

## Annual Council – 22 May 2024 – Public and Member Questions

Annexe A – Public Questions	
Name of person submitting	Question
<b>Sigurd Reimers</b>	<p>In February, Somerset Wildlife Trust published a position statement on the continuing problem of peat extraction#. This practice is responsible for approximately 5% of all human-produced emissions of greenhouse gases globally. Greenhouse gases are largely responsible for the devastating problem of global warming.</p> <p>Following their declaration of a climate and ecological emergency in 2021, Somerset Council and its predecessors have carried out some important work in this area. This is of course particularly important in a county like ours which is almost unique in still permitting the extraction of peat. Somerset (County) Council’s 2016 Mineral Plan, following on its 2013 document <i>Mineral Topics Paper 3: Peat Reserves and Supply</i>, now severely dated, started addressing the problem, but progress has been too slow. Although quality peat-free products have been available for years, the sale of peat continues, often indirectly: amateur gardening accounts for 66% of all sales of peat in this country. It is hoped that Parliament will have debated this issue on 17<sup>th</sup> May (Horticultural Peat (Prohibition of Sale) Bill), including a proposal to ban the sale of peat by the end of 2024.</p> <p><b>Question 1a</b> – What steps is Somerset Council itself taking to bring this dangerous practice to an end?</p> <p><b>Response from Lead Member for Environment and Climate Change, Councillor Dixie Darch</b></p> <p><b>Response from Lead Officer: Executive Director for Climate and Place, Mickey Green and Service Director for Climate, Environment and Sustainability, Kirsty Larkins</b></p>
<b>Full written response to be distributed within 5</b>	<p>We are working with key partners (DEFRA, NE, EA and FWAG) across Somerset to reduce peat extraction, but without changes to legislation and consumer practice it is difficult to completely eradicate. We believe peat extraction and its degradation needs to be tackled in a more holistic working with landowners and rural communities to keep ground wetter for longer, and reduce the demand for peat, and peat products, by offering alternative income generation through green initiatives.</p>

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<b>working days</b>	<p>There are several sites across Somerset that are trialling alternative land management methods to keep peat wetter for longer, whilst balancing this with the need to be able to farm.</p> <p>Somerset peat is recognised nationally as hugely important in reducing CO2 emissions and support biodiversity. The Council will continue to work towards the eradication of peat extraction with partners.</p>
<b>David Redgewell</b>	<p><b>Question 2a</b> what progress is being made on purchase and Redevelopment of Yeovil bus and coach station and shopping centre Developments,</p> <p>In a report to last full council,</p> <p>The Executive member for Planning and Regeation councillor Ros wyke stated the shopping centre and Bus and coach station would be demolition with grant money from the Department for levelling up,</p> <p>As part of this scheme once the council has purchased the shopping centre from the Northern Ireland property Group, company,</p> <p>What plans does the council now have as owners of the shopping centre and Bus and coach station,</p> <p>To keep the waiting room and Toilets facilities open at the bus and coach station Including First Group plc offices and Drivers mess room and supervisor office, bus shelters repairs</p> <p>Keeping the kiosk open for passengers and looking at the future of the cafe</p> <p>It is very important the this Regional bus and coach station that services bus and coach Network across Yeovil and into Somerset and Dorset is kept open</p> <p>For bus network provided by First group plc South buses Division and First group plc Wales and West buses Division, South west coaches group</p> <p>Somerset council own bus company .</p> <p>Berry coaches part of megabus Scottish City link coaches network and Flixbus coaches network to Wincanton bus and coach station, Amebury and London Hammersmith and Taunton from coaches to Exeter, Plymouth Cornwall and North Devon,</p> <p>Rail link bus service to Yeovil pen mill station First group plc Great Western Railway company service to Dorchester west and Weymouth, For Bournemouth and Poole,</p> <p>Castle cary, Bruton Westbury, Frome, Trowbridge, Bradford on Avon, Bath spa, keynsham and Bristol Temple meads,</p> <p>Castle cary for London Paddington, Taunton, Exeter St David Plymouth North Road and Penzance or North Devon, and Torbay,</p>

