

## South Somerset District Council

**Minutes** of a meeting of the **Scrutiny Committee** held at the **Main Committee Room, Council Offices, Brympton Way, Yeovil BA20 2HT** on **Tuesday 3 April 2018**.

(10.00 - 11.55 am)

**Present:**

**Members:** Councillor Sue Steele (Chairman)

Jason Baker	Mike Lock
Dave Bulmer	Alan Smith
John Clark	Rob Stickland
John Field	Gerard Tucker
Carol Goodall	Martin Wale

**Also Present:**

Jo Roundell Greene	Henry Hobhouse
Val Keitch	

**Officers**

Netta Meadows	Director (Strategy & Commissioning)
Tamsin Gold	Benefits Team Leader
Clare Pestell	Director (Commercial Services & Income Generation)
Caron Starkey	Strategic Lead for Transformation
Andrew Kinghan	Project Manager (Transformation)
Caroline White	Commercial Property, Land and Development Manger
Nicola Hix	Lead Specialist (Finance)
Angela Cox	Democratic Services Specialist
Becky Sanders	Case Services Officer (Support Services)

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**132. Minutes (Agenda Item 1)**

The minutes of the meeting held on 27 February 2018 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

**133. Apologies for absence (Agenda Item 2)**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Tony Lock, David Norris and Colin Winder.

**134. Declarations of Interest (Agenda Item 3)**

There were no declarations of interest.

**135. Public question time (Agenda Item 4)**

There were no members of public present at the meeting.

**136. Issues arising from previous meetings (Agenda Item 5)**

The Chairman checked with members that they had now received documents regarding the Yeovil Refresh as had been discussed at the previous meeting. Members confirmed that the papers had been received.

### **137. Chairman's Announcements (Agenda Item 6)**

The Chairman noted that several Scrutiny members had attended an informal Scrutiny meeting with the Strategic Lead for Transformation, who provided an overview of the Transformation Governance arrangements, risk and budget monitoring to improve members understanding. The meeting had been informative and useful.

### **138. Customer Access Strategy: Outline Approach and Key Principles (Agenda Item 7)**

The Director for Strategy and Commissioning introduced the report on behalf of the Lead Specialist (Strategic Planning, Strategy & Commissioning). She provided a presentation which informed members of the Customer Access Strategy currently under development. She explained that the strategy would give structure to the way in which SSDC would be engaging with its customers and communities in the future. It was recognised that the Council wanted as many services as possible available digitally, but it was also acknowledged that this may not always be appropriate to everyone. Work had been done to identify measurable outcomes, but there would be a need to be responsive, and continually develop, improve and change processes when required.

The presentation included information about:

- Why a Customer Access Strategy was needed.
- What was already known?
- What do we undertake to deliver? – Principles and Outcomes
- How will we know we've been successful?

During discussion, the Director and the Strategic Lead for Transformation responded to points of detail, including information about:

- Timeframes regarding preparation of the strategy.
- The suggestion for working with partners regarding training for customers would be investigated further.
- The offer to our customers would need to be right for SSDC and would be tailored to systems. The systems in use, or to be used, were well known known, tried and tested. A system was needed now but processes may change as we gain more customer insight as the authority continued through Transformation.
- Processes would be in place to follow up on abandoned, or incomplete transactions / service requests etc.
- Unlikely to be gaining any more data from customers than currently, but information more likely to be held digitally than on paper.

At the end of discussion, members were content to the note the presentation and report. The Chairman thanked the Director for the information and presentation.

### **139. Civil Penalties Update (Agenda Item 8)**

The Benefits Team Leader presented the report as detailed in the agenda, which provided an update on Civil Penalties in Housing benefit which were introduced from April 2017. She updated members that the penalty for 77 cases had now been collected.

During a brief discussion the Benefits Team Leader responded to points of detail including:

- It was not possible for SSDC to apply a similar penalty to Universal Credit claims but it may be possible to apply a penalty scheme to Council Tax.
- Penalties could not be appealed in isolation but would be considered together with the Housing Benefit claim.
- Explanation of the process for informing the customer about applying penalties
- People in debt could be signposted to other agencies for help and advice such as Citizens Advice. People were encouraged to contact SSDC as soon as possible to notify of a change in circumstances in order to prevent getting into an overpayment situation.

