

## South Somerset District Council

**Minutes** of a meeting of the **District Executive** held as a **Virtual Meeting using Zoom meeting software on Thursday 4 June 2020.**

(9.30 am - 11.07 am)

### **Present:**

Councillor Val Keitch (Chairman)

Jason Baker  
Mike Best  
John Clark  
Adam Dance  
Sarah Dyke

Peter Gubbins  
Henry Hobhouse  
Tony Lock  
Peter Seib



### **Also Present:**

Robin Bastable  
Hayward Burt  
Nicola Clark  
Brian Hamilton  
Mike Lewis  
Sue Osborne  
Robin Pailthorpe  
Crispin Raikes  
Gina Seaton  
Jeny Snell

Mike Stanton  
Rob Stickland  
Martin Wale  
Nick Colbert  
Jenny Kenton  
Oliver Patrick  
Clare Paul  
Andy Soughton  
Lucy Trimnell

### **Officers:**

Alex Parmley  
Netta Meadows  
Martin Woods  
Clare Pestell  
Nicola Hix  
Kirsty Larkins  
Richard Ward  
Jo Nacey  
Toffer Beattie  
Robert Orrett  
Jan Gamon  
Simon Fox  
Angela Cox  
Becky Sanders  
Jo Morris  
Cara Cheshire

Chief Executive  
Director (Service Delivery)  
Director (Place)  
Director (Commercial Services & Income Generation)  
Director (Support Services)  
Director (Strategy and Commissioning)  
Monitoring Officer  
Section 151 Officer  
Lead Specialist (Digital Change)  
Commercial Property. Land & Development Manager  
Lead Specialist (Strategic Planning)  
Lead Specialist (Development Management)  
Specialist (Democratic Services)  
Case Officer (Strategy & Commissioning)  
Case Officer (Strategy & Commissioning)  
Case Officer (Strategy and Commissioning)

**Note:** All decisions were approved without dissent unless shown otherwise.

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## **134. Minutes of Previous Meeting (Agenda Item 1)**

The minutes of previous meeting held on 7 May 2020 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman, subject to the following addition to Minute 129: Allowenshay Mains Water Project: The reason for deferring the item was expanded to include:

The Chairman confirmed that this item was deferred to a future meeting of the Committee until the financial situation of the Council could be assessed and also to explore other sources of funding for the project.

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**135. Apologies for Absence (Agenda Item 2)**

There were no apologies for absence.

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

There were no declarations of interest made by Members.

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**137. Public Question Time (Agenda Item 4)**

There were no questions from members of the public.

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**138. Chairman's Announcements (Agenda Item 5)**

The Chairman thanked all the staff of the Council for their work during the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic to support the local community. She also thanked Councillors for embracing the new technology and participating in the on-line meetings.

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**139. Impact of Covid-19 on the Council (Agenda Item 6)**

The Portfolio Holder for Protecting Core Services began by thanking officers for their work during the Covid-19 pandemic. He said that officers had protected the core services but there would be a cost to the Council.

The Director for Strategy and Commissioning advised that due to the cost of the pandemic, some Council services may need to be scaled back or paused. Organisationally, the Council were doing their best to support their communities and businesses and almost a quarter of staff had been re-deployed to assist in areas of high demand. The demand on services meant the Council would have to review its Medium Term Financial Plan, Financial Strategy and Council Plan. A draft Recovery Plan was also being prepared. The Recovery Plan also linked with the work being completed by the Heart of the South West relating to economic recovery.

The Portfolio Holder for Finance and Legal said that the loss of income to the Council was an issue. He said the estimated losses would be around £10m in 2020/21 whilst the support from the Government needed to be clarified and they would be pressed through the Local Government Association for further funding. He said that there were reserves held against the risks. The revenue reserve could be used and also the reserve for the Commercial Strategy. If the NNDR Retention Scheme were to be set back by one year

then approximately £2m would be realised into the following year. The Fairer Funding Review had also been held back and could be brought forward but clarification from the Government was needed. Budget and spend monitoring would be stepped up and a new budget would be proposed if required.

