

Full Council 20 December 2023 – Public and Member Questions

Annexe A – Public Questions	
Name of person submitting	Question
Ray Rose	<p>Question 1a - Vivary Park Netting and Posts there is an Independent Review Risk assessment and Planning Permission, please can an update be provided?</p> <p>Question 1b - Vivary Park Fountain and flower watering system. Somerset Council are doing it all wrong. I was on the Taunton Deane Council and then West Somerset & Taunton for 34 years and that Fountain and watering system was part of my job. 4 years ago, I retired and I had redundancy. But for the last 4 years I have been looking after the Fountain and water system and not been paid for it. I do not want to be paid for my time. So now Somerset Council say they can do it, but they had no idea if it's not put right soon it will be too late. I am willing to put it right at no cost to the Council. When I left I took the know-how with me. ask Cllr Hazel Prior-Sankey and Cllr Andy Sully.</p> <p>Question 1c - Paul Street Toilets. There is 7 Toilet units there 5 are locked out of order they are the disabled unit. urinal unit and 3 Toilet pane units. only 1 men's unit open and 1 woman's unit open and them too stink. and not cleaned. On the locked doors there is a sign saying Temporarily out of order that is over 6 months ago and now someone ie: member of the public put on that sign permanently. The rest of the Public Toilets belong to Taunton Town Council. But Somerset Council will not let Taunton Town Council see the cleaning contract to see if it's been fulfilled by the contractor.</p> <p>Response from Lead Member for Communities, Housing and Culture: Cllr Federica Smith-Roberts</p>
Rosa Kell	<p>Question 2a</p> <p>Can this Executive assure the Bus Users, to the tax payers, workers employers, students, shoppers and visitors of this part of Somerset that Wells Bus station will not be on the disposal off assets register; and that any hypothecated revenue from parking charges in Wells will be spent on the modernising and upgrading of the Wells Transport Hub (our Bus Station being the main interchange between Bristol and Bath and Weston to Yeovil, Taunton, Bridgewater and keep this Bus Hub in Somerset Ownership.</p>

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	<p>Rosa Kell Lead on Wells Bus Users Group</p> <p>Response from Lead Member for Transport and Digital: Cllr Mike Rigby</p>
<p>David Redgewell</p>	<p>Question 3a What progress is being made with First group plc South Buses and First group property, on Yeovil new bus Depot. Which is important for maintenance cleaning fueling and staff room and supervisor office to maintain Yeovil and Somerset and Dorset Councils bus network has a planning application been lodged and an operating centre with the Traffic Commissioner Kevin Rooney. This is very very important as First Group plc property's have told the planning Department that Neutilus works Reckleford bus and coach Depot will be demolished in the new year And need to maintain the public transport Network,</p> <p>Question 3b In view of the Delays proposed by Public transport Network officers at Somerset council on Taunton Transport hub former Taunton bus and coach station, with has been a bus station of the southern and western National omnibus company and was owned by First group plc South west buses and Somerset west and Taunton council. So why are English Heriage ask for a detail conservation Consents and planning permission for a bus and coach station in the local plan allocated use and pre application discussion before passengers and stakeholders consultation. The station can be funded on Revenue support from Departure charges from First Group plc South buses or National Express coaches limited Berry Coaches Flixbus go ahead South west or stagecoach South west or Hatch Green and Retail shop or cafe rentals, discussion with Transport Town Council, and South west Transport Board We welcome the Referral to the Department for transport to move Money from Bridgwater bus lanes money to be spent on Transport hub</p>