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Yeovil Junction railway station First group plc MTR South Western Railway company, for Railway services to London Waterloo via Salisbury and services to Crewence, Axminster, Exeter Central and Exeter St Davids ,  
So what is the present proposal for Yeovil bus and coach station and shopping centre under Somerset council ownership,

### **Question 2b,**

With the purchase of Yeovil bus and coach station and Yeovil shopping centre, and the council proposal to demolish the. Shopping centres car park and bus and coach station,

What provision is in place by Somerset council to crate a Temporary bus and coach station, similar to the Temporary bus and coach station at built at Bath spa durring the shopping centre redevelopment that included waiting room facilities, Shelters Temporary public toilets including disabled facilities,

Staff accommodation for Drivers and supervisor and Kiosk/ cafe facilities and information points,

### **Question 2c,**

With regards to the Somerset bus service improvement plan,

What discussion have the Somerset council had with the rest of the county of Somerset on the bus service Network including ,North Somerset council, and the west of England mayoral combined transport Authority and Banes council ,bus services improvement plan, with Devon County Council bus service improvement plan, Wiltshire Council and Swindon bus services improvement plans

But especially with new administration in Dorset and the importance of Yeovil and District bus and coach Network into Dorset with cross boundary bus services CR5 Yeovil bus and coach station to Sherborne Railway station

Sherborne Town centre and Dorchester,

Operated by South west coaches for Dorset Council,

service 58 58 a Yeovil bus and coach station Yeovil pen mill station, Sherborne Town Sherborne Railway station Templecombe

Wincanton bus and coach station,

Operated by First group plc South buses Division for Somerset and Dorset Councils,

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	<p>CR6 Yeovil bus and coach station to Yeovil pen mill, Sherborne Town centre, Sherborne Railway station, strumister Newton, and Blandford Forum,          Operated by First group plc South buses Division for Dorset Council,          Service CR4 Yeovil bus and coach station to crewrence Beaminster and Bridport bus and coach station,          Operated by First group plc South buses Division for Dorset Council,          This along with the importance of bus Depot facilities in Yeovil for maintenance of bus and coaches for Dorset and south Somerset council area by working together to improve the area bus and coach Network through the council bus service improvement plans and Western Gateway Transport Board and Peninsula Transport Board,</p> <p><b>Response from Lead Member for Transport and Digital, Councillor Richard Wilkins</b></p> <p><b>Response from Lead Officer: Service Director for Infrastructure and Transport, Mike O’Dowd-Jones</b></p>
<p><b>Full written response to be distributed within 5 working days</b></p>	<p><b>Response to 2a &amp; 2b:</b></p> <p>The Council is committed to keeping Yeovil Bus Station operational as a vital part of a rejuvenated town centre. We will ensure the bus station remains a key transport hub in the county and are currently involved in commercial discussions with the owner with a view to buying the site. These talks are ongoing and have been for some time as part of Yeovil’s regeneration. Once we have secured ownership of the site, we will eventually look to remove some of the existing ageing buildings with a view to making long term improvements. We are currently considering the detail of the facilities that will be retained for the time being as part of a phased approach to redevelopment and will be discussing this with the bus operators.</p> <p>There will not be a need to create a temporary bus station as we will be keeping an operational facility throughout the forthcoming changes.</p> <p>We are pleased to confirm that we have reached an agreement to keep the waiting room open beyond 31 May with the support of the Somerset Bus Partnership and First Bus South West.</p>

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	<p><b>Response to question 2c:</b></p> <p>As part of the consultation process for the BSIP 2024 review, we have consulted the Bus Advisory Board which includes representatives from neighbouring Local Authorities. Officers have also attended the Enhanced Partnership Forums of these neighbouring authorities where their BSIP reviews were discussed.</p> <p>At this stage, the review contains very high-level ambition and is not a bidding document, as there is no new funding available. We anticipate a further BSIP submission next year, which may require more detailed proposals and we will ensure we discuss this with neighbouring authorities where appropriate.</p>
<b>Rosa Kell</b>	<p><b>Question 3a –</b></p> <p>The bus travelling public of Taunton, are being inconvenienced on a daily basis by the closure of the Bus Station at Castle Way. We are unable to understand how this site can be used for a vintage bus experience when passengers can safely board buses but this site is not available for daily bus travel.</p> <p>I therefore would like to ask the council if it can advise us bus passengers of their target date by which the Taunton Mobility Hub should be open?</p> <p><b>Question 3b</b></p> <p>Can we have confirmation that it will have a waiting room, refreshment area and WCs?</p> <p><b>Question 3c</b></p> <p>Has the DfT set any deadline by which the Taunton Mobility Hub must be open?</p> <p><b>Question 3d</b></p> <p>Is there any risk that further delay could result in the DfT funding for the Taunton Mobility Hub being withdrawn?</p> <p>We have asked other committees for updates and to date no satisfactory response has been received.</p> <p><b>Response from Lead Member for Transport and Digital, Councillor Richard Wilkins</b></p>

