

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

Annexe A – Public Questions	
Name of person submitting	Question
Neil Guild and Micheál Duffy	<p>Union Submission</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>Question 1a - 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>Response from the Leader of the Council, Councillor Bill Revans and Lead Member for Transformation, HR and Localities, Councillor Theo Butt Philip</p>
Full written response	<p>Firstly, I would like to thank Trade Union colleagues for their question, and indeed for all their support during the recent workforce restructuring programme. The point about council budgets is well made and we have been vocal about the challenges facing all councils as the costs and demand for core services, such as adults and children’s social care continue to rise. We have taken a number of decisions locally to protect non-statutory services, but the</p>

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

	<p>system is clearly broken on a national level, and the planned reform of social care funding cannot come soon enough.</p> <p>Here locally, the Somerset Council Improvement and Transformation Programme must enable the delivery of the Somerset Council Plan 2023-2027 and support our Medium-Term Financial Strategy. The objective of the programme is to improve service delivery and achieve financial sustainability over the period 2025-2030 as we implement our council plan. We will invest in our capacity for change and establish robust governance and delivery frameworks to meet the challenges outlined in our medium-term financial strategy.</p> <p>A clear People Strategy is essential to underpin a whole council transformation plan, ensuring that the workforce is equipped to meet current and future challenges. A robust people strategy will focus on driving organisational success through workforce planning, skills development, employee engagement, fair and equitable reward, employee performance, and streamlining organisational culture.</p> <p>Our Council Workforce Development Plan will help to identify and address skills gaps, promote continuous learning and succession planning, and foster a culture of innovation and adaptability. By investing in the development of our staff, our Council can enhance service delivery and support staff development and morale.</p> <p>Additionally, a well-defined people development plan ensures that employees are prepared for, and can adapt to, new processes and technologies. Ultimately, this approach leads to a more resilient and capable workforce, driving the successful implementation of the council's transformation plan.</p>
David Orr	<p>Question 3a</p> <p>The Government issues this council with a £63m “capitalisation direction”. <i>There is no new money.</i> 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>

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

	<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>Response from the Deputy Leader and Lead Member for Finance, Procurement and Performance, Councillor Liz Leyshon</p>
<p>Full written response</p>	<p>Thank you for your statement, Mr Orr. I would like to reassure you that Full Council is required by law to carry out a named vote on the budget.</p> <p>You cover a range of issues in your comments that I will take as rhetorical.</p> <p>On the substantive point about capitalisation, you are correct this is not additional funds for the Council. It is permission to use our own capital funds (whether income from asset sales or additional borrowing) to subsidise our revenue spend in 2025-26.</p> <p>I appreciate this is a complex area but the portfolio of commercial properties that Somerset Council inherited is no longer achieving the financial surplus that was possible at the time of purchase (pre-Covid and when interest rates were much lower). The Council has the option of selling assets and commercial investments or taking out more</p>

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

	<p>borrowing. We are working hard to keep cost of servicing and repaying our debt to no more than 10% of our budget unlike some councils that have much higher percentages.</p> <p>I appreciate very much the timing of the publication of the National Audit Office report last Friday and hope that it can guide the Government in taking decisions that will create more sustainable councils, whether they are already Unitary or will shortly be undergoing Local Government Reorganisation.</p>
<p>David Preece</p>	<p>Question 4a Where are the audited accounts for 2024-25?</p> <p>Question 4b 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>Question 4c AFTER PROPOSED Staff cuts 555 - Leaving " SLIMMED DOWN 4000 ! STILL EMPLOYED how many of these staff WORK ONLY 3 Days a week or less ! Or do not even Go into the Council Offices - STAFF WORKING FROM HOME - Not part of Team or under Direct MANAGEMENT STRUCTURE Accountable for work STRUCTURE - Attendance since Covid ! ? "The Press release - Put out to Us LAST WEEK " reportedly in the Gazette - Mercury - Stated these jobs would go April 5 Th...But the SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - Said that had not been yet FORMALLY AGREED WITH UNIONS AND STAFF So OCTOBER BEING THE TIME WHEN THESE JOBS MAY GO ?! 6 months SALARIES & Pension Contributions - HOLIDAY ENTITLEMENTS WILL NEED TO PAID .??? So EVEN MORE ADDITIONAL COSTS - Against BUDGETS! Set</p> <p>Question 4d</p>

