found no evidence of RAAC in local authority maintained schools. This latest programme was initiated in early 2023, with the first surveys on site in June. We are fully confident at this stage that there is no RAAC present in 40 of the 108 schools, and survey work is well underway across a number of other sites. No RAAC has been identified at any of our 108 schools to date.

However one academy school, Selway School, run by the Oak Trust, has identified RAAC in one site since the letter was initially sent. We expect that school to open tomorrow to all but one class.

In the past few days we have speculation about RAAC in local schools - with suggestions that it could be present in the buildings of Milford Infants School and Bridgwater College Academy and Brymore schools. This is incorrect and I'd like to discourage such speculation. It really doesn't help teachers to teach or help students to learn. BCA for instance have reassured us that their buildings have been surveyed in the last 15 months and they are confident that RAAC is not present in their estate.

**Question 2 - Lead Member for Children, Families and Education, Cllr Tessa Munt**

Following the change in the Department for Education's risk assessment last week, officers in the Strategic Asset Management department have worked with our structural engineer contractor to accelerate the survey programme. We are targeting the completion of initial surveys at all 108 sites over the next two weeks. Some further investigations will be necessary following the initial survey programme where structural components are more difficult to access; these follow up surveys will take longer to complete.

No RAAC has been identified at any of our school sites to date and we hope that the survey programme will enable us to conclusively rule out the presence of RAAC in our schools. If any RAAC is identified through



the remainder of the programme, we will follow DfE advice and the recommendations of our structural engineers to mitigate any risk to students and staff.

**Question 3 - Lead Member for Economic Development, Planning and Assets, Cllr Ros Wyke & Lead Member for Communities, Housing and Culture, Cllr Federica Smith-Roberts**

The latest survey programme is currently forecast to cost a total of £80,000, but this figure is likely to increase depending on the amount of detailed follow-up investigatory work required. If any RAAC is identified the financial impact would increase further, though at this stage we clearly hope this will not be the case. This cost is an in-year pressure on the Strategic Asset Management departmental budget – no funding for investigative work on RAAC has been provided by the government.

**Question 4 - Lead Member for Economic Development, Planning and Assets, Cllr Ros Wyke & Lead Member for Communities, Housing and Culture, Cllr Federica Smith-Roberts**

The Council owns and manages 10,000 homes through its housing services. The majority of these homes are traditionally built houses, flats and bungalows using well established techniques and materials; concrete slab construction methods are present in our housing estate, but with relatively few large blocks we believe that the risk of RAAC being present is likely to be low. Additional verification work is being undertaken by the housing services to provide assurance in this area.

Somerset Council also has a significant operational and leased estate. Officers in the Strategic Asset Management department have undertaken an initial data review of over 1000 buildings, and commissioned some follow up surveys as a result. Again, no RAAC has been identified to date, however we have been prioritising work on schools and it will be some time before we have a comprehensive view on the risk posed by RAAC in this part of the estate. We will continue to review Health and Safety Executive and any other relevant sector guidance as the national response develops in this very challenging area.