In response to questions from Members, the Portfolio Holder for Finance and Legal and the Section 151 Officer advised:

- There was an agreement for SCC to pay £150,000 towards SSDC homelessness costs but the funding had yet to be received.
- SSDC had a legal obligation to make precept payments to Town and Parish Councils and they had to be paid within the calendar year. There were no issues with cash flows but the ability to defer was highlighted in the report.
- A question regarding the commercial investments would be answered individually.

During discussion the following points were made by Members:-

- Investing in infrastructure of regeneration projects during a recession was a good way to boost the health and well-being of residents.
- The report should be read in full and individual paragraphs should not be taken out of context, as parts of the press had done.

The Chief Executive clarified that if the Council were required to draw on their reserves to cover the cost of their response to Covid-19 then the money may not be there for the regeneration projects. But the Council was working with the HotSW LEP and Government to bring the projects forward more quickly as they were recognised as part of the economic recovery.

At the conclusion of the debate, the Chairman thanked officers for their comprehensive report and for responding to questions. Members unanimously agreed the recommendations of the report.

**RESOLVED:** That District Executive:-

1. agreed to note the impact on Covid-19 on Council Services and Finances.
2. agreed to an update every two months, over the coming year or until no longer required.
3. agreed to the approach to dealing with the financial and service impacts of the Covid-19 crisis as set out in paragraphs 48 to 55 in the report.
4. agreed to the revision of the Financial Strategy, Budget and Council Plan, the drafts to be brought back to District Executive in August.
5. agreed to a draft Recovery Plan being brought to District Executive in July.

**Reason:** To give Members an overview of the initial impact Covid-19 has had on the Council including finances, demand, and organisational performance across the Council and the potential implications for the council, its services and what it aims to deliver.

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#### **140. Digital Strategy (Agenda Item 7)**

The Portfolio Holder for Protecting Core Services advised that the Director for Service Delivery had made a comprehensive presentation when the original decision to pursue the strategy had been agreed, bringing together IT, business and delivery strategy. He noted that the report had been presented to the Scrutiny Committee who had been supportive. He said the Strategy would help the Council to become more commercially viable and be more proactive in the delivery of services to the community.

The Lead Specialist for Digital Change advised of the questions asked at the Scrutiny Committee meeting regarding cyber security, governance of the strategy, lessons learned from Transformation and scope to work better digitally with partner organisations.

In response to questions from Members, the Lead Specialist for Digital Change advised:-

- Getting better control of the Council's contractual arrangements was critical and a new team member had started a review of the Council's contractors and suppliers to achieve better consistency in the future.
- Cloud storage was no more or less secure than an on-premises server and if properly managed could be more secure as cloud provider could secure data with better technology and be more dynamic as to security measures than SSDC could achieve on-site.
- As migration to the cloud developed, the specific issue of how and where data was stored would be communicated to Members so all were comfortable that due precautions had been taken for the security of the data.

During discussion, the following points were made by Members:

- Concern that there were other people accessing the storage, exclusive storage would be more secure than a multiple use one.
- For resilience and business continuity consider if we need more than one cloud provider.
- Need to consider changing our style of working and complying with the Public Records Act in terms of communication.
- Although the Strategy focussed on communities and customers, it should also recognise the residents who do not embrace IT and help them to catch up.

At the conclusion of the debate, Members unanimously confirmed the recommendations of the report.

**RESOLVED:** That District Executive agreed to:-

- a. approve the Digital Strategy, with its proposed organisation and operational changes, for immediate adoption and implementation;

- b. note the strategy will be implemented in line with the budget agreed by Full Council as part of the 2020/21 budget setting report in February 2020;
- c. note any potential savings identified as a result of its implementation will be added to the financial strategy and medium term financial plan once identified.

**Reason:** To provide a new council wide Digital Strategy, outlining the strategic aims of the council, why we need a Digital Strategy, how we achieve our objectives and how we measure the outcomes and evaluate our success.