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

	<p>I would like to CALL FOR A named COUNCILLOR VOTES or ABSTENTION's - on this Budget set for 2025-26 year.</p> <p>Response from the Deputy Leader and Lead Member for Finance, Procurement and Performance, Councillor Liz Leyshon</p>
<p>Full written response</p>	<p>4a. The financial year for 2024/25 closes on the 31st March 2025, and the financial statements will be produced by the deadline of the 30th June 2025 ready for public inspection and auditing by our external auditors.</p> <p>4b. The Q3 budget monitoring report was published for Scrutiny on 24th Feb and Executive on 26th Feb and showed a Revenue forecast underspend of £20.005million, which includes the £6million corporate contingency. This would mean a reduced draw on MTFP earmarked reserves, thereby strengthening our position. This is a credit to the staff of the Council, and we should congratulate them for this strong performance.</p> <p>4c. The restructuring of the workforce is underway as we speak and those who are leaving the Council will be doing so over March and April. I do not recognise the picture your question suggests.</p> <p>4d. The Council Budget Resolution is by law a named vote.</p>
<p>Rosa Kell</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>Question 5a – 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>

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

	<p>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</p>
<p>Full written response</p>	<p>Thank you for your question, parking income associated with enforcement activity is regulated by the Road Traffic Regulation Act 1984 which means that parking income can be applied to eligible expenditure of the council. I am satisfied that the income created by the on street parking proposals will be used for transport related initiatives.</p> <p>Surpluses from off road parking in car parks can be used for general Council expenses once all other car park provision has been satisfied.</p> <p>As an Administration we continue to work on Active Travel routes in both urban and rural areas of Somerset as a priority, and public transport as funding allows.</p>
<p>Nigel Behan</p>	<p>Question 6</p> <p>Agenda Item 7 Report of the Section 151 Officer Section 25 Statement.pdf</p> <p>And Agenda Item 8 Appendix AA - Revenue and Capital Budget and Council Tax 202526 and MTFS 202526 - 202930.pdf</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>

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

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.”.

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.”

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”.)

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?

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.”

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!

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.”

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

	<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>Response from the Deputy Leader and Lead Member for Finance, Procurement and Performance, Councillor Liz Leyshon</p>
<p>Full written response</p>	<p>Thank you for your questions/statements.</p> <p>It is only by working differently, within the Council and with our partners, that we will find ways of delivering services while increasing efficiency. The My Life My Future work has been a fine example of how we can work with adults, and the Homes and Horizons project has ensured children and young people can stay in Somerset, where appropriate.</p> <p>There are many examples of effective transformational work underway in Somerset. We do need an overarching Transformation Plan that sets the vision and direction and pulls together all the good work that the officers of Somerset Council are working on, at different stages. That work can be funded by Flexible Use of Capital Receipts and, in the longer term, I believe that will serve the people of Somerset.</p> <p>I do not believe that we can take risks, asking others to work with us in a certain way, where others' actions cannot be guaranteed and where the potential impact on Somerset could be much greater than it already is.</p>
<p>Keith M Bevan</p>	<p>Question 7</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