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	<p><b>Response from Lead Officer: Service Director for Infrastructure and Transport, Mike O’Dowd-Jones</b></p>
<p><b>Full written response to be distributed within 5 working days</b></p>	<p>3a) The bus station was originally closed due to a commercial decision by the operator ceasing use of the site. It was then bought by the former District Council and Somerset Council is now seeking to improve the site as a mobility hub and open it up to use again using BSIP funds. It was <u>not</u> closed due to safety issues, but we would like to change the layout within the new scheme to minimise reversing manouvres and improve pedestrian movement; so the revised design will have safety benefits. It is considered safe for a heritage bus to pick up from the site as a one-off or occasional trip as per the event that the NHS have organised. The Taunton Mobility Hub is in the development phase, so the details are still emerging as we work through the process. The work is due to be completed during 2025 and is subject to planning permission. The date for opening will be shared once it is known.</p> <p>3b) The aspiration is to include a range of facilities, but the exact details are still subject to design, planning permission and understanding the future affordability.</p> <p>3c) The DfT has not set any deadline regarding the opening of the mobility hub, we update them regularly.</p> <p>3d) There are risks with any infrastructure project, which are managed throughout the life of the project, there is no risk to the funding at this point.</p>
<p><b>Nigel Behan</b></p>	<p><b>Question 4a</b> In a recent summary of a debate on the future of social housing posted on the LGA website <a href="#">Debate on the future of social housing, House of Commons</a> it was noted:</p> <p>A generational step-change in council housebuilding is required to boost housing supply, help families struggling to meet housing costs, and tackle housing waiting lists.</p> <p>And</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Over recent decades, construction of new homes has failed to keep pace with population growth, demographics and socio-demographic change, particularly due to the decline public house building. At the same time, the stock of social homes has significantly reduced as councils have struggled to replace homes lost through Right to Buy. The housing shortage has seen rents and property prices rise significantly faster than incomes, acutely impacting the lowest income and vulnerable</li> </ul>

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families and individuals. Compared to the private rental sector and homes at affordable rent, social homes provide a genuinely affordable alternative and greater security of tenancy. For many people, social housing remains the only feasible option due to the widening gap between Local Housing Allowance (LHA) and market rents.

Councils are determined that all tenants should have the security of a safe and well-maintained home. Councils manage more than 1.6 million homes, carry out millions of repairs each year and invest billions in housing services. The majority of social housing landlords are responsible and provide high quality homes for people to live in, and councils are determined to ensure that poor conditions and repairs are swiftly and satisfactorily addressed.

Moreover:

Funding remains one of the key barriers local authorities face in delivering more social homes. The lifting of the HRA borrowing cap in 2018, which allows local authorities to borrow against expected rental income, has had a positive impact on planned levels of council house building. Councils stand ready to rapidly scale up investment in new builds and the existing housing stock when further funding is made available. However, to meet our ambitions for social housing, there are a range of policy and fiscal interventions that councils need from Government:

And

### **Access to affordable borrowing**

To fund the supply of social housing we have long been calling for councils to have access to lower borrowing rates through the Public Works Loan Board (PWLB). Government announced in the Spring Budget that they will bring forward a new discounted Public Works Loan Board (PWLB) policy margin to support local authorities borrowing for Housing Revenue Accounts and the delivery of social housing, which is positive and will help provide much needed additional support for vital council housebuilding projects.

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What will this Council practically do to increase (significantly) council house building across the former District Council areas In Somerset?

