

Special Full Council – 12 February 2025 – Public and Member Questions

Annexe A – Public Questions	
Name of person submitting	Question
<p>Neil Guild and Micheál Duffy</p>	<p>Union Submission</p> <p>UNISON have repeatedly raised concerns with Somerset Council through the Joint Consultative Forum about the lack of detail within the consultation documentation. We have outlined concerns that there has been no costed business case outlining how functions of Somerset Council will continue post restructure. Key projects required for the delivery of the proposed restructure including transformation, IT and AI solutions have not been developed or costed in a business case for this transformation programme. Our members are concerned that services will suffer as there is no capacity to take on work of colleagues who are made redundant and a robust transformation programme has not been implemented. We would like to recognise that the external audit published at the Audit Committee on the 30th January 2025 raised similar concerns.</p> <p>While recognising the need for urgency, the implementation of the staff restructure before a costed transformation programme has been developed presents a significant risk. This risk is namely that the reductions and the new structures being developed without this robust planning could adversely impact on the Council’s capacity to deliver vital services to the people of Somerset.</p> <p>UNISON recognise that the Council must create a comprehensive and sustainable plan for the future. However, UNISON has raised repeated concerns about the lack of a detailed, costed business case and the inadequacy of detail on the projects required to implement these changes.</p> <p>Question 1a – How does the Council intend to address this issue to ensure that vital services are not compromised when the new structure is implemented early in the next financial year?</p> <p>Response from the Lead Member for Transformation, Human Resources and Localities, Councillor Theo Butt Philip</p>
<p>Full written response</p>	<p>Thank you for your question. Joint Consultation Meetings have been held fortnightly throughout the duration of the Council Restructure Programme. All requests from recognised Trade Unions have been responded to verbally at the meetings, and where written questions have been submitted, full written responses have been provided. This question repeats similar questions raised recently at Scrutiny (Corporate and Resources) and Audit Committee, and responses have been provided.</p>

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A Workforce Programme Risk Register and Service Impact Assessments have captured all risks identified by the Programme Team and raised by Stakeholders. When new organisational structures go live on 1st April 2025, work will be prioritised, and resources allocated accordingly. Local Government Reorganisation, bringing five Councils into one in Somerset in April 2023, was intended to reduce revenue costs associated with management overlap and duplication. The restructure and new organisational designs were not based on digital transformation and AI, although some improvements have been made this year to improve productivity, with the introduction of Microsoft Copilot. Transformation will follow in the next three years and will continue to drive organisational improvement.

Staffing levels have been reduced by decreasing the number of layers of management from the top to the front-line and increasing spans of control to more suitable levels (for example, removing one manager to one employee reporting lines). Reducing the cost of the paybill by reducing inefficient and duplicated organisational structures was always an aim of the LGR business case; however, due to the financial emergency, this work has been accelerated, including full and meaningful consultation with Unions and staff.

Service Impact Assessments have been undertaken, details of which, along with the proposed mitigating actions, are included in the papers for this meeting. These impacts have been identified by the relevant directors for each service and have been reviewed by both Scrutiny and Executive. We accept that there will be challenges in implementing the changes required to work with a reduced workforce and agree that there will be a level of investment required in our systems to support this change. The transition required in working with a reduced workforce is being planned for and worked through with Directors and their teams. There will need to be some changes to services, as identified in the report, and we will closely monitor the impact of these changes and adapt our mitigating actions as required.

It is clear that the activity of the last year, in readiness for the forthcoming financial year, has been about improvement and change and LGR, and less about true transformation of how we can deliver services in the future. A Transformation and Improvement Business Plan will be developed for future years, based on data, evidence and a robust business case to demonstrate a return on investment.

The Council has given serious consideration to the External Auditor's report and has provided a management response. In 2024/25 we accelerated the Somerset Council Improvement and Transformation Programme to deliver £34m of workforce savings compared to the target of £12m as outlined in the original Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) business case. This reduction in General Fund has been made in advance of the 2025/26 financial year to help close the budget gap which was originally forecast in excess of £100m. The pressures on our Council budget are severe, with demand for social care services far

