

## Budget Setting Full Council – 5 March 2025 – Public and Member Questions

<b>Annexe A – Public Questions</b>	
<b>Name of person submitting</b>	<b>Question</b>
<b>Neil Guild and Micheál Duffy</b>	<p><b>Union Submission</b></p> <p>Somerset Council staff have endured over a decade of uncertainty, below inflation pay rises and job losses. Somerset Council was created, in part, to provide greater resilience for local government services in the county. UNISON challenged this and other assertions at the time, noting the limited overlap between district and county council services. Our predictions have been proven accurate. Its creation has led to years of disruption, with little evidence of any material improvement in actual services for the public of the county. Instead, it has meant that what were previously district council services and staff have joined the basket of services that are having their funding consumed to pay for increasing costs in Adult Social Care.</p> <p>As a consequence, council staff, who we note are residents and voters themselves, have little confidence in councillors to grapple with the challenges facing Somerset. Staff morale is low. and the Council routinely struggles to recruit to essential roles due to below market rates of pay and that Somerset is not seen as an attractive proposition by prospective employees. This in turn leads to increased agency and consultancy costs to fill these roles.</p> <p>UNISON recognises that the Council must provide a comprehensive and sustainable plan for the future. However, the current set of cuts and job losses will lead to reduced services for residents and still will not guarantee that Somerset will avoid a Section 114 being issued in the future.</p> <p><b>Question 1a</b> - How does the Council intend to address these challenges and ensure that funding for all essential services, not just Adult Social Care, is safeguarded in the medium to long-term, while also maintaining a resilient workforce and improving staff morale?</p> <p><b>Response from the Leader of the Council, Councillor Bill Revans and Lead Member for Transformation, HR and Localities, Councillor Theo Butt Philip</b></p>
<b>Tracy Daly</b>	<b>Awaiting Submission</b>

## Budget Setting Full Council – 5 March 2025 – Public and Member Questions

<b>David Orr</b>	<p><b>Question 3a</b></p> <p>The Government issues this council with a £63m “capitalisation direction”. <b><i>There is no new money.</i></b> Instead, this Council, as a distressed seller in a poor commercial market, is flogging off investment assets (often at a loss); foregoing the income generated, whilst retaining debt repayments for decades to come (but with no asset behind the loan).</p> <p><i>Before continuing with this short-term and damaging investment asset disposal policy, will you hold a named vote at Full Council to re-ratify it?</i></p> <p>Back in 2008, reckless investment bankers created junk bonds, wrecking economies around the world. Governments (that is taxpayers) had to step in to save the private Banks, heralding years of austerity, which continue to damage key public services today.</p> <p>From 2010 to 2015, a coalition Government of Tories and Lib Dems imposed austerity cuts, falling principally on Councils. £31 billion of council funding was cut to just £13 billion. The seeds of the “financial emergency” were sown back in your own coalition government. The Somerset Tories compounded things by freezing Council Tax for 6 years (over two elections). That long Council Tax freeze stopped this Council’s base budget from rising with inflation and spending power has been critically undermined.</p> <p>The greatest responsibility for the “financial emergency” lies with our entire political class in Westminster. They have failed to address predictable adult social care pressures for 14 years after Dilnot issued his report. Since 2011, every administration has “kicked the can [of adult social care reform] down the road”. Labour has broken their pre-election commitment to a care cap by delaying adult social care reform until 2029.</p> <p>Increasing numbers of local authorities require emergency funds or have declared themselves effectively bankrupt. The National Audit Office says increasing costs of social care, special educational needs provision, and temporary housing require a long-term solution from across government.</p> <p><i>By April 2026, this Labour government needs to take responsibility for their delay to reforming adult social care, by providing bridging funding until 2029, for large councils with those responsibilities.</i></p> <p>We elect national and local administrations to be in charge and to solve problems. Running a unitary Council is complex and without much discretionary funding, can large Councils only ever be Officer-led? If so, why vote locally, as “nothing changes”</p> <p>We are in a crisis of confidence and trust in our democratic politics. <i>Do we stop voting because “what’s the point” or do we, like America, vote for a disrupter?</i></p> <p><b>Response from the Deputy Leader and Lead Member for Finance, Procurement and Performance, Councillor Liz Leyshon</b></p>
------------------	---

