

SWT Full Council - 18 February 2021

Present: Councillor Hazel Prior-Sankey (Chair)

Councillors Simon Coles, Ian Aldridge, Benet Allen, Lee Baker, Marcus Barr, Mark Blaker, Chris Booth, Sue Buller, Norman Cavill, Dixie Darch, Hugh Davies, Caroline Ellis, Habib Farbahi, Ed Firmin, Andrew Govier, Roger Habgood, Andrew Hadley, John Hassall, Ross Henley, Marcia Hill, John Hunt, Marcus Kravis, Andy Milne, Richard Lees, Sue Lees, Libby Lisgo, Mark Lithgow, Janet Lloyd, Dave Mansell, Chris Morgan, Simon Nicholls, Craig Palmer, Derek Perry, Martin Peters, Peter Pilkington, Andy Pritchard, Steven Pugsley, Mike Rigby, Francesca Smith, Federica Smith-Roberts, Vivienne Stock-Williams, Phil Stone, Andrew Sully, Nick Thwaites, Anthony Trollope-Bellew, Ray Tully, Sarah Wakefield, Alan Wedderkopp, Danny Wedderkopp, Brenda Weston, Keith Wheatley, Loretta Whetlor and Gwil Wren

Officers: Dawn Adey, James Barraah, Jo Comer, Lesley Dolan, Paul Fitzgerald, James Hassett, Alison North, Andrew Pritchard, Marcus Prouse, Clare Rendell, Amy Tregellas, Emily Collacott, Chris Hall, Andrew Low, Gerry Mills, Stuart Noyce, Kerry Prisco and Joe Wharton

(The meeting commenced at 6.15 pm)

116. Apologies

Apologies were received from Councillors Paul Bolton, Dave Durdan, Kelly Durdan, Martin Hill and Terry Venner.

117. Declarations of Interest

Members present at the meeting declared the following personal interests in their capacity as a Councillor or Clerk of a County, Town or Parish Council or any other Local Authority:-

Name	Minute No.	Description of Interest	Reason	Action Taken
Cllr L Baker	All Items	Cheddon Fitzpaine & Taunton Charter Trustee	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr M Barr	All Items	Wellington	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr M Blaker	All Items	Wiveliscombe	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr C Booth	All Items	Wellington and Taunton Charter Trustee	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr N Cavill	All Items	West Monkton	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr S Coles	All Items	SCC & Taunton	Personal	Spoke and Voted

		Charter Trustee		
Cllr H Davies	All Items	SCC	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr C Ellis	All Items	Taunton Charter Trustee	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr A Govier	All Items	SCC & Wellington	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr Mrs Hill	All Items	Taunton Charter Trustee	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr J Hunt	All Items	SCC & Bishop's Hull	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr R Lees	All Items	Taunton Charter Trustee	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr S Lees	All Items	Taunton Charter Trustee	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr L Lisgo	All Items	Taunton Charter Trustee	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr M Lithgow	All Items	Wellington	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr J Lloyd	All Items	Wellington & Sampford Arundel	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr A Milne	All Items	Porlock	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr C Morgan	All Items	Stogursey	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr S Nicholls	All Items	Comeytrove	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr C Palmer	All Items	Minehead	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr D Perry	All Items	Taunton Charter Trustee	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr M Peters	All Items	Taunton Charter Trustee	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr P Pilkington	All Items	Timberscombe	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr H Prior-Sankey	All Items	SCC & Taunton Charter Trustee	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr M Rigby	All Items	SCC & Bishops Lydeard	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr F Smith	All Items	Taunton Charter Trustee	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr F Smith-Roberts	All Items	Taunton Charter Trustee	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr V Stock-Williams	All Items	Wellington	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr N Thwaites	All Items	Dulverton	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr R Tully	All Items	West Monkton	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr A Wedderkopp	All Items	SCC & Taunton Charter Trustee	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr D Wedderkopp	All Items	Taunton Charter Trustee	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr B Weston	All Items	Taunton Charter	Personal	Spoke and Voted

		Trustee		
Cllr L Whetlor	All Items	Watchet	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr G Wren	All Items	Clerk to Milverton PC	Personal	Spoke and Voted

118. **Public Participation - To receive only in relation to the business for which the Extraordinary Meeting has been called any questions, statements or petitions from the public in accordance with Council Procedure Rules 14,15 and 16**

Mr Alan Debenham submitted the following questions:-

1. In the recent Commons debate on the Local Government Settlement, the MHCLG Minister, Luke Hall MP, said that this year's settlement was very generous in that overall it involved a 4.5% increase in real terms compared with last year and local residents would much benefit.