Members were content to note the report and thanked the officer for attending the meeting to answer questions.

**ACTION:** That the report be noted.

#### **140. Verbal update on reports considered by District Executive on 1 March 2018 (Agenda Item 9)**

The Chairman noted that the Scrutiny comments had been considered and were included in the District Executive minutes which had been circulated.

#### **141. Reports to be considered by District Executive on 5 April 2018 (Agenda Item 10)**

Members considered the reports within the District Executive agenda for 5 April 2018 and made comments including:

##### **Transformation Project Progress Report (Agenda item 6)**

- Some members felt that para 22 (page 8) needed to better reflect Locality working providing input into Council objectives within the Council Plan. Others also felt there should be reference to local democracy.
- Regarding staffing - Scrutiny asked if there were still any unfilled posts within Phase 1?
- In referring to their contact with local Town and Parish Councils – members were concerned that some councils had mentioned that Transformation seemed to be being used as an excuse for delays in responding to queries within some departments.
- Members sought reassurance that phases 2 and 3 were on track regarding timeframes
- Members also asked for reassurance that while staff were undertaking selection activities that workloads were being managed.
- Members were concerned if the number of staff vacancies throughout the council was having an impact on service delivery.

##### **Asset Transfer Policy revised to: The Asset Disposal and Community Asset Transfer (Agenda item 7)**

- Scrutiny asked if there were any Community Asset Transfers currently in progress that might get caught up in the change of policy.

- Members asked if the Disposal Assessment Group (DAG) would meet on a regular or ad-hoc basis.
- Members queried if Community Groups and Town/Parish Councils knew that a policy existed?
- Regarding particular assets purchased for investment – some members queried if an asset under-performed was there an option to withdraw?
- Scrutiny queried who would value or assess assets/properties from an independent perspective.

#### **District Executive Forward Plan (Agenda item 8)**

- Scrutiny made no comments.

#### **142. Verbal update on Task and Finish reviews (Agenda Item 11)**

Members noted the updates provided by the Chairman on each of the Task and Finish Groups currently in progress or commencing in the near future.

**Homefinder Somerset Plain English Policy** – No updates since the last meeting.

**Council Tax Support Scheme 2019** – No updates since the last meeting.

**Customer Accessibility** - This group has yet to meet, it has been delayed pending the presentation of the Customer Access strategy, which was discussed earlier on the agenda.

#### **143. Update on matters of interest (Agenda Item 12)**

The Chairman had no updates.

Councillor Martin Wale reported that he, and Councillor Carol Goodall, had recently attended a meeting of the Joint Waste Scrutiny Panel. The meeting had included a site visit to an anaerobic digester near Bridgwater which had been very interesting.

#### **144. Scrutiny Work Programme (Agenda Item 13)**

The Specialist (Democratic Services) referred to some notes made by the Scrutiny Specialist, in which she asked if the committee felt a verbal overview or short report regarding Business Rates Retention would be helpful.

During discussion members felt a report on the take up of Business Rates Relief Schemes would be of interest. Some members also queried if there was anything that could be done to support smaller businesses who were struggling to pay their rates.

Reference was also made to a recent email circulated to members regarding the two stalling of major planning applications and the possible referral to Regulation Committee. Members asked if the situation, and the process as to how we've got where we are regarding planning appeals, was something Scrutiny could look into as they felt there was clearly an issue. After a brief discussion, it was agreed to await further advice from the Specialist (Scrutiny).

**ACTION:** Specialist (Scrutiny) to arrange for reports or provide further advice to a future Scrutiny Committee meeting regarding:

- Take up of Business Rates Relief Schemes
- Planning process regarding appeals and the two starring of planning applications.

**145. Date of next meeting (Agenda Item 14)**

Members noted the next meeting of the Scrutiny Committee was scheduled for 10.00am on Tuesday 1 May 2018 in Council Chamber B, Brympton Way, Yeovil.

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Chairman