	<p>Response from the Deputy Leader and Lead Member for Finance, Procurement and Performance, Councillor Liz Leyshon</p>
<p>Full written response</p>	<p>Since Vesting in April 2023, Somerset Council’s Revenue Budget is now in excess of £600million per year delivering services to the residents, and businesses of Somerset. The gross budget is in excess of £1billion, including the maintained schools and capital programme.</p> <p>If you simply consider inflation and higher interest rates you can see that whilst the savings predicted on the move from five councils to one were useful, but they were nowhere near adequate to cope with the economic climate we have endured since 2022. For context a 5% increase in council tax generates something in the order of £18m per annum. Inflation has hit over 10% in recent years. Although it has now settled around 2.5% or 3% we all realise that when inflation reduces this doesn’t bring prices down. The Council has delivered very significant savings since April 2023, and as part of our transformational activity we will need to continue to do so until a new sustainable local government finance settlement is implemented nationally.</p>
<p>Alan Debenham</p>	<p>Question 8</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"> • 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. • 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. • New and fairer property taxation in relation to site and land values over and above that of just considering buildings and other commercial facilities.

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

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complete review and overhaul of present anomalous and unfairly burdensome business and commercial rates. • 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.. <p><i>(Note re the last sentence I recommend all Councillors to become followers of Professor Richard Murphy- www.richard.murphy@taxresearch.org.uk of Sheffield University, Public Accountant Lecturer & Consultant who supplies an excellent free daily/ weekly newsletter)</i></p> <p>Response from the Deputy Leader and Lead Member for Finance, Procurement and Performance, Councillor Liz Leyshon</p>
<p>Full written response</p>	<p>Thank you Mr Debenham for your good points on the failings of Council Tax as a way of funding the needs of residents of this county and other council areas.</p> <p>The National Audit Office report, published on 28th February, is informative and will hopefully guide Government in the right direction as more Councils continue towards a cliff edge.</p> <p>We also acknowledge that businesses are eagerly awaiting reform of Business Rates but it will take a very bold Government to reform both Business Rates and Council Tax at this extremely challenging time.</p> <p>We must not forget that the previous Government used up a great deal of the borrowing headroom for this country by unwise decisions during the Covid years, with a small number of businesses and individuals benefiting from public monies that would have been far better directed to local authorities for services such as track & trace, and purchase of PPE.</p> <p>Thank you for your suggestion of the newsletter published by Prof Richard Murphy, much appreciated.</p>
<p>David Redgewell</p>	<p>Question 9a</p> <p>With Somerset unity council being allowed to raise council tax by 7 % by UK government.</p> <p>But the council is still like many other councils like North Somerset council</p> <p>Have finances difficult.</p> <p>We welcome the Bus service grant from UK government.</p> <p>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</p>

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

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

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 .

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

	<p>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.</p> <p>Response from the Lead Member for Transport and Waste Service, Councillor Richard Wilkins</p>
Full written response	<p>Question 9a) Thank you for your question David and for your ongoing work with us in helping promote public transport use in the County. I can confirm that the Council took a decision in December 2023 to implement a more financially sustainable model for the provision of park and ride and reduce the need for subsidy from the Council's general budget. We will look for opportunities to draw closer linkages between our parking and public transport strategies as we roll out our new local transport plan which will shortly be available for consultation.</p> <p>Question 9b) The Government has currently placed the Wellington and Collumpton Rail Station projects on-hold pending the outcome of its infrastructure review. Wellington Station remains a high-priority project for the Council, and we have been working with local stakeholders, MPs and the Department for Transport to promote continued investment in the scheme; and have been working with local developers to progress the adjacent residential development and access road. We have also submitted the West Somerset Railway business case to Government on behalf of the stakeholders promoting that scheme. We will consider in due course what appropriate financial provision is necessary should these schemes progress further; but the business cases currently assume that financial support from the Council will not be required. I can confirm that the Council will continue to fund our contribution to the Peninsula Transport Body for the coming financial year.</p>