## Budget Setting Full Council – 5 March 2025 – Public and Member Questions

<p><b>David Preece</b></p>	<p><b>Question 4a</b> Where are the audited accounts for 2024-25?</p> <p><b>Question 4b</b> Why can other councils bring their budgets in within estimates - yet again you fail - despite your promises last year ! which your own 151 financial officer - doubted was achievable! Especially speaking out against your cut to the reserve emergency fund £70m plus to £43m- this being required by all governments to local authorities - in order to be able to cover immediately any requirement for potential disasters- ie floods - (fluvial - rain deluge) as we are having year on year since the devastating floods here in Somerset 2014 - moorland village - and other. community area's due to building on previous almost flood plains ! with excess water unable to permeate ground soil..... hence causing run off and flooding.</p> <p><b>Response from the Deputy Leader and Lead Member for Finance, Procurement and Performance, Councillor Liz Leyshon</b></p>
<p><b>Rosa Kell</b></p>	<p>Somerset has declared a climate emergency. It has a financial crisis that's being managed it's laudable that it's finding alternative revenue streams. One of the proposed budget income is from Car Parks and road side parking. This is laudable too as it might discourage car use for short journeys, encourage more walking, bicycling and bus usage and hopefully improve health and reduce traffic a win win.</p> <p>The proposed parking roadside and car and coach park charges realignment, lets call this "a car dissentive" initiative, and/or an increase on car running throughout Somerset. However one might object to this there is revenue that Somerset badly needs and this revenue is included in the proposed Budget presented today 3rd March and Wednesday 5th March.</p> <p><b>Question 5a –</b> Can the public be assured that the revenue recovered from this initiative be ringfenced and be spent on roadside and bus infrastructure and thus benefit the communities from where it's recovered ie Somerset Transport</p> <p><b>Response from the Deputy Leader and Lead Member for Finance, Procurement and Performance, Councillor Liz Leyshon and Lead Member for Transport and Waste, Councillor Richard Wilkins</b></p>

## Budget Setting Full Council – 5 March 2025 – Public and Member Questions

<b>Nigel Behan</b>	<p><b>Question 6</b></p> <p>Agenda Item 7 <a href="#">Report of the Section 151 Officer Section 25 Statement.pdf</a></p> <p>And Agenda Item 8 <a href="#">Appendix AA - Revenue and Capital Budget and Council Tax 202526 and MTFS 202526 - 202930.pdf</a></p> <p>The government -by not offering the council any additional money but merely the flexibility to borrow and capitalise for day to day running costs known as Exceptional Financial Support (EFS) - has at least helped you avoid a (potentially embarrassing) council tax referendum in “allowing” Somerset Council to increase council tax by 7.49% - and of course, don’t forget the parish/town add-ons (precepts).</p> <p> (“The Council’s financial position is critical, given its inability in 2024/25 and 2025/26 to set a balanced Revenue Budget without reliance upon Exceptional Financial Support (EFS). This has been in the form of additional Council Tax increase of 2.5% above the referendum limit and a Capitalisation Direction of £43.000m for 2025/26 to set a balanced Budget 2025/26.”)</p> <p>It states within the “Implications of Failure to Achieve a Balanced Annual Budget and MTFP” that “The alternative to an application for EFS, is for the Section 151 Officer to issue a Section 114 Notice. This would have extremely serious implications and would result in a range of onerous actions to suspend all but the most essential expenditure.”.</p> <p>Public Finance noted that: “A record number of councils asked the government for exceptional financial support for 2025-26, and 30 requests have been approved – but CIPFA has expressed serious worries about the system.”</p> <p>The numerous comments (“bleats” etc) and reports made by the LGA and other bodies that the local government (finance) system is broken and unsustainable (LGA: “...in desperate need of reform, describing the current arrangements as “opaque, overly complex and out of date”.)</p> <p>If 30 Councils – or more accurately 30 (courageous?) Chief Finance Officers (S151) - prepared S114 reports (“effective bankruptcy”) at the same time then perhaps the government will probably be forced into adopting a different approach to that of sending in government appointed commissioners?</p>
--------------------	--

## Budget Setting Full Council – 5 March 2025 – Public and Member Questions

	<p>It is also noted that: “There is a significant Budget gap for 2026/27 that will need to be addressed at pace with significant savings and transformation. The reserves are forecast to be exhausted during 2026/27 unless urgent management action is taken to develop further transformation and savings plans at pace during 2025/26 for Member approval and implementation in 2026/27. If this budget gap is not closed the Council will again be reliant on Exceptional Financial Support in the form of additional Council Tax above the referendum threshold and/or Capitalisation Direction.”</p> <p>So, the method so far appears to be, act as if a S114 notice has been issued -repeated EFS (which means more borrowing, selling off public assets, continuing reductions in services and further job culls), whilst electors, service users, residents and council taxpayers receive even more limited and rationed services at significant cost!</p> <p>The Head of Paid Services said recently “....our Council must balance the needs of our most vulnerable residents with the broader needs of the community, of which we are all a part.”</p> <p>Councillors could be bolder and consider prioritising a budget based on need and create a meaningful campaign to demand (rather than asking them to flog public assets and go into more debt) the money from central government?</p> <p><b>Response from the Deputy Leader and Lead Member for Finance, Procurement and Performance, Councillor Liz Leyshon</b></p>
<b>Keith M Bevan</b>	<p><b>Question 7</b></p> <p>Somerset Council March 2023 "identified £40 million of Savings"</p> <p>April 2023 has identified £18.5 million every year to deliver financial sustainability.</p> <p>February 2024 has a financial projected gap of £100 million for 2024- 2025.</p> <p>After less than a year, Somerset Council delivered exciting financial news to the residents, then delivered a financial deficit wide enough to face bankruptcy. These figures do not add up.</p>