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	<p>in excess of income levels, so in addition to action taken in line with the Medium-Term Financial Strategy the Council has needed to request Exceptional Financial Support from Government for 24/25 and 25/26. This is a national problem affecting all Local Authorities and not a reflection of our plans. Without taking this action in 24/25 the S151 Officer may have needed to issue a Section 114 notice and more draconian measures, including stopping services, would be a consequence.</p>
Nigel Behan	<p>I am speaking about Item 4 Workforce Restructure - Head of Paid Service Section 4 Report.pdf and Item 6 Somerset Council External Auditors Annual Report 2023-24.pdf (including Appendix 1 report to the Audit Committee 30 January 2025.pdf and Appendix 2 Local Government Auditor's Annual Report 2023/24)</p> <p>We highlighted at the Audit Committee some of the concerns raised by Grant Thornton (External Auditors): The annual audit report from Grant Thornton raises concerns that Trade Unions have been raising for some months but without satisfactory answers to maintain the confidence and trust of our members. Their critical reports states that: <i>"the Council is delivering the workforce reduction programme before the development of the detailed transformation programme business case and before key enabler projects, relating to ICT, data and process improvement, have been implemented"</i>. <i>"the implementation of the staff reduction programme presents a significant risk that reductions in staff will impact on the Council's capacity to deliver services before they are effectively transformed"</i></p> <p>And</p> <p>Grant Thornton made a key recommendation that <i>"the Council should mitigate the risk of implementing the organisational restructure before the development of the wider transformation business case"</i></p> <p>These concerns are before you today within Item 6 and the appendices.</p> <p>In Item 4 you are being recommended to 1 "Endorse the proposed organisational structure as set out in this report and its appendices, ahead of the decision by the Head of Paid Service." And 2 "Note that where any proposed changes to service delivery as a result of the organisation structure proposals will impact on existing approved service standards, Executive have delegated authority to the relevant Service Director to revise the service standards and also complete a review of any impacted plans and policies"</p> <p>Question 3a – Does the council feel (believe) that significant attention has been given to the external auditor's critical comments and that changes to service delivery should have been planned prior to a rushed job cull?</p>

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	Response from the Lead Member for Transformation, Human Resources and Localities, Councillor Theo Butt Philip
Full written response	<p>Thank you for your questions.</p> <p>Joint Consultation Meetings have been held fortnightly throughout the duration of the Council Restructure Programme. All requests from recognised Trade Unions have been responded to verbally at the meetings, and where written questions have been submitted, full written responses have been provided. This question repeats similar questions raised recently at Scrutiny (Corporate and Resources) and Audit Committee, and responses have been provided.</p> <p>A Workforce Programme Risk Register and Service Impact Assessments have captured all risks identified by the Programme Team and raised by Stakeholders. When new organisational structures go live on 1st April 2025, work will be prioritised, and resources allocated accordingly. Local Government Reorganisation, bringing five Councils into one in Somerset in April 2023, was intended to reduce revenue costs associated with management overlap and duplication. The restructure and new organisational designs were not based on digital transformation and AI, although some improvements have been made this year to improve productivity, with the introduction of Microsoft Copilot. Transformation will follow in the next three years and will continue to drive organisational improvement.</p> <p>Staffing levels have been reduced by decreasing the number of layers of management from the top to the front-line and increasing spans of control to more suitable levels (for example, removing one manager to one employee reporting lines). Reducing the cost of the paybill by reducing inefficient and duplicated organisational structures was always an aim of the LGR business case; however, due to the financial emergency, this work has been accelerated, including full and meaningful consultation with Unions and staff.</p> <p>Service Impact Assessments have been undertaken, details of which, along with the proposed mitigating actions, are included in the papers for this meeting. These impacts have been identified by the relevant directors for each service and have been reviewed by both Scrutiny and Executive. We accept that there will be challenges in implementing the changes required to work with a reduced workforce and agree that there will be a level of investment required in our systems to support this change. The transition required in working with a reduced workforce is being planned for and worked through with Directors and their teams. There will need to be some changes to services, as identified in the report, and we will closely monitor the impact of these changes and adapt our mitigating actions as required.</p>