**Question 4b** In [Reforms and resistance: how tenants can influence housing policy](#) it was stated:

“Yet, after many years of relatively little activity there has been a noticeable growth in grassroots resistance on housing issues. Much of the academic work on housing does not portray tenants as active agents who can influence or even change their living conditions. The analysis tends to focus on the nature, history and potential impact of particular policies and processes in housing. But historically, grassroots campaigning has had a significant influence on the nature of housing at both local and national levels. Furthermore in the current environment housing campaigns are being sparked by the failing policies of successive governments.

An example of this reform-resistance dynamic is the campaigning, over the past two decades, by [Defend Council Housing](#) (DCH). DCH was formed when campaigners who had been opposing the emerging large-scale voluntary stock transfers of council housing to housing associations, recognised the need to fight at both the estate (local) level and the national government level. Over the intervening period, DCH has had a greater impact than is often recognised, supporting tenants to secure anti-transfer (privatisation) votes in approximately a quarter of all proposals in England. These votes resulted in very real benefits with council tenants retaining their accountable, secure tenancies. At a national level, the early DCH successes forced the New Labour government to develop an alternative policy of [Arm’s Length Management Organisations](#).

There were campaigns in Somerset to retain the council housing stock successful in Taunton Deane (and almost in South Somerset) where council tenants were actively involved in “retaining their accountable, secure tenancies.”

How does this council intend to involve service users, citizens, residents, electors (and council tenants) meaningfully in moving “.....towards a housing system that is based on the need for secure, decent shelter – not the priorities of finance or the market”?

**Response from Lead Member for Communities, Housing and Culture, Councillor Federica Smith-Roberts**



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	<p><b>Response from Lead Officer: Executive Director for Community Services, Chris Hall and Service Director for Housing, Chris Brown</b></p>
<p><b>Full written response to be distributed within 5 working days</b></p>	<p><b>4a –</b></p> <p>The council share concerns on the shortage of affordable housing nationally and in the county. Over the past seven years compared to the previous seven years, the number of properties let by housing associations and the council through the Homefinder Countywide choice-based allocation system has decreased by over 752 homes per annum. This is from c 2,898 units per year 2010-2016 to c2146 between 2017-2023 yet demand for affordable housing has increased significantly both on homefinder and through direct approaches to the housing options service. There are a constant c10,000 households seeking affordable homes in the county yet insufficient private rented accommodation and social housing through housing associations and the council. The dual pressure of fewer affordable homes available to let and increasing demand is both a national, regional, and local challenge and I would agree that this is a housing crisis.</p> <p>The environment for housebuilding in Somerset, particularly affordable houses, is challenging as build costs have risen at an even steeper rate than many other costs. Affordable home coming through the planning process are being squeezed or reduced as viability assessments as well as competing s106 contributions for areas such as education and highways must be considered alongside affordable homes. We have seen new climate change and ecology requirements introduced through the planning system which has stalled many developments and/or reduced the viability of schemes further squeezing the numbers of s106 affordable homes able to be achieved through the planning system.</p> <p>The demand for private rented homes is so great in the county that there are very few landlords advertising homes within the Local Housing Allowance level. The local housing allowance sets a ceiling for subsidy towards private rented sector tenants accommodation costs. The inability of households to secure affordable accommodation in the private rented sector is contributing to the increased number of households on the Homefinder system and those looking for affordable housing with the council or housing associations.</p>

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There are many registered providers (RP) and smaller organisations including community land trusts working hard throughout the county to try and building their own schemes or purchasing the s106 affordable units from developers. The council work with many of these developers through the planning process and through our Housing Enabling Team. Our aim is to support these organisations delivery not only new affordable units but also the size and type of homes people require in the county.

As a landlord the Council does not have many homes in the South, East and most Westerly parts of the County as stock was transferred to registered providers a number of years ago increasing the importance of good partnerships with housing landlords to manage affordable home provision. Timely support to help Registered Providers helps deliver general need and specialist housing, low-cost home ownership opportunities as well as homes for rented at affordable rents. This is something the Council is committed to do.

