

Executive Committee – 4 November 2024 – Public and Member Questions

Annexe A – Public and Member Questions	
Name of person submitting	Question
Cllr Caroline Ellis	<p>At the time of writing 1,584 residents have signed a petition demanding that Somerset Council retain the Mary St/High St car park as a car park, rather than sell it to a developer for housing. They are deeply concerned at the social and economic impact of the potential loss of this car park – on the viability of key arts and social venues and businesses in the vicinity, on places of worship, attendance at vital community events, and on older and disabled people’s access to vital services and amenities in the area. They would like the Council to come to a fuller understanding and appreciation of the role this car park - which is the only one in the area with evening parking - plays in the community, the myriad social and community services in the vicinity whose service users rely upon it and the impact on women and disabled people of removing a safe and accessible night time parking option. People will not simply say ‘oh well, let’s park further away’ – many will literally not be able to; instead they will stay at home, lose access to friends and activities, feel isolated and businesses will lose vital custom. To date I note that no mitigation has been proposed to address the loss of 12 disabled parking bays or the complete lack of parking in this key area after 7pm. I would like to ask the Executive the following questions:-</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Do they not agree that the grave concerns expressed and the large degree of public concern over this now merits a pause to conduct <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. an equality impact assessment on this proposed asset disposal b. a wider socio-economic impact assessment on the proposed asset disposal, taking into account the impact on vital community services in the vicinity including services, venues/cultural and social amenities as well as high street and other neighbouring businesses and to engage properly with local residents, businesses and community groups whose lived experiences, needs and circumstances are so relevant to taking good decisions? 2. Have they considered alternatives to selling the land to a developer for housing which would nonetheless provide a route to helping to close the budget gap? Such alternatives could include potential disposal to the Town Council to continue to run as a public car park (they would need to be provided with details of likely maintenance costs and revenue, carry out a condition survey and all other aspects of due diligence in order to consider this) or retaining the car park lower storey(s) and building housing above (this could secure at least some accessible parking including at night time whilst offering the prospect of securing further income towards balancing the budget.)

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	<p>3. Have they considered whether there is any viable mitigation possible within current budgetary constraints – for example opening Orchard Car Park in the evenings (not just for one off events – the need for evening parking is a DAILY need), improving its safety and creating further on-street disabled parking spaces close by and various other measures?</p> <p>4. Can we be assured that early, transparent and meaningful engagement and consultation with stakeholders will become the norm before decisions on specific asset disposals come forward in the future so that we can fully understand and assess all the implications and avoid unintended consequences that could impact negatively on our communities and economy?</p>
Full written response	<p>High Street Car Park, also known as Mary Street Car Park is a two multi-storey carpark located next to the Orchard multi-storey carpark in Taunton. This car park was considered by the Executive meeting on 5th of August and approved for disposal as surplus.</p> <p>Asset Management Group (AMG) considered the disposal of High Street Car Park in December 2023. AMG were advised that a valuation had been sought some time ago which confirmed that the site would be attractive to the market for a potential housing development and should be sold after pre-application advice was obtained.</p> <p>The car park was brought back to AMG in March 2024 for further consideration prior to a formal decision. It was noted that there is surplus capacity at other town centre car parks, so no significant reduction in income was anticipated if this car park was to close.</p> <p>The recommendation is to market as an unconditional sale which could achieve in the region of £600,000, with a positive pre-app the receipt could be over £1m. AMG agreed with the recommendation to declare the site surplus and proceed with the recommended sales strategy. AMG also discussed the proximity of the Crescent Car Park and significant funding had been invested in the recent improvements by SWT/SC Councils.</p> <p>Somerset Council is committed to a rationalisation of its property and land portfolio, reducing holding and management costs and achieving capital receipts and reduced revenue costs, following the ongoing review of surplus assets. The Council's response to the financial emergency has been to establish a financial strategy that embeds a sales target for surplus assets.</p> <p>The High Street Car Park was one of 22 non-operational buildings and small parcels of land which hold development potential that could generate significant receipts. AMG provided a steer that these disposals should be brought forward to Scrutiny prior to the Executive so there was full transparency on the range of assets identified as surplus.</p>

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Local Members were informed by email that this car park would be considered by the Scrutiny Corporate and Resources, and again on 26th of July that it would be discussed at the Executive meeting on 5th of August. Taunton Town Council was also notified of the proposals before both the Scrutiny and Executive meetings.