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	<p>It is clear that the activity of the last year, in readiness for the forthcoming financial year, has been about improvement and change and LGR, and less about organisational-wide transformation of how we will need to deliver services in the future. A Transformation and Improvement Business Plan will be developed for future years, based on data, evidence and a robust business case to demonstrate a return on investment.</p> <p>The Council has given serious consideration to the External Auditor’s report and has provided a management response. In 2024/25 we accelerated the Somerset Council Improvement and Transformation Programme to deliver £34m of workforce savings compared to the target of £12m as outlined in the original Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) business case. This reduction in General Fund has been made in advance of the 2025/26 financial year to help close the budget gap which was originally forecast in excess of £100m. The pressures on our Council budget are severe, with demand for social care services far in excess of income levels, so in addition to action taken in line with the Medium-Term Financial Strategy the Council has needed to request Exceptional Financial Support from Government for 24/25 and 25/26. This is a national problem affecting all Local Authorities and not a reflection of our plans. Without taking this action in 24/25 the S151 Officer may have issued a Section 114 notice and more draconian measures, including stopping services, would be a consequence.</p>
David Orr	<p>A reminder that you were elected in 2022 and have had one year to plan and nearly two years to implement the rationalisation savings from 5 councils into 1. For those Councillors who think this ask is Day 1, then a reminder it is Day 689. The financial emergency was declared 18 months in from you being elected in 2022.</p> <p>The key business-as-usual rationalisation savings on Day 689 have attracted a trenchant criticism in two Red cards from the government-appointed auditor, for activities that need to be in place in just 7 weeks time, when the 2025/26 year begins.:</p> <p><i>“The Council should develop the overarching transformation business case and detailed business cases for individual workstreams that will deliver service transformation and contribute to delivering the Council's ambitious savings targets. The funding required to deliver transformation, and the new target operating model, should be identified and a funding plan developed. This should be undertaken at pace in order to deliver the savings required to balance the 2025/26 budget.”</i></p> <p>This Council’s response to this unusual statutory recommendation from the government-appointed auditor is a veritable “word salad”, with no explanation as to how, on Day 689, key plans and an operating model appear to be absent or incomplete.</p>

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	<p>Actual implementation and delivery are lagging well behind any commercial timetable, with a plethora of aspirational “management-speak” reports.</p> <p>The government-appointed auditors Grant Thornton last week raised yet another Red flag about the vital 'transformation' work:</p> <p><i>"The Council is delivering the workforce reduction programme before the development of the detailed transformation programme business case and before key enabler projects, relating to ICT, data and process improvement, have been implemented"</i></p> <p><i>"The implementation of the staff reduction programme before the transformation programme has been developed presents a risk that reductions in staff will impact on the Council's capacity to deliver services".</i></p> <p>Without a full staffing plan identifying the skills requirements, based on a detailed service plan, it is difficult to see how the new organisation could be efficient and cost effective</p> <p>Councillors know all about failed transformation programmes. They have been a source of chaos and concern at Somerset County Council with Southwest One and then at both Taunton Deane and South Somerset District Councils with Ignite.</p> <p>Question 2a - Will we in the coming year see yet another failed transformation programme at this new unitary council? Sadly, and now unavoidably, I think we will.....</p> <p>Response from the Lead Member for Transformation, Human Resources and Localities, Councillor Theo Butt Philip</p>
Full written response	<p>Thank you for your question. In 2024/25 we revised the Somerset Council Improvement and Transformation Programme to deliver £34m of workforce savings compared to the target of £12m as outlined in the original Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) business case. We disagree about your statement of a future failed transformation programme. The pressures on our Council budget are severe, with demand for social care services far in excess of income levels, so in addition to action taken in line with the Medium-Term Financial Strategy the Council has needed to request Exceptional Financial Support from Government for 24/25 and 25/26. This is a national problem affecting all Local Authorities and not a reflection of our transformation plans.</p>

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	<p>Service Impact Assessments have been conducted, and the proposed mitigating actions are included in the meeting papers. These impacts, identified by service directors and reviewed by Scrutiny and Executive, acknowledge the challenges of working with a reduced workforce. Investment in systems will be required to support this change. The transition is being planned with Directors and their teams, and service changes will be monitored and adapted as needed.</p> <p>It is clear that the activity of the last year, in readiness for the forthcoming financial year, has been about improvement and change and LGR, and less about organisational-wide transformation of how we will need to deliver services in the future. A Transformation and Improvement Business Plan will be developed for future years, based on data, evidence and a robust business case to demonstrate a return on investment.</p> <p>We have given serious consideration to the External Auditor’s report and have provided a management response.</p>
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Annexe B – Member Questions	
Name of person submitting	Question
<p>Cllr Diogo Rodrigues</p>	<p>Question 1a - "What support is Somerset Council considering to assist businesses across Bridgwater that have experienced reduced footfall and loss of trade due to the cumulative impact of multiple roadworks occurring simultaneously?"</p> <p>Questions 1b - "Current road configuration prevents buses from using the designated bus stop at Bridgwater Train Station. Given the importance of linking bus and rail services to improve transport options, when will Somerset Council carry out the necessary works to enable buses to stop at the train station?"</p> <p>Response from Lead Member for Economic Development, Planning and Assets, Councillor Mike Rigby (Q1a) and Lead Member for Transport and Waste Services, Councillor Richard Wilkins (Q1b)</p>

