Dear councillor,

**NHS Transformation and the role of Somerset County Council**

Health services in Somerset are facing another reorganisation as part of the “sustainability and transformation plans” (STPs) that every part of England has to produce to show how health and social care will be transformed and money saved over the next five years.

These plans are supposed to build joined up care between health and local government. But the STPs have no formal place in law, so there are concerns about how those responsible for implementing the plans will be held to account. That means councillors like you have a vital job to do in scrutinising local plans and making sure residents know what is going on and have a voice.

As the biggest union of health and care workers in the UK, representing several thousand members in Somerset, UNISON is concerned that these plans are being attempted at a pace and with a lack of money that will render them at best unachievable, and at worst deeply damaging to local services. In Somerset the savings requirement each year is more than double the current year plans. Given that one of the aims is to develop non bed-based services in the community, this is likely to lead to the closure of community hospitals.

At the same time across Somerset the plan is to reduce emergency care bed days by 29%, elective care bed days by 16%, day case admissions by 9% and outpatient attendances by 14%. There is no information on how this will be achieved and no transitional funding to enable a move to different ways of providing care. At a time when the NHS and adult social care are both creaking under the strain, there is a very real danger that these plans will be used to push through cuts to services in order to meet budget requirements.

In Somerset a decision has been taken to delay any public engagement until after the local council elections. At the very least, these plans should be subject to proper scrutiny by the council’s health overview and scrutiny committee and full debate by the council’s health and wellbeing board. We believe that any implementation plans should be paused until meaningful consultation has taken place with all stakeholders and the NHS and social care funding crisis has been addressed.

Our members working in health and care across Somerset have a right to know what their candidates for council think about the challenges of the STP and how the transformation process will be held publicly to account. Therefore, we are writing to current councillors asking you to answer a number of questions:

1. Do you recognise that the lack of significant additional funding for the NHS places Somerset’s STP at risk of failure?
2. As a councillor, will you actively be making the case for new models of care to be fully tested and up and running alongside existing provision of local health services, prior to such services being reduced or withdrawn as part of reconfiguration plans?
3. Will you work to ensure that the emerging Accountable Care Organisation in Somerset commissions existing and new health services on the basis of the NHS as the preferred provider, and on the basis of a fully integrated and public owned system of health and social care?

Please send a response by 17 April 2017. UNISON will publicise your response to our members who reside and vote in your ward, with “no response” if we do not receive anything by the deadline.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely

**Helen Eccles – head of health, UNISON South West**