The opposition strongly refuted this by saying that Local Councils generally were having to take a serious hit over inadequate funding for the Covid-19 emergency, whilst still suffering from real terms cuts of up to 40% over the past decade through severe Tory austerity cuts, and including still the much diminished Revenue Support for 2021/22. The so-called 4.5% real terms increases were achieved only by loading them onto very regressive Council Tax, with nearly all Councils – including this one, plus the County Council and Police – making local residents, especially the struggling poor, pay another 5% more for the same or less services, with inflation running at about 1.5% in both RPI and CPI.

What was the Leader's response to this damning critique of the government's and this Council's position as the overall charging authority, albeit increasing its 9% part of the total Council Tax bill by only 3% in contrast to the County Council's 5% increase as the bulk (80%+) tax demander and the Police's usual exorbitant percentage increase?

2. Many people, certainly as I do, very much welcomed the Council's really positive move to at last return to the pre-Thatcher days of building Council houses and flats to rent at affordable rates, with recent completion of the quality big renovation building scheme at Creechbarrow in Taunton and the excellent progress made in the even bigger similar scheme in Taunton North. What had been done - if it could be under Tory mania for private ownership and Council asset sell-offs under the lure of discounted prices - to prevent all those desperately needed socially rented properties from quickly disappearing into the hands of greedy speculators?

3. Whether or not there were to be County Council elections next May still seemed to be unknown for Somerset West and Taunton residents when everywhere else were definitely having elections. Why did this remain unknown when time was fast running out for proper preparation for County elections and what was the very latest position known to the Electoral Returning Officer?

Signed: Alan Debenham

The Portfolio Holder for Corporate Resources gave the following response:-
I would like to thank Mr Debenham for his comments and questions.

For the first part it had been well reported, and discussed many times in our council meetings, that core funding for local government had been gradually and significantly reduced over the last decade. This trend was expected to continue.

The Executive was recommending that the Somerset West and Taunton's council tax rate was increased by 3% per year, which was £5 on a Band D property, and which would increase our income for services by £280,000. This would make a valuable contribution to funding vital services we provided to our communities next year, and meant for example we could help to protect services and invest in our top priorities such as climate change. Council tax would fund around half of the Council's Net Budget in 2021/22.

We did not control or influence council tax decisions of the other precepting authorities, therefore it's not for this Council to comment on that. We were mindful that Council tax forms an important source of income for local authority services – not just district council services – and carefully considered both the short term and long term funding requirements for SWTC as well as of course the overall impact on household income. In this regard we operated a Council Tax Support scheme that helped to reduce council tax bills for currently around 11,300 lower income households across the district.

In terms of your second question I believed you were referring to the Right to Buy scheme. Under the Housing Act 1985 all Council tenants had the Right to Buy after 3 years holding a public sector tenancy, there wasn't a requirement for this to have been with SWT and could have been with different public sector housing providers. Tenants were only exempt if they had a current CCJ or were currently Bankrupt or had an active Notice Seeking Possession.

All properties classed as "General Needs" were eligible to be purchased through the Right to Buy with the exception of any which had a demolition notice on them or any properties which were deemed to be especially suitable for an aging population.

Any new-build properties or properties which had received an extensive amount of work would have a cost floor applied for the following 15 years, which meant they would not be sold for less than the total spent on the property, including acquisition and the cost of works done.

To your final question, the Chief Executive at SCC is the Returning Officer for the SCC elections and was the person who had officially requested the deferral of the election so in fairness you would need to direct your question to him. This Council conducted the elections on his behalf.

Mr David Redgewell submitted the following question:-

In view of the importance of public transport to the growth and economic development of Taunton town centre and Minehead town centre.

What budget had the council put forward to maintain and clean bus shelters in both Taunton and Minehead town centres and in view of the closure of the bus station that you part owned and now fully own.

To invest in new bus shelters in The Parade, Corporation Street, Castle Way and East Reach to make them fit for a bus interchange facilities with real time in Taunton.

In Minehead to provide bus shelter outside the railway station.

David Redgewell, South West Transport Network and Railfuture Severnside.

119. **To receive any communications or announcements from the Chair of the Council**

There were no announcements given by the Chair of the Council.

120. **To receive any communications or announcements from the Leader of the Council**

The Leader of the Council highlighted that the number of Covid cases in Somerset were on the decline and that it was positive that the vaccine rollout was in full swing. However, she reminded everyone to stay vigilant and to continue to follow Government guidance on social distancing.