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Full written response	<p>(Q1a) For businesses affected by roadworks in connection with the Celebration Mile project, potential options including temporary business rate relief and waiving of pavement licences are being considered. The project contains provisions for some marketing support once the project has been completed</p> <p>The wider works in the highway around Bridgwater are part of various organisations' programmes including utility companies, private developers and the Council to invest in essential infrastructure for the town. Once we became aware of the huge amount of work necessary in such a short period, we worked with those organisations on a program of dovetailing works as best as possible. We have challenged all the contractors, which has in many cases, resulted in better traffic management than was initially proposed, and insisted on 24hr working on some works so reducing overall work programmes, such as the recent development related works on the A39 Bath Road and A30 Puriton Hill. The aim of much of this investment is to regenerate and improve the economy in Bridgwater and will have long-lasting benefits to business once completed.</p> <p>Utilities have statutory rights to provide service such as a new water or gas supply, and can pursue roadworks without prior consultation due to safety reasons for instance gas leak or electricity outage. If and when this does occur we move fast to see what mitigations we can put into place.</p> <p>Unfortunately we are not able to provide compensation to businesses during the construction of this wide-ranging programme of improvements. Successive governments have taken the view that businesses should not have the right in law to any given level of passing trade, and that traders must take the risk of loss due to a temporary disruption of traffic flows along with all the other risks of running a business.</p> <p>(Q1b) The council is very aware of the issue with the bus stop at Bridgwater Railway Station and keen to resolve the situation. The existing stop is on land owned by Network Rail and leased to Great Western Railway (GWR) under their franchising agreement. The Lead Member for Transport and Waste and council officers met with GWR representatives in the autumn to understand the options for making improvements to the bus access. Council officers have also met with representatives from Bridgwater Town Council about the matter. The council has agreed to facilitate work to develop proposals for an improvement and seek funding to support its delivery. However, constructing the improvements on railway property is complex due to the franchising arrangements and further work will be needed with GWR to understand the most appropriate route for delivery once a solution is agreed.</p>
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<p>Cllr John Hunt</p>	<p>Question 2a – The proposed disposal of the Mary Street/High Street Car Park in Taunton.</p> <p>Back in September last year I highlighted the amount of public concern over the loss of this vital facility, supporting the calls of residents and businesses asking for the Mary Street/High Street Car Park to be withdrawn from sale by Somerset Council. It became clear that the council were not going to budge, so I went along to November’s meeting of Taunton Town Council to ask them for their support. Following their own agenda item on the subject, it was pleasing to see that they were going to write to Somerset Council asking for this Car Park to be retained.</p> <p>In January, I also attended the Town Council’s meeting to find they had not yet received a reply to their letter. They wrote again and have now received a reply, basically saying little more and certainly not giving much hope of a change of heart from Somerset Council.</p> <p>At last week’s Somerset Council Executive meeting, I was pleased to see the Town Council’s deputy clerk Marcus Prowse speaking in support of retaining the Car Park and showing his disappointment in the in the content of the letter. He asked for a meeting between the two councils to find a way forward in favour of retaining this asset.</p> <p>Of course, I realise the council needs to sell assets, however, based on the figures provided to me back in September, selling this Car Park will undoubtedly damage our county town’s economy, whilst making no financial sense whatsoever.</p> <p>During the day, this car park is used mostly by shoppers and commuters, as well as visitors to the very popular Vivary Park and the many local Churches. In the evening, the ground floor is used by the many people taking advantage of the thriving local entertainment facilities, such as the Creative Innovation Centre (CICCIC), The Lawns and the many restaurants and public houses nearby.</p> <p>We are trying to attract people to Taunton, if they cannot park, they will not come. Yes, in a perfect world they’d all use the Park and Ride, cycle or walk. However, in the real world, they want to drive. Losing these 269 conveniently situated spaces(including 12 disabled), will hugely affect Taunton’s already fragile economy.</p> <p>I therefore ask yet again, that this car park is removed from the list of proposed disposals.</p> <p>Response from Lead Member for Economic Development, Planning and Assets, Councillor Mike Rigby</p>
<p>Full written response</p>	<p>NEW response: As Lead Member for Ec Dev, Planning and Assets I issued a press release yesterday confirming my intention to reverse the decision made by Executive on 5th August 2024. The process to do so will be an Executive Member Key Decision, 28 days from publication on the forward plan.</p>

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My position follows significant feedback from businesses, local members and Taunton Town Council concerned by the likely impact of selling this asset for development.

This Council has to be sustainable in these extremely tough financial times, but we also have to listen. The message we've heard loud and clear is that the impact of the sale of the High Street car park is such that we need to reconsider.

We thank everyone who has taken the time to let us know their views.