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	<p>This is most important Transport project in Somerset and South west England and we would ask for urgent progress for passengers using the County and South west bus and coach Network without delay that risk the public money from the Department of Transport</p> <p>Question 3c</p> <p>I view of the importance of bus coach and public transport Network services in Somerset and into North Somerset Banes and the west of England mayoral combined transport Authority, Dorset ,Devon, Wiltshire what discussion are taking place with city Town and parish councils other Local Transport Authority to maintain Somerset bus and public transport Network in the financial emergency which is effecting most South west Local Authorities.</p> <p>David redgewell South west transport Network. Railfuture Severnside.</p> <p>Response from Lead Member for Transport and Digital: Cllr Mike Rigby</p>
<p>Peter Travis</p>	<p>Question 4a</p> <p>Somerset spends far less than our neighbouring LTAs on supporting bus services. Two thirds of Unitary Councillors endorsed the Somerset Bus Partnership manifesto that called for a 40% increase in Somerset’s bus funding during the lifetime of this Council. A 4,000 signature petition organised by Somerset Bus Partnership during September’s Catch The Bus Month is again calling on Somerset to increase its financial support for buses.</p> <p>Somerset’s buses are used by the young, the old, the disabled and by those who either can’t afford or choose not to own a car. The £2 flat fare scheme and the £1 fare in Taunton has seen many people switch to relying on buses to get to work, to the shops and to see friends and family. Many, particularly in Mendip, have now taken jobs in Bath and Bristol’s service industries and their employment is dependent on them being able to get to and back from their work by bus (often that requires late evening buses).</p>

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	<p>Whilst Somerset may have higher than average car ownership, in single car households the use of that car is usually determined by the main breadwinner and so often isn't available to other members of the household. The population in Somerset is spread widely over the large county without a single dominant urban centre, and that geography means a higher proportion of people in Somerset are dependent on buses.</p> <p>Given the financial challenges facing Somerset Council, there is a need to find new income streams that can fund our under threat bus services. Planning application for new housing estates requires a transport plan. That transport plan should include and prioritise, wherever possible, the improvement and enhancement of bus services.</p> <p>This way we can have an additional income stream to support the ever-increasing number of under threat bus services.</p> <p>Response from Lead Member for Transport and Digital: Cllr Mike Rigby</p>
David Orr	<p>Statement to Full Council 20/12/2023 by David Orr (please read out on my behalf)</p> <p>The Financial Emergency is the highest priority for this council but it isn't the only priority.</p> <p>The Natural England nutrient neutrality guidance for all new homes in Somerset came in over 3 years ago, without a local scientific understanding of how phosphorus gets on and off our levels and moors, nor was it underpinned by a local evidence base. The generic guidance isn't specifically targeted to reducing phosphorus on the moors and levels.</p> <p>The highly precautionary assumption by Natural England was that all phosphorus that was discharged into the relevant rivers ended up on the moors and levels and then another 20% more phosphorus is added to that total.</p> <p>Local research shows that not to be the case. Only a fraction of discharged phosphorus in the relevant rivers gets to the moors and levels. Agricultural inputs over the past 60 years of artificial fertiliser use are significant, with the eutrophication impacts of choking weed and algal growth being exacerbated by climate change. Additional local research will be needed to complete the evidence base and guide a targeted phosphorus neutrality policy.</p>

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	<p>There are 18,000 held-up new home permissions, within which thousands of vital social and affordable homes are also held up. The primary focus is on the phosphorus from the 18,000 new homes, while the phosphorus from more than 250,000 existing homes isn't accounted for. Clearly, improvements in removing phosphorus from each wastewater treatment works mitigates phosphorus removal from all homes connected to that works, both new and existing.</p> <p>To build all of the 18,000 new homes held up, just 4 tonnes per annum of phosphorus needs to be removed from our river catchments. Wessex Water have over the past 4 years removed almost 60 tonnes of phosphorus per annum from our river catchments, yet absurdly the new homes remain held up. Between now and 2030, new wastewater regulations will remove even more phosphorus from our rivers.</p> <p>The urgent need for a thriving local economy, together with delivering vital social and affordable housing, should be part of a balanced Somerset nutrient neutrality policy.</p> <p>The cumulative economic, social and community impacts from holding up new homes are now highly damaging. This flawed and dated nutrient neutrality status quo cannot continue until 2030.</p> <p>Cornwall and Wiltshire have moved to taking a catchment-wide approach (with Natural England's continuing oversight) to unblock new housing and get the vital social and affordable homes built.</p> <p>Question 6a</p> <p>When will this Council also move to a catchment-wide nutrient neutrality model to unlock vitally needed new homes, while targeting phosphorus removal from the moors and levels?</p> <p>Response from Lead Member for Economic Development, Planning and Assets: Cllr Ros Wyke</p>
<p>Valda Dagnell / Elspeth Waldie (to be presented)</p>	<p>I've been trying to get to a meeting of the Somerset Council to present the folder of Letters to the Future from the public which we collected during the Great Big Green Week (now several months ago!)</p> <p>We are keen to get the folder handed over so that all council members have the chance to see what it is that people are concerned about with regard to climate change.</p>

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by Cllr Sue Osborne)

Obviously we realise that this is in some way ‘preaching to the converted’ – we know that Somerset is committed to an environmental policy that supports positive action with regard to global warming, difficult though it often is to maintain against the current climate of denial (cf the latest watered-down COP proposals re fossil fuels).