121. **To receive only in relation to the business for which the Extraordinary Meeting has been called any questions from Councillors in accordance with Council Procedure Rule 13**

The Chair advised that no questions had been received under Procedure Rule 13.

122. **General Fund Revenue Budget and Capital Estimates 2021-22**

During the discussion, the following points were raised:-

- The Portfolio Holder for Corporate Resources proposed a further recommendation to add two one-off budgets into the budget proposals:-
 - The first was for £100,000 towards further tree planting across the district; and
 - The second was for £100,000 towards a Community Enhancement Fund to help support the community across Somerset West and Taunton following the impact of the Covid Pandemic.

Both were seconded by the Leader and became part of the substantive motion.

- Councillors were pleased that Somerset County Council had taken back the Park and Ride and that the funds reserved for that service could be spent on the additional recommendations.
- Concern was raised on the section that included the Watchet East Quay Development Loan and councillors queried why Somerset West and Taunton (SWT) were borrowing funds for a private company and what happened if they couldn't pay back the loan and requested an explanation. *The Portfolio Holder for Corporate Resources clarified that the existing budget was originally approved by West Somerset Council, and provided a 'last resort' funding option to the developer if they were unsuccessful in fully funding the works from other sources. At this stage no loan had been provided, and was unlikely to be needed as the developer had been very successful in obtaining other funding, but it was sensible to retain the facility in case it was needed to complete the development as it moved through to completion. If a request for loan finance was forthcoming it would be subject to the usual due diligence at the time. He further explained that this was separate to the £5m of grant funding awarded to the developer from the Coastal Communities Fund for the project. Whilst this was not Council funds, the grant was administered by the Council as the accountable body, to reimburse the developer based on actual costs incurred.*

- Concern was raised on recommendation 2.8 and that the whole of the SWT area should charge the same for its car parks.
The Portfolio Holder for Planning and Transportation agreed that it was a good point and he was aware of the anomaly. He advised that all parking provided within the SWT area was currently being reviewed and that he would report back with the outcome of the review.
- Concern was raised that the 2020/21 budget did not match the outturn report and that it appeared that the commercial investment had 'plugged' the gap. Further concern was raised that they could not calculate how the budget had been balanced and believed it was not sustainable for the future years.
The Portfolio Holder for Corporate Resources advised that council budgets were different to those for a private company. The Section 151 Officer had given sign off on a robust budget and would not have if he didn't believe that was the case. Section 17 of the report gave further details on why the budget was deemed robust.
- Councillors were pleased to see that there had been no mention of reduction in services and that there was an increased budget provided for climate change.
- Concern was raised that there was not enough updated information given on the commercial investment, which the budget seemed reliant upon.
The Portfolio Holder for Corporate Resources advised that councillors had been briefed on the commercial investment several times. Further information would be distributed to all councillors.
- Councillors highlighted the section on Business Rate Funding and raised concern that the future funds from Hinkley Point could be paid into a 'central pot', rather than be given to the local councils to use.
- Councillors requested more information on which assets were being disposed of, to ensure that officers were using due diligence in their decision making.
The Portfolio Holder for Asset Management and Economic Development assured councillors that assets were being managed to receive the best value and that they were not 'selling the silver' to balance the budget.
- Concern was raised that the budget was only a short term plan due to the likelihood of a unitary council being formed in two years' time.
- The Leader of the Council thanked councillors for their comments. She highlighted that the council had managed to carry on with their services during the Covid Pandemic and still provided additional services to support businesses and vulnerable residents within SWT, including homeless residents. She also explained that she understood councillors concerns on the Commercial Investment Strategy but that it had been signed off by Full Council. The Leader commended the budget and believed SWT had produced a robust budget.

In accordance with Standing Order 18(2)(i), the Chair called for a recorded vote to be taken and recorded in the Minutes.

The recommendations, which are detailed below, were put and **CARRIED** with thirty for, six against and seventeen abstaining:-