## Budget Setting Full Council – 5 March 2025 – Public and Member Questions

	<b>Response from the Deputy Leader and Lead Member for Finance, Procurement and Performance, Councillor Liz Leyshon</b>
<b>Alan Debenham</b>	<p><b>Question 8</b></p> <p>Bearing in mind how Somerset Council, especially through its Leader, Councillor Bill Revans, and his Liberal Democrat team, and my Green Party Councillors, have for a a long time now spoken of the existential crisis in local government being caused by being tied to a very out of date model regarding its chronic underfunding in relation to its statutory functions, particularly those of adult and children’s social care.</p> <p>What new model, if any, has this Council campaigned for with the public, the LGA, the government and elsewhere, and under what remodelling design and plans especially with regard to :-</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The ridiculous outdated, unfair and regressive Council Tax and its property bands based on 1991 valuations, with a highest to lowest payments ratio of 9 to 1 - replacing an old General Rates one of roughly 25 to 1.</li><li>• The comprehensive Layfield Royal Commission report of 1979 and its attempt to furnish primary local authorities with much more fund-raising powers – particularly using new local income and sales taxes - and new statutory functions to make them almost completely free from central government domination.</li><li>• New and fairer property taxation in relation to site and land values over and above that of just considering buildings and other commercial facilities.</li><li>• Complete review and overhaul of present anomalous and unfairly burdensome business and commercial rates.</li><li>• Introducing a banded scale of tax reliefs based upon how environmentally friendly, in their designs and usages, all properties are with regard to the Council’s climate emergency strategy and policies..</li></ul> <p><i>( Note re the last sentence I recommend all Councillors to become followers of Professor Richard Murphy- <a href="http://www.richard.murphy@taxresearch.org.uk">www.richard.murphy@taxresearch.org.uk</a> of Sheffield University, Public Accountant L ecturer &amp; Consultant who supplies an excellent free daily/ weekly newsletter)</i></p>

## Budget Setting Full Council – 5 March 2025 – Public and Member Questions

	<p><b>Response from the Deputy Leader and Lead Member for Finance, Procurement and Performance, Councillor Liz Leyshon</b></p>
<p><b>David Redgewell</b></p>	<p><b>Question 9a</b>          With Somerset unity council being allowed to raise council tax by 7 % by UK government.          But the council is still like many other councils like North Somerset council          Have finances difficult.          We welcome the Bus service grant from UK government.          But we welcome the Somerset bus service improvement funding 2025 2026 £6.849 .778 for £2.9 million pounds for revenue support and £3.3 million pounds for capital programmes          Which will allow bus and coach service and infrastructure improvements in Yeovil and south Somerset and West Dorset with Dorset Council.          On Town service in the Evenings and in Sundays links from CR 6 Yeovil bus and coach station to Bridport bus and coach station.          58 Yeovil bus and coach station to Yeovil pen mill station to Sherborne Town Sherborne, Railway station Templecombe Wincanton bus and coach station.          Sunday and Evening services from Yeovil bus and coach station to Ilchester Somerton Street, Glastonbury Wells bus and coach station to Bristol bus and coach station.          New services in Bridgwater Town services In the Evenings and Sundays          Including links improvements in Link from Taunton Transport hub to Bridgwater bus and coach station to Highbridge and Burnham on sea.          For service 20 to weston super mare. Bus and coach station.          Service 25 26          Improvements to Taunton Transport hub to Taunton Railway station, Codford St lakes, Wiveliscombe with connection          For Bampton Devon and Dulverton.          The £ 5 million pounds in revenue support for supported bus services in the county.          and 126 Weston super mare bus and coach station to cheddar and Wells bus and coach station.          But we are concerned with the local Transport plan the need for more revenue support for sustainable transport and the Public transport</p>

## Budget Setting Full Council – 5 March 2025 – Public and Member Questions

Network bus priority measures in Taunton Bridgwater and Yeovil towns with economy growth jobs and Employment and new homes  
But we were surprised that the council scrutiny commission still want free car parking in many parts of unity council and not bring into a council wide parking charges policy.  
For car parking coach parking and bus and coach station access charges.  
What is council doing to continue to Devop and Somerset wide parking charges policy with money going into Taunton park and ride service.  
But also in sustainable transport like the cheddar valley shewberry line and Somerset circle line.