However, these letters differ from those which I’m sure you and other counsellors receive frequently from campaigners citing figures and facts of which you are already aware. These are heartfelt pleas and worries about the future from a random set of ordinary people, and I hope they will be supportive of the concerns that you are already working on.

Statement 7a:

Dear friends,

Thank you for this chance to present to you the folder of Letters to the Future. The Climate Alliance invited people all over the country to write these, expressing their hopes for future generations, and their fears for what life could be like if we fail to slow down climate change.

Here in Ilminster, we opened up Sweet Surprise Cafe on the Saturday of the Ilminster Experience weekend, and invited people in for a coffee and a chance to tell us, and the world, about their concerns at what is happening to the planet.

When people heard what we were doing, they came in off the street, sat down, and started to write. It was a very moving experience to see them, and we hope you are equally moved to read what they have written. This was no quick job, no easy signing of a petition, but a thoughtful experience in which people, some for the first time ever, talked with us and each other about their hopes and fears, or sat staring into the distance, pen poised above the letter-form we provided.

It was a powerful experience to see people finally facing their fears about the future. There was anger, there was sadness - one man who looked as though he had never cried in his life was wiping tears away as he tried to express what it was that he felt. You can not tell always from what is on the page just how strongly people feel.

Others wrote their letter at the Church or sent it us by

email. We decided to collect the letters together, both to share them amongst ourselves and to send on to you and to our MP, with the urgent request that you study these concerns and act upon them. But more than that - we know that this council is already on

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	<p>side; we also know that the big decisions, that impact not only our lives but the lives of people thousands of miles away, are made by politicians we rarely see, and by international corporations.</p> <p>In these letters there are many examples of the principle of doing what you can, where you are, with what you have. More and more people are doing that, but it is not going to be enough. So our question is: how can we all work together to celebrate and make known all these small actions, not for self-aggrandisement, (nor even to get re-elected!) but to the point where it actually shames the Big-Decision-Makers into refusing to water-down the essential actions the people of the world are calling for to save the planet, now, before it is too late.</p> <p>We look forward to hearing your thoughts.</p> <p>In friendship, Valda Dagnell pp Chard and Ilminster Quakers</p> <p>Response from the Lead Member for Environment and Climate Change: Cllr Dixie Darch</p>
<p>Nigel Behan</p>	<p>These questions relate to Item 6 Report of the Leader and Executive – Items for Decision and the Supporting documents and Local Government Finance generally.</p> <p>Public Finance reported (about Hampshire) that: County to establish statutory service levels amid S114 risk where “Officers will establish the statutory minimum level of services, but councillors have been warned this could include proposing cuts that “based on past work do not necessarily make sense” – in order to satisfy any government-appointed commissioners in the case that they are sent to the authority.”</p> <p>And “In his report, finance director Rob Carr (Hampshire) said these cuts could include ending preventative services.....” Moreover</p>

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“The council (Hampshire) first warned of a Section 114 notice last year, when its leader wrote to senior ministers warning income from council tax and business rates [“barely covers” yearly cost increases](#), leaving unfunded care pressures.”

Question 9a What preventative services are at risk in Somerset?

Question 9b Can you define (and list) a “statutory minimum level of services...” that Somerset Council has considered (are considering) -and corresponding impacts etc?

In the Somerset public consultation “Cllr Revans added: “We are continuing to lobby Government to address the financial crisis facing local councils. Just last week the County Councils Network published a letter sent to Levelling Up Secretary Michael Gove and signed by myself and 32 other Council Leaders from all over the country. The letter highlighted the growing concern nationally with 7 out of 10 councils no longer confident they can balance their budget next year.”

And PF also reports that: “The continued expectation that councils will simply use their declining reserves to balance their budgets shows the government does not understand why authorities hold them, a finance director has said.” [Local government settlement: continued emphasis on reserve use ‘disappointing’](#)

“The recently published local government finance policy statement stated authorities should consider using reserves to maintain services over this and the next financial year.