The Council housing stock of 9700 homes are mainly in the West and North of the county although the council as landlord is stretching to other parts of the county on a small scale. Fifty-Four new build Net Zero affordable homes are about to complete in Minehead this summer and the council has been able to purchase homes in Yeovil and Martock over the past year. The Housing Revenue Account of the council is the ring-fenced account which is used to fund the landlord service and new council homes. The housing revenue accounts income is primarily from tenants' rents however the council can use a share of the Right to Buy sales receipts and other grants to reduce the costs of new build and acquisitions to the Councils landlord service. Over the past three years we have seen this proportion of Right to Buy Receipt we are able to use for acquisitions and new build homes increasing from 30%-50% which is helpful. However, the landlord service is not unfettered in its ability to grow its stock as the Housing Revenue Account must have sufficient funds in its business plan to cover the costs of its services and any borrowing for new homes. The Council as landlord has many responsibilities with keeping tenants safe in their homes at the top of the list. Other key aspects of our service include keeping homes in a good state of repair, achieve the decent homes standard and the statutory milestone requirements to achieve net zero (at an affordable cost to the tenant). The landlord is subject to increasing legislation including the new consumer standards and regulatory framework which rightly means the council as landlord must seek to deliver a quality service to tenants in a way tenants as a whole value.

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There is therefore a priority when setting the business plan to ensure the landlord first considers its need to provide quality services in safe, decent homes and increasingly energy efficient homes. These pressures equally apply to Registered Providers, and we have seen a national trend in social landlords reducing their development programmes in order to concentrate on core services and achieving energy efficiency standards.

Due to the one-off subsidy 2023/2024 was a good year for new council homes with 100 new homes and exceptionally low number of homes lost (17) the council increased its new homes by 83. On average the housing revenue account predicts to lose c50 homes through the Right to Buy and some homes are lost through regeneration work. The Housing Revenue Account business plan has 448 new build homes in its approved programme over the next 5 years, but we can see that this represents a small net gain when we consider the Right to Buy and regeneration losses. We recognise these number will not be sufficient to meet demand and we need to fund as many opportunities to work with other providers to maximise affordable housing in the county and encourage greater funding for building new affordable homes. The ability to develop and acquire more council homes is dependent on sufficient headroom in the Housing Revenue Account business plan or one-off subsidies which the council can bid for from time to time. An example of a one-off subsidy would be the Local Authority Housing Fund which has seen 31 homes acquired by the Council in 2023/2024 with a bid for an additional 33 more homes submitted to government for delivery 2024/2026. The council's landlord service like all developers is subject to the material and labour inflation experienced by all developers when building homes plus the same need to address climate change and ecological requirements.

### **4b -**

The landlord service is the more advanced in involving tenants (service users) in the monitoring of services and influencing the policies and priorities of the service. Council homes whether they are managed in the North by Homes in Sedgemoor or in the West by the In-house Council service are working with tenants engaged in operational matters such as landlord safety and compliance, standard of properties, energy efficiency, communication and also have bodies of tenants at the strategic level considering policy and performance. Members of our Tenants Strategic Group has just completed their three year term and over

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	<p>thirty tenants have applied to be selected (by other tenants). We would like to thank all those tenants who give up their time to ensure oversight and influence of the in house and Homes in Sedgemoor services.</p> <p>The government has introduced greater regulation for all registered providers including council landlords based around a number of consumer standards. The consumer standards set out clear expectations for social landlords to involve customers with decision making as well as set out expectations of service in relation to safety, decency, engagement, managing and learning from complaints, understanding of tenants needs, governance and a lot more. These consumer standards help landlords including the council maintain a focus on the customer experience and collect customer satisfaction through a standard approach using ‘Tenant Satisfaction Measures’. The government have accompanied the consumer standards with a new regulatory regime which will complement other external oversight of social landlords such as the housing ombudsman. The council looks forward to engaging with tenants and other stakeholders on options for the housing service to reflect Somerset Council as a landlord of nearly 10,000 homes.</p> <p>The Council’s housing options (homeless service), Displaced Persons service, and its adaptations service carry out surveys and collect customer feedback to improve service. The enabling service work with groups delivering or aspiring to deliver community led housing as well as larger social landlords, who in turn are influenced by their tenants and or their members. The council will continue to seek ways to work with customers receiving our service and members of the public and partners who would like to influence our services.</p>
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Annexe B – Member Questions	
Name of person submitting	Question