The Executive report stated: -

This small multi storey car park is located within the centre of Taunton, has been put forward for release by Parking Services as they have identified that capacity can be met in the Council's owned Orchard Street multi storey, which lies adjacent.

The asset suffers from anti-social behaviour issues and requires ongoing management and investment in maintenance.

It is considered that the site has residential development potential, and a Planning pre-application is being undertaken for residential use.

Based on the advice of the Equalities Team, Equality Impact Assessments were not required for the disposal of the original list of 22 commercial sites of which the High Street Car Park formed part.

Following the Executive, a formal pre-application was submitted in September 2024, for a mix of housing and apartments. The site will then be marketed with agents in accordance with the pre-application recommendations.

The High Street Car Park has a long history of reports relating to anti-social behaviour, primarily excessive vehicle noise as the car park is a meeting place for “racers.” There are also regular reports of individuals causing a disturbance associated with rough sleeping. Regular dialogue has been ongoing with the Police and Platinum Skies, the retirement development overlooking the car park. Requests had been made for the car park to be closed to reduce the anti-social behaviour. This is not possible due to the covenant in place to the owner/occupier of Mendip House who refused to accept any impediment to their access. On the basis that this asset has been declared surplus there is no current capital or revenue budget set aside for improvement, repairs or maintenance.

There has been a recent fire incident in the High Street car park. The car park would require significant capital investment to make the car park a safer and a more inviting space for the public.

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Recently, it has been highlighted that the people who attend The Lawns Social Club and the Creative Innovation Centre use the car park, in particular in the evenings and at weekends but other parking provisions are available.

The Orchard Car Park is owned by the Council however the upper floors extend over the Orchard Shopping Centre and those areas are subject to a lease. The lease is for 80 years commencing in 1983 and, as tenant, the Council has a requirement to keep the entire car park open to service the shopping centre. The structure of the car park was surveyed in 2021 and 2023 and deemed to be structurally sound, albeit circa £80,000 of remedial works were undertaken at the time. Notwithstanding a car park of this age and construction does require ongoing maintenance. The works proposed will, in the main, address the concrete degradation to the exposed floors and water ingress. As part of the annual maintenance programme a scoping document is being prepared which will be issued to a specialist contractor and with a budget sum that is yet to be determined.

The Orchard Car Park (also known as the Paul Street car park) is closed in the evening for the same reasons as the High Street upper floors car park to prevent anti-social behaviour and rough sleeping. Unlike High Street car park the Orchard Car Park is served by a number of lifts providing a greater level of accessibility.

Where there is specific event in Vivary Park or other major events in the town there is an option for the Orchard Car Park to remain open later in the evenings and also the option remains to use the Car Park in response to specific demands.

The Orchard multi-storey car park has a capacity of 553 standard bays and 37 disabled bays. The parking contractor NSL advises that there is capacity in the Orchard Car Park typically on Mondays to Fridays from levels upwards from 3A, including 4A, 5 and 5A. On Saturdays, there is generally capacity from level 4A upwards.

As with most of the towns multi-level car parking facilities, both High Street and Orchard Street Car Parks are dated and require funds to maintain them to an acceptable standard. Given the extra capacity at Orchard Street and the requirement to keep it open the decision to close High Street allows for investment to be focused on one site rather than two. There would be value in a separate review of options for the future of the High Street Car Park, this review should consider the impacts and opportunities for the privately owned Orchard Shopping centre and the Council owned and operated Library.

Whilst the decision to dispose was focused on the service declaring the asset as surplus, the ability to support a housing need should also be recognised.

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Since the Council decision, concerns have been raised in regard to accessibility and suitability of alternative parking facilities with much attention on High Street Car Park. Appended to this briefing is a location plan that identifies the alternative off road parking facilities in central Taunton, a number of these won't be a suitable distance for all users but there will continue to be accessible parking at the nearby Fons George, Ash Meadows, Crescent and Shire Hall.

On 18th October, the Asset Management Group revisited the High Street Car Park, although the car park had been declared surplus by the service, the future options for the site are contingent on a favourable pre-application outcome.