Michael Hudson, executive director of finance and resources at Cambridgeshire County Council, said it is “disappointing” the statement still puts such emphasis on reserve use.

He told *PF* recent comments from local government minister Simon Hoare, who Hudson said told finance chiefs “reserves are not tablets in stone that can’t be touched”, showed a lack of understanding.

“That’s unhelpful and continues to fail to recognise the role of the Section 151 officer, and the difficult role they face in terms of their assessment and judgement over the risks for prudent position,” Hudson said.”

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	<p>Question 9c At the recent Audit Committee (The “Preventing Failure in Local Government” Agenda Item) discussions took place around whether “well managed councils” had issued a S114 notice – I believe the answer from a representative of the External Auditors (Grant Thornton) was “no”. Does this Council think – in light of the number of Local Authorities facing financial “distress” – that the answer “no” should be revised (updated) to “not yet”?</p> <p>Response from the Deputy Leader of Council and Lead Member for Resources and Performance: Cllr Liz Leyshon</p>
<p>Eva Bryczkowska</p>	<p>"Local authorities that have been issued with Section 114 notices, have had failures of leadership, management and governance, and some have taken risks." Michael Gove. Levelling Up Secretary on councils' financial carnage. (Source: the i newspaper). *From what Michael Gove has stated above, the threat of 114 notices have nothing to do with the coalition government originally voting for austerity, thus starving local authorities of funding since 2010. *Nope. Him and Conservatives locally will continue to spin the line that local authorities have been naughty, profligate, and it is basically all their fault. *Lack of local authority funding threatens to strip the ability of Somerset to provide necessary services right down to a skeleton, with little meat on the bones. *Legally, Somerset have to balance the books. *At the same time, if you councillors are simply going to continue balancing the books, being a victim of circumstances, making staff redundant, cutting vital non statutory services every year, this will render this local authority a shadow of its former self, almost ending up as a corpse. *Future Levelling Up Secretaries, the media, and indeed many Somerset residents, will blame Somerset councillors for making cuts** in services.</p>

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Not the carnage inflicted on councils by this government. Even if residents criticise the government, whatever you decide to do, many will say you should have done something else, completely different to what they wanted you to do.

**They are CUTS not 'savings' as you describe them.

*Residents faced with the possibility of experiencing deterioration of services, staff you plan to make redundant, and the trade union movement, see these actions as CUTS.

*Even if you raise council tax in order to increase funding for services, Somerset residents won't notice the difference because it will be needed just to stand still.

*It is a given that local authorities like Somerset need adequate state funded services that form the infrastructure for the nation's population, so that vital services like social care, housing, the needs of children and families, are being funded properly.

Question 10a:

*Instead of being victims of circumstance; making swathes of staff redundant; being on a collision course with three staff unions; and cutting services, especially non statutory provision:

Will councillors consider multifarious ways of taking action in original, creative, and inspirational ways, thus drawing attention to the financial cliff edge that nationally & locally 21 councils are facing?

*Lobbying, begging the government, presenting them with a Christmas wish list, and believing that the Chancellor of the Exchequer will deliver anything more than breadcrumbs, is patently futile.

*The last 13 years is all the evidence you need.

*An example of effective, flamboyant, and creative action was when the Treborg workers went on strike.

*They stood at an intersection of the motorway near Bridgwater. As well as placards, they had a giant inflatable rat, the factory was being overrun by them.

*Motorists tooted their horns in support.

*By taking creative action, the workers won a pay rise and other benefits.

*There are many other examples of actions taken by workers and campaigners in general that have been successful.

*Like footballer Marcus Rashford's campaign, which forced the government to make a U turn on providing hungry schoolchildren with hot dinners.

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*Another possibility is

*This is the only language this government understands. Not a letter to Santa Jeremy Hunt, telling him you have been good this year, and deserve a big Christmas present of massive extra funding.

*Councillors, you are employers, and say that you don't want to make staff suffer. But you are planning to make swathes of hard working staff redundant, in a desperate attempt to balance the books.

*The GMB, Unison, and Unite the Union are rightfully taking steps to defend their members against swingeing job cuts.

* The cost of paying out redundancy money will be a drain on finances, affecting the amount of council tax Somerset residents will have to pay.