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

Annexe B – Member Questions	
Name of person submitting	Question
<p>Cllr Diogo Rodrigues</p>	<p>Question 1a – 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>Question 1b - 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>Question 1c - 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>Response from the Lead Member for Economic Development Planning and Assets, Councillor Mike Rigby</p>
<p>Full written response</p>	<p>Thank you for your questions</p> <p>Q1a & b There is currently 0.8 FTE with an additional 1 FTE starting a phased return from long term sick. Current number of cases on hand (which does not include general queries that are triaged and shut down before generating cases) is 183. The time to clear will be case dependant in terms of the complexity of the issues and the compliance of the individuals in breach of planning control.</p> <p>Q1c Site visits have been undertaken to this site on two different occasions by Enforcement Officers covering the north and wider area of Somerset over the Christmas period. They confirmed they would be submitting a planning application and had a planning agent engaged. In accordance with the Councils Enforcement Procedure the Council will look to negotiate to resolve impacts at the first point and submission of an application could aim to mitigate or address the planning harm as a result of the development. At the conclusion of any application process if the development is</p>

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

	<p>unacceptable a notice can be served and the applicant has the right to appeal. All of these steps are required for the site to demonstrate that any action the Council takes is proportionate to the harm and cannot be overcome by other means.</p>
<p>Cllr Diogo Rodrigues</p>	<p>Question 2</p> <p>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>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.</p> <p>We do not have a policy on staff working overseas, however Somerset Council provides robust guidance and procedural advice from Information Governance, Information Security and Cyber Security teams regarding accessing the network abroad or taking devices abroad. Any attempt to login to Somerset Council network from overseas is blocked unless appropriate authorisation is granted in advance of travel. Approval is only granted in exceptional circumstances.</p> <p>Somerset Council currently has 5 staff who are currently based overseas in hard to recruit roles.</p> <p>Departments:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Legal (Lawyer) x 2 • Highways (Engineer) x 1 • Adults (Social Care) x 2
<p>Cllr Sue Osbourne</p>	<p>Question 3</p> <p>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:-</p>

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

	<p>' 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> <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>Response from Lead Member for Economic Development, Planning and Assets, Councillor Mike Rigby</p>
Full written response	<p>We are currently considering the implications of the reference to 'community heritage assets' contained in the letter from the Secretary of State. We do not believe this refers only to land and buildings but also artefacts, artwork and other assets, none of which the Council are planning to sell.</p> <p>Excluding closed Church yards, where the Council has responsibility for the land, we have 58 listed properties on our records, a full list of our assets is available online. However, just because a property is listed under the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 does not automatically mean it would fall under the definition of a 'community heritage' asset as the property itself is protected by the fact that it is 'listed' and therefore it automatically benefits from the statutory protections granted by its listing.</p> <p>We need to determine whether the assets the Council have currently declared surplus are community heritage asset, this is not a clearly defined designation. The Council will most likely need to seek further clarification from the Secretary</p>

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

	<p>of State on this point. The Council can then review all potential asset sales against the clarified definition and request to 'avoid the disposal of community heritage assets where possible'. Once we have clarity over the definition, any property that is considered a community heritage asset will be withdrawn from the sale process.</p> <p>The Council are shortly planning to commence the marketing process for the Market House, Taunton but any potential sale would be several months away and would not complete unless and until the Council has satisfied itself that the asset does not fall under the category as defined (and subject to the clarifications needed). It should also be noted that the Cornhill Complex is not currently due to be listed for sale until later in the year and we would expect to have clarity over the definition of community heritage assets before any marketing.</p>
<p>Cllr Sue Osbourne</p>	<p>Question 4</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.</p> <p>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>Response from the Lead Member for Economic Development Planning and Assets, Councillor Mike Rigby</p>
<p>Full written response</p>	<p>Thank you for your questions</p> <p>The planning budget changes referenced in the assurance statement give a clear intent to support the planning service with the ongoing permanent resources needed. The workforce restructure initially sought to reduce Enforcement Officer roles as this is a non-statutory service, however following consultation a growth bid has been submitted which reinstates the 2 roles that would otherwise have been deleted.</p>

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

The local plan budget reference in the assurance statement is an additional amount to be combined with a current budget for 25/26. Collectively this is sufficient funding to meet with the local plan business case the service has put forward. This will not get the timeline “back on track” but will deliver for Somerset Council the two local plans it is required to deliver.

I cannot give an assurance based on future changes that government might make, should the extension of time option be removed we will look workload and resource impacts.