

Dear Councillor Revans,

Subject: Response to Asset and Service Devolution Communication

I am writing on behalf of the Parish Council of Churchstanton and our council tax paying residents - to formally respond to your communication regarding asset and service devolution amidst Somerset Council's 'financial challenges'.

Noting that in early January we have to set a precept for 2024/25 without any clarity as to what we are expected to take on from the council in that period we would be grateful if the council would take note of the following:

Firstly, it is crucial to acknowledge the widespread opposition within our Parish to the formation of the single unitary authority, a sentiment echoed in the public referendum and unfortunately disregarded. This disregard for public opinion is reflective of a broader pattern of neglect by the Council over a considerably extended period of time, particularly in areas directly impacting our community.

Our Parish has consistently been on the receiving end of substandard services from the two Councils since well before the unitary formation. Planning and development control (as communicated by numerous residents) has been nothing short of atrocious for far too long – and that department's general failure to adopt a positive / proactive position is undoubtedly costing the local economy many, many millions in construction expenditure, employment opportunities, taxes, CIL and other revenues on a monthly basis. The state of disrepair of our highways is also a perpetual concern, creating not only inconvenience but also posing a danger to residents. Additionally, the near-total cancellation of bus services over the years has severely impacted connectivity and mobility, further isolating our community.

The maintenance of highway verges and hedges, often left till far too late in the year and allowed to grow to dangerous levels, and reduction in gritting in winter, each pose a serious hazard to traffic and other road users alike. Such basic yet crucial services have been grossly neglected, adding to the woes of our already underserved community.

Not that it is within our care / scope – like our roads, our much loved (and needed) Primary School is constantly being [temporarily] patched up rather than proactively maintained. While the team and Governors do their best with the funds that they have – the School is in desperate need of attention and proper modernisation.

Amidst these challenges, it is the spirit and dedication of the Churchstanton community that has led to any measure of success we have managed to achieve over recent years. It is through almost exclusively voluntary and charitably minded service, along with third-party grants, that our community has thrived (at least at a social, if not on an infrastructure level). This success, perched at the edge of the county boundary, has been in spite of, and not thanks to, the Council's efforts or support for a considerable period...

As a parish we have only one part time member of staff (effectively one day per week) and most of our councillors are employed full-time or are engaged in permanent residential care – we thus do not have the resources needed to voluntarily administer Somerset Councils services for them. Any increase in resources requirements would alone (probably) raise precept by 2x, perhaps 3x (to cover staffing alone) before we even start to consider service delivery costs...

Given this backdrop, the proposal to devolve services and by inference to expect us to **substantially** increase local precepts to support these services is not only impractical for our Parish but is also fundamentally unjust. The notion of burdening our isolated residents further to compensate for the Council's financial mismanagement and long-standing neglect is wholly unacceptable...

The Parish Council have been managing our limited assets effectively without any Council aid thus far and oppose any substantial increase in our precept to make up for a shortfall at County level. Had we received disproportionately better service than our neighbouring areas in the past – we would have no compulsion in seeking a justifiable raise in precepts to make up for previous preferential treatment – however this is not the case and as such we cannot be expected to sit-by and expect to soak up a financial burden arising from what, in our view, is due to fundamental mismanagement, waste and inefficiency.

Our community's ability to self-sustain should not be seen as an opportunity for the Council to abdicate its responsibilities to us. We expect the Council to address the inefficiencies and waste prevalent in its operations, particularly in areas such as planning, highways, and public transport, which have each directly and adversely affected the quality of life in Churchstanton over the years.

In conclusion, while we understand the financial constraints Somerset Council faces, it is imperative that any future plans or decisions consider the unique challenges and limited resources of smaller parishes like ours. Our willingness to engage in dialogue should be viewed within the context of seeking fair and equitable treatment for our community, not as an acquiescence to further neglect and mismanagement. We most certainly will not stand by and expect our residents to pay disproportionately higher sums each year for services from which they will still not gain direct benefit... Indeed as one colleague put it, if the council expect us to raise funds and do their work for them – they will not just be looking for more funds, they will be looking for a new Parish Council too...

Yours sincerely,

Ian Firth

Chair - Churchstanton Parish Council

Cc. CPC, Ross Henley, Sarah Wakefield, The wider community of Churchstanton

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