*This will have a detrimental effect on the local economy, particularly affecting local businesses, because of unemployed former staff having less money to spend.

*Coupled with the cost of living crisis, all the above will be compounded.

*Austerity damages the economy and doesn't work.

*Successive national governments have often posed the need to make cuts in the same way that households have to economise.

*This is false. Otherwise, families might say let's get rid of the baby, it contributes nothing to the household, and is a drain on family finances.

Question 10b:

*Instead of being on an inevitable collision course with the three staff unions, will you councillors consider other options:

*Such as taking your cue from experienced union officers and workers. They have valuable knowledge of day to day working conditions, regarding the potential detrimental effect of redundancies on performance of their job roles, furthermore the impact this will have on service users as a result of savings/cuts you are planning to make?

After the comment about Marcus Rashford, ending in hot dinners, I wrote:

*Another possibility is for Somerset Council to begin the process of joining together with other cash - strapped councils nationally, to collectively take the government to court for deliberate asset stripping of community resources and infrastructure for an agenda that has nothing to do with building stable communities.

*Councils joining together and crowd funding will help meet the cost of doing this.

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Question 10c:

*At the Health and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee meeting, the portfolio holder Mel Locke stated that hiring consultancy firm Newton Europe would save 10 million pounds over 2 years i.e. by 2026.

*There is no guarantee that this will happen. By the time these savings are possibly made, in the meantime Somerset Council might face near bankruptcy.

*I do not want another penny of mine and other council tax payers to be spent on the consultancy firm Newton Europe.

*This is a duplication of the the portfolio holder and lead director's job that they should be doing.

*If they are unable to fulfill their designated roles, then the research and number crunching could possibly be given to hard working officers in the Democratic Services Team. Not as an addition to their role/s, but solely on this important task.

*They could be assisted by others, such as union officers, members of the public who are willing to do the research, myself, or other people. Get creative.

*The Adult Social Care Transformation Programme, Fit for My Future is a fancy title which smacks of other schemes that have been unsuccessful.

*When the Liberal Democrats led the council in previous years, we in Unison warned them that bringing in IBM to deal with South West 1 would lead to an expensive disaster.

And it did, losing over a million pounds for the authority.

*Nebulous blue sky thinking, with vague generalities that everyone can agree with, does not form a coherent well formed strategy.

*Councillors, will you please reconsider and revisit this expensive decision and stop paying any more money to Newton Europe?

Eva Bryczkowski

Response from the Deputy Leader of Council and Lead Member for Resources and Performance: Cllr Liz Leyshon and Lead Member for Adult Services: Cllr Dean Ruddle

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Colin Nash	<p>Can I please submit the following question and request to speak on behalf of Colin Nash for the above meeting in relation to Paper A – 2024-25 General Fund Revenue Budget and Capital Programme Update:</p> <p>Question 11a The overspend that has triggered this financial crisis is largely as a result of forecast overspend in Adult Social Care. How did senior management and lead councillors, including those in place before the Local Government Reorganisation, not realise this problem was coming?</p> <p>Question 11b How and when did the Council come to realise the problem was so acute and what actions were taken to ensure the identified shortfall is correct, so there is confidence in the figures? Following work to reduce the gap in the budget, as of today what are the current anticipated budget short falls in 2023/24 and 2024/25?</p> <p>COLIN NASH Kind regards, James Ellis</p> <p>Response from the Deputy Leader of Council and Lead Member for Resources and Performance: Cllr Liz Leyshon and Lead Member for Adult Services: Cllr Dean Ruddle</p>
Beth Poole	<p>Can I please submit the following question and request to speak on behalf of Beth Poole for the above meeting in relation to Paper A – 2024-25 General Fund Revenue Budget and Capital Programme Update:</p> <p>Question 12a</p>