Resolved that Full Council:-

- 2.1 Noted the S151 Officers Statement on the robustness of the budget and adequacy of reserves as set out in section 17;
- 2.2 Approved the General Fund Revenue Budget;
- 2.3 Approved the setting of a basic band D council tax of £169.63, comprising £167.88 for services and £1.75 on behalf of the Somerset Rivers Authority;
- 2.4 Approved the Special Expenses Precept of £1.91 for a basic band D council tax in respect of the Unparished area of Taunton;
- 2.5 Approved the new capital schemes of the General Fund Capital Programme Budget of £3,116,980 for 2021/22, £2,033,980 for 2022/23 and the asset for sale target of £2,742,720, as set out in Table 11;
- 2.6 Delegated authority to the Chief Executive, in consultation with the S151 Officer, to allocate the £813,000 one-off grant funding to meet COVID-related exceptional service costs and income losses during 2021/22;
- 2.7 Approved the transfer of £2.4m from General Reserves to an earmarked reserve to create a Budget Volatility and Risk fund for 2021/22 financial year; and
- 2.8 Approved a continued policy of suspending parking charges, as detailed below, on the three Saturdays leading up to Christmas and on one Sunday in Dulverton in line with previous years, to support local economies.
 - a) Free parking would apply from 15:00 to 23:59 on the three Saturdays (subject to car park opening hours) in Taunton Car Parks.
 - b) Free parking would apply all day; from 00:00 to 23:59 on the three Saturdays (subject to car park opening hours) in all other Council owned Car Parks.
 - c) Free parking would apply all day; from 00:00 to 23:59 on one Sunday (subject to car park opening hours) in Dulverton Car Parks to support the Dulverton by Starlight events.

Those voting **FOR** the **MOTION**: Councillors B Allen, L Baker, C Booth, S Coles, D Darch, C Ellis, H Farbahi, E Firmin, J Hassall, R Henley, Mrs M Hill, M Kravis, R Lees, S Lees, M Lithgow, S Nicholls, D Perry, M Peters, P Pilkington, H Prior-Sankey, M Rigby, F Smith, F Smith-Roberts, P Stone, A Sully, R Tully, S Wakefield, A Wedderkopp, D Wedderkopp and K Wheatley.

Those voting **AGAINST** the **MOTION**: Councillors S Buller, N Cavill, R Habgood, C Morgan, C Palmer and L Whetlor.

Those **ABSTAINING** from voting: Councillors I Aldridge, M Barr, M Blaker, H Davies, A Govier, A Hadley, L Lisgo, J Lloyd, D Mansell, A Milne, A Pritchard, S Pugsley, V Stock-Williams, N Thwaites, A Trollope-Bellew, B Weston, and G Wren.

123. **HRA Revenue and Capital Budget Setting 2021/22 including Dwelling Rent Setting 21/22 and 30-Year Business Plan Review**

During the discussion, the following points were raised:-

- Councillors were pleased to see that a 30 year plan had been included and also the amount of homes planned to be built in that time.

- Councillors were pleased with the money used to invest in homes within the whole of the SWT area.
- Councillors were pleased to see that apprenticeships had been included in the scheme.
- Concern was raised on the use of retro-fitting for heating and insulation in the current housing stock.
The Portfolio Holder for Housing agreed that retro-fitting was an important part of the work carried out on the existing housing stock and that they would investigate zero carbon and other options for the work.
- The Leader of the Council fully supported the recommendations as it was not just about money, it supported tenants and local residents and helped provide better homes.
- Councillors thanked the Portfolio Holder for Housing and the Housing Team for their hard work.

In accordance with Standing Order 18(2)(i), the Chair called for a recorded vote to be taken and recorded in the Minutes.

The recommendations, which are detailed below, were put and were **CARRIED** with forty-six Councillors in favour and seven abstaining:-

Resolved that Full Council:-

- 2.1.1 Approved the HRA Annual Revenue Budget for 2021/22;
- 2.1.2 Approved the increase of 1.5% (CPI+1%) to Dwelling Rents for 2021/22;
- 2.1.3 Approved the HRA Capital Programme for 2021/22;
- 2.1.4 Noted the reviewed and updated assumptions in the 2021 HRA 30-Year Business Plan; and
- 2.1.5 Approved the minimum operational balance on HRA general reserves at £2m.

Those voting **FOR** the **MOTION**: Councillors I Aldridge, B Allen, L Baker, M Blaker, C Booth, S Buller, S Coles, D Darch, H Davies, C Ellis, H Farbahi, E Firmin, A Govier, R Habgood, J Hassall, R Henley, Mrs M Hill, M Kravis, R Lees, S Lees, L Lisgo, M Lithgow, J Lloyd, D Mansell, C Morgan, S Nicholls, C Palmer, D Perry, M Peters, P Pilkington, H Prior-Sankey, A Pritchard, M Rigby, F Smith, F Smith-Roberts, P Stone, A Sully, N Thwaites, R Tully, S Wakefield, A Wedderkopp, D Wedderkopp, B Weston, K Wheatley, L Whetlor and G Wren.

Those **ABSTAINING** from voting: Councillors M Barr, N Cavill, A Hadley, A Milne, S Pugsley, V Stock-Williams and A Trollope-Bellew.

(The Meeting ended at 8.35 pm)