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**141. South Somerset Families Programme - supporting struggling families, improving life chances for children and young people (Agenda Item 8)**

The Leader of Yeovil Community Church, representing Yeovil4Families said they had worked in partnership with SSDC for 8 years and the proposal was to expand the programme to work with more families. Currently, they worked with 75 families and would increase this to 200, to include innovation to understand the unique pressures on families at the current time and how to support them and enable them to help themselves. There were plans in place to up-scale the project and they were being adapted because of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Portfolio Holder for Health and Well-Being said the report set out the details for the proposed delivery to meet the Council Plan priority project 7 – Supporting struggling families and helping to address child poverty and low rates of social mobility across the district. He noted that it was increasingly likely for a child to live in a deprived area within the district as there were 29 neighbourhoods within the 20% most deprived areas. He said the Covid-19 pandemic had increased the impact upon these families so now was the time to turn them around.

The Director for Place advised that the programmed would address issues identified in the Council Plan and support for families was required in rural as well as the urban areas. He said it was a bold programme which would look innovatively at how to address social mobility as Covid-19 was impacting people on lower incomes. The programme hoped to address a number of aims and outcomes as listed in the report over the following 3 years. It was a South Somerset programme and was district wide, expanding to help 200 families in partnership with schools, primary care, police and other agencies and the governance arrangements would reflect that multi-agency approach. The cost of the project was identified for year 1 but not years 2 or 3 as yet and this was to be looked at.

During discussion, Members were supportive of the project and it was suggested that economic development initiatives could be brought in to help. It was also noted that working in an integrated way would help to address the issues within the district and improve the lives of families in the longer term.

At the conclusion of the debate, Members unanimously agreed the recommendations of the report.

**RESOLVED:** That District Executive:-

- a. agreed the development of a strategy, with partners.
- b. in advance of the strategy, agreed action now to start to address some of the issues and challenges.
- c. approved the engagement of Yeovil4Family to carry out the Council's priority project to support struggling families and help address child poverty and low rates of social mobility in the district for a period of three years, subject to meeting agreed milestones.
- d. approved the allocation of funding for Yeovil4Family to carry out this programme of work in the sum of up to £361k for Year 1 of the project which includes £62k of set up costs.
- e. approved in principle, a future funding allocation of £303k for each of the following two years of the programme subject to budget approval and satisfactory progress reports at month 10 and 22 of the project.

**Reason:** To agree a proposed programme delivery the "South Somerset Families Programme" to meet the Council Plan Priority Project 7 - support struggling families and help to address child poverty and low rates of social mobility in the district, and to approve the funding required to enable delivery.

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## 142. Planning Validation Guide (Agenda Item 9)

The Portfolio Holder for Service Delivery reminded Members that the Planning Validation Guide had been presented to them at a workshop the previous week where it had been very well received. He said the document would help to improve the performance of the planning service and Members and officers should work as a team and he thanked officers for their work in compiling the document.

The Director for Service Delivery urged Members to attend the upcoming planning workshops.

In response to questions from Members, the Lead Specialist for Development Control proposed an additional paragraph titled Retrospective Applications be entered at page 7 summarising what a retrospective applications was and how it would be dealt with, as follows:-

Planning applications submitted for development which has already been carried out (retrospective) there is nothing in planning law to stop someone carrying out development in advance of seeking planning permission but they do so at their own risk. Any application that is refused, an enforcement action will be launched direct to the situation. In terms of the applications submission, it is advisable that the fact the application is retrospective is made clear and that photos are submitted to show the current situation of the build, whether half-complete or finished. In these situations,

existing plans should show the situation prior to the work being undertaken with proposed plans showing the proposed finished development.

During discussion, Members expressed their support for the document and welcomed the clarity it gave to applicants regarding the documentation required to submit a valid planning application. They commended the officers responsible for drawing up the guidance.

At the conclusion of the debate, Members unanimously agreed to adopt the Planning Application Validation Guide at Appendix B.