### **Question 9b**

What money has been allocated in Somerset budget to reopen Wellington Railway station along with Cullompton station in Devon as part Devon and Somerset Metro .  
With bus rail sustainable transport cycling and walking facilities  
As Wellington is taking economy growth and housing Development plus new jobs and health facilities  
And money towards reopening Taunton to Minehead Railway line joint with First group plc Greater Western trains company limited GWR Network rail Western route and West Somerset railway company and Peninsula Transport Board and First group plc South buses for integration with railway services.

**Response from the Lead Member for Transport and Waste Service, Councillor Richard Wilkins**



## Budget Setting Full Council – 5 March 2025 – Public and Member Questions

Annexe B – Member Questions	
Name of person submitting	Question
<b>Cllr Diogo Rodrigues</b>	<p><b>Question 1a</b> – How many enforcement cases are currently in the backlog in area North, and how many new cases have been received in the last six months?</p> <p><b>Question 1b</b> - How many full-time equivalent (FTE) staff are currently working in enforcement in area North, and what is the estimated timeframe for clearing the backlog with this staff number?</p> <p><b>Question 1c</b> - In the case of River Lane, Dunwear, enforcement was first contacted in October 2024, yet unauthorised work has continued for months. Bridgwater Without Parish Council feels held to ransom by the system as delays mean that, by the time enforcement acts, the damage is already done. They are also concerned that enforcement across the parish is ineffective, with other cases similarly stalled. What will Somerset Council do to ensure enforcement action is timely and effective in cases like this</p> <p><b>Response from the Lead Member for Economic Development Planning and Assets, Councillor Mike Rigby</b></p>
<b>Cllr Diogo Rodrigues</b>	<p><b>Question 2</b> Are there currently any Somerset Council employees working remotely from outside the UK? If so, how many, in which departments, and what is the council’s policy on staff working from abroad?</p> <p><b>Response from the Lead Member for Transformation, Human Resources and Localities, Councillor Theo Butt Philip</b></p>
<b>Cllr Sue Osbourne</b>	<p><b>Question 3</b> Within the Section 151 Officers written Section 25 report to Full Council she has included as Appendix A, Annex Ai the 2025/26 Exceptional Financial Support 'in principle' agreement for a capitalisation directive.</p> <p>Within this letter there is a paragraph that reads as follows:- ' If you are considering financing capitalisation support through capital receipts, I want to make clear at this stage that it is my expectation that councils should avoid the disposal of community heritage assets where possible to protect the public ownership of locally significant sites to ensure residents can continue to benefit from them'</p>

## Budget Setting Full Council – 5 March 2025 – Public and Member Questions

	<p>The August 2024 Executive meeting agreed to dispose of 22 assets of which 2, The Market House Taunton, grade 2 listed and the Cornhill Complex, Bridgwater, grade1 listed were included for disposal.</p> <p>Will these assets, if not already done so, now be withdrawn from this list?</p> <p>How many grade 1, grade 2* and grade 2 heritage assets does the council own? In addition, how many 'non designated' heritage assets does the Council own?</p> <p>What is the likely financial impact of this condition on your ability to finance this capitalisation directive from 'non operational' asset sales and how will you mitigate this?</p> <p>What changes will you now be making to your assets disposal policy to comply with this part of the proposed capitalisation directive?</p> <p><b>Response from Lead Member for Economic Development, Planning and Assets, Councillor Mike Rigby</b></p>
<p><b>Cllr Sue Osbourne</b></p>	<p><b>Question 4</b></p> <p>Budget Assurance Statement - Community, Place and Economy, Table 1 - Planning. In 2024/25 the Planning service had a base budget of £5,402m. Despite a Growth Bid of £1,990, it is expected to save £2,501 leading to a proposed total budget for 2025/26 of £5,108. This means a reduction in the planning budget of £384,000. What assurance can you give to members already concerned about the performance of this service, particularly Enforcement, that it can continue to discharge its planning function effectively, especially if the government remove the allowance of 'extension of time' to the targets for time taken to process the different categories of planning applications? The target for producing a local plan is April 2028 yet it is being forecasted that this won't be ready till April 2029, so how is the local plan going to get back on track when the growth figure of £0.771m (table 2) that has been allocated for this work is cancelled out by the amount of savings that have to be made?</p> <p><b>Response from the Lead Member for Economic Development Planning and Assets, Councillor Mike Rigby</b></p>