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<p><b>Cllr Leigh Redman</b></p>	<p>Debate not hate update.</p> <p>I would like to ask a question of the CEO and Leader of council.</p> <p>A year or so ago this council supported my motion unanimously, Debate not Hate is too me an important part of my political role, as leader of a small group on a big council being able to compromise and work cross party is essential in order to get things done for the people I represent and everyone in Somerset. My heart was filled with joy when this LGA promoted issue was agreed unanimously.</p> <p>When I put the motion, I made reference to an aspiration that the motion would be council wide, looking inward and out, I have to admit that after the last 2 full council meetings, I was not assured that all members were on board with the heart of the motion, I was shocked to see members leaning across their tables to shout across the floor on more than one occasion. Not a good impression for anyone looking in.</p> <p><b>Question 1a</b></p> <p>Can council have an update on steps taken and actions implemented following the motion please?</p> <p>Thank you and Stay safe,</p> <p><b>Response from the Leader of the Council, Councillor Bill Revans</b></p> <p><b>Response from Lead Officer: Chief Executive, Duncan Sharkey</b></p>
<p><b>Full written response to be distributed within 5 working days</b></p>	<p>Thank you Councillor Redman for your question and for bring the Debate not Hate motion forward in the first instance.</p> <p>A number of activities have been undertaken in the last year to support developing the aspirations of the Motion.</p> <p>Communications – The Council publicised its commitment to Debate Not Hate with a press release and photos following the passing of the motion in March 2023. This was also shared on social media channels, with more than 9,000 views and 500 engagements. Then in June a statement signed by all party leaders was promoted proactively and again shared on social media with a further 4,000 views and 1,000 engagements.</p>

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Democratic Services – The motion that Cllr Redman proposed was agreed by Somerset County Council at its meeting on 1 March 2023 in readiness for the new Somerset Council. The full motion can be viewed on the Council’s website in the minutes of that meeting. In support of the motion, in partnership with Health & Safety Team, during 2023/24 we developed and issued a Personal Safety Handbook for elected members.

Monitoring Officer/Code of Conduct – *Signposting Members to the LGA resources regarding Civility in Public Life. Assisting Members with responding to difficult and challenging customers. Advising Members on the opportunity for any of their interests to be considered sensitive and thereby withheld from publication, sharing associated correspondence from the minister of Local Government. Making contact with and signposting members to the recently appointed Police SPOC.*

Group Leaders – *we have ongoing discussions where issues arise, particularly if between members, consideration of critical issues and overall changes to the way people engage with Councillors and those who disagree with them.*

Councillor Redman specifically mentioned behaviour in Council meetings. Cllr Best as Chair of Council has been clear with members that he wants meetings to be run efficiently and appropriately in a way that allows robust debate but ensures that all councillors can express their views, if they wish. How the motion was ‘Debate not Hate’ and we want to see high quality debates in Council – it’s not about everyone agreeing with each other.

Some of the issues - I know Councillor Best is actively discussing with Officers how to advance these issues – would appear to be:

- Do Members understand the difference between debate and conversation. Council meetings aren’t conversations, you express your views, informed by the Officer advice, listen to other Councillors opinion and vote to determine the Council’s position.
- All remarks in meetings should addressed to the Chair, that is who members are talking to, not each other.

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- During motions Members shouldn't be using speeches for fact finding. The evidence the debate is based on should be in the papers and any other information should be sought in advance.
- Members in a debate should be respectfully listening to each others views and expressing their own. The way to disagree with a view is to express your own view and vote accordingly. It is not necessary or required to 'argue' against others points as might be necessary in other fora as we have a voting mechanism to determine the outcome.
- The flow of debate should be Proposer to explain the recommendations, seconder (who may reserve their right to speak), Members who wish to express a view, Seconder (if they reserved their rights and haven't already spoken) and then the Proposer to sum up the debate. Obviously, amendments and points of order can interrupt this flow, but Members should expect to speak once and once only and should not expect people to answer the questions they pose in the debate – they should be taken as rhetorical or dealt with before the meeting.

None of this should stop members expressing their views and contributing but that shouldn't be done in ways that stop other members enjoying the same rights.

The Chair of Council plans to write to all members in the near future about the expected standards for behaviour at meetings.