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	<p>How many posts remain vacant at this present time within Somerset Council and, given the council is likely to be looking for ‘indications’ for voluntary redundancies from January 2024, what is the scale and the speed of the redundancies envisaged and how many posts over and above the unfilled posts are likely to be affected?</p> <p>Question 12b</p> <p>How will the Council be looking after all staff throughout the redundancy processes, particularly; our younger colleagues, colleagues with families, mature colleagues, many who will have mortgages and financial responsibilities? Crucially, what support will be provided to secure other employment in terms of re-training and developing employment skills, with a focus to obtaining work with new employers?</p> <p>BETH POOLE Kind regards, James Ellis</p> <p>Response from the Deputy Leader of Council and Lead Member for Resources and Performance: Cllr Liz Leyshon and Lead Member for Transformation and HR: Cllr Theo Butt-Philip</p>
<p>Alison Hann</p>	<p>Can I please submit the following question and request to speak on behalf of Alison Hann for the above meeting in relation to Paper A – 2024-25 General Fund Revenue Budget and Capital Programme Update:</p> <p>Question 13a</p> <p>The council has previously been found guilty in the courts of not delivering on its legal obligations, particularly in certain aspects of social care. What is the council doing to ensure that vital, high quality statutory services are delivered in a timely fashion to clients so that similar legal proceedings can be avoided in the future?</p> <p>Question 13b</p>

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	<p>How exactly is the council approaching the significant shortfall in funding with the government? What resources are realistically expected to come from the government to support the most vulnerable in our communities?</p> <p>ALISON HANN Kind regards, James Ellis</p> <p>Response from the Deputy Leader of Council and Lead Member for Resources and Performance: Cllr Liz Leyshon and Lead Member for Adult Services: Cllr Dean Ruddle</p>
<p>Ian Glover</p>	<p>Can I please submit the following question and request to speak on behalf of Ian Glover for the above meeting in relation to Paper A – 2024-25 General Fund Revenue Budget and Capital Programme Update:</p> <p>Question 14a Staff mental health and high stress levels are prevalent in the workplace from the ongoing worry as a result of the LGR process and associated restructures, and now from the threat of further redundancies as a result of the Council’s financial position. What is the council doing to help with this? Is the current offer of online and telephone support from external companies, such as Care First, really the answer?</p> <p>Question 14b What assurances and certainty can be offered to staff at this difficult time?</p> <p>IAN GLOVER Kind regards, James Ellis</p>

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	Response from the Deputy Leader of Council and Lead Member for Resources and Performance: Cllr Liz Leyshon and Lead Member for Transformation and HR: Cllr Theo Butt-Philip
Richard Brown	<p>Can I please submit the following question and request to speak on behalf of Richard Brown for the above meeting in relation to Paper A – 2024-25 General Fund Revenue Budget and Capital Programme Update:</p> <p>Despite the best efforts of staff working in these areas, the Council has reportedly around £43million in uncollected council tax debt, which is nearer to £55m when uncollected business rates are factored in. In a response to staff questions on the 13th of December, The Chief Finance Officer indicated that these figures ‘may not be accurate’.</p> <p>Question 15a What are the accurate figures for unpaid council tax and business rates currently?</p> <p>Question 15b What is the council doing to recover this unpaid money in this period of financial emergency and how many dedicated staff have been allocated to recover outstanding money owed in council tax and business rates?</p> <p>Question 15c What is the target amount set for recovery and within what period will the recovery be completed?</p> <p>RICHARD BROWN Kind regards, James Ellis</p> <p>Response from the Deputy Leader of Council and Lead Member for Resources and Performance: Cllr Liz Leyshon</p>

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Annexe B – Member Questions		
Name of person submitting	Question	Status
<p>Cllr Leigh Redman</p>	<p>Question for Exec member for finance: Reference uncollected Council tax.</p> <p>It has been noted that the coming together of five legacy councils to create Somerset Council has generated a few teething issues.</p> <p>This council recently declared a financial emergency and identified the need to maximise every available resource to secure the future of the council.</p> <p>The council has in presentations & questions indicated a large amount of uncollected council tax inherited from the legacy councils believed to be in the order of £40m.</p> <p>Can the Exec member confirm the figure and advise how the outstanding figure is being chased and or confirmed?</p> <p>Would it be worth formalising a process, that generates formal reporting to the appropriate Scrutiny committee meetings?</p> <p>Would a report be able to cover these points:- The amount of council tax due and uncollected. The age of that council tax by reference to the year it was due. Action taken to recover said uncollected council tax. Ongoing amounts collected. Any amounts proposed to be written off with a reason.</p> <p>This would allow council to be aware and monitor as the list reduces.</p> <p>Thank you and stay safe,</p> <p>Response from the Deputy Leader of Council and Lead Member for Resources and Performance: Cllr Liz Leyshon</p>	

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