**RESOLVED:** That the District Executive agreed to adopt the Planning Application Validation Guide at Appendix B.

**Reason:** To adopt a new Validation Guide to aid the validation and registration of planning applications.

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#### **143. Planning Enforcement Protocol (Agenda Item 10)**

The Lead Specialist for Development Management said that if adopted the Planning Enforcement Protocol would be launched on 1<sup>st</sup> July 2020, which would allow time for communications and internal training and linked with the on-line Civica reporting system which would replace paper files. He said this would bring a significant change to the way the enforcement service was delivered within the resources available. The Protocol laid out the enforcement processes so that the public and Parish Councils could understand at what stage a complaint had reached in the system. He noted that a perceived lack of communication had been an issue in the past. The Protocol would be reviewed in 12 months time to check it was fit for purpose and updated if necessary. He advised that since March 2018, there had been 522 complaints of alleged breaches of planning control, which took time to investigate properly and several prosecutions were currently being pursued.

During discussion, Members expressed their support for the Protocol and welcomed the positive attitude to enforcement action. Members also thanked the Enforcement Specialist for his work in investigating alleged breaches of planning control

At the conclusion of the debate, Members unanimously agreed to adopt the Planning Enforcement Protocol at Appendix B.

**RESOLVED:** That the District Executive agreed to adopt the Planning Enforcement Protocol at Appendix B.

**Reason:** To adopt a new Planning Enforcement Protocol to support the investigation of breaches of planning regulations.

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#### **144. Investment Assets Update Report (Agenda Item 11)**

The Portfolio Holder for Economic Development introduced the report and reminded Members that the investment in commercial property was made to maintain essential services for residents. He said that some Council's had over extended their risks in commercial investments but the professional staff at SSDC had managed the risk well. They had made prudent assumptions in the portfolio and the risk reserve put aside was sufficient to manage the effects of Covid-19.

The Commercial Property, Land and Development Manager advised that the report covered the period from November 2019 to May 2020 and the overall objective was to invest £150m from April 2017 to March 2022 and to deliver £3.35m of net annual revenue. Their target was a 7% return on investment and so far £92m had been invested. He updated Members on the return on investment of several commercial ventures. He noted that there were 18 assets in the portfolio producing a gross income of £5.29m per annum. During the previous 6 months, two office properties, a trade counter project and a second phase battery storage project at Taunton had been purchased at a cost of £22.75m. He noted that the first phase battery storage project in Taunton was now income generating. The impact of Covid-19 was proving to be a significant challenge to the investment programme. Landlords were generally experiencing delays to their quarterly rents due in March 2020 and some tenants had not paid at all, however SSDC had received 90% of their quarter rents but the next quarter rents could be more challenging although 64% of tenants had confirmed payment would be made and it was hoped to increase this through negotiation. He said there was expectation of economic recession although selected acquisitions could continue to be made taking allowance of the increased risk. The risk reserve was established in recognition that investment was subject to economic cycles and it was currently at £6m which was expected to provide sufficient cover for the impacts arising from Covid-19.

There were no questions from Members and the recommendations of the report were noted.

**RESOLVED:** That District Executive:-

- a. noted the resilience of the property investment portfolio thus far in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- b. noted progress made to date in acquiring new commercial property investments and the asset management following acquisition.
- c. noted the return being achieved across the portfolio which is slightly above the Council's target of 7%.
- d. noted progress being made in securing income from our existing assets and the contribution to the revenue budget towards the revised £3.35m target.
- e. noted progress being made in disposals and transfers of existing assets, resulting in a reduction of future liabilities associated with these assets.



**Reason:** To update members on progress with implementing the Commercial Strategy agreed by Council including the commercial investments and management of the existing asset portfolio since the last half yearly update in January 2020.

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#### **145. District Executive Forward Plan (Agenda Item 12)**

The following additions and amendments to the Forward Plan were noted:

- Priority Project Accelerated Housing Report – July
- Amendments to the Budget, Financial Strategy and Council Plan – moved to August
- Budget outturn and 1<sup>st</sup> quarter monitoring reports – August
- Covid 19 Update Report - financial and service impact – bi-monthly reports
- Investment Asset update report – quarterly reports
- South Somerset Supporting Families – quarterly reports
- Remote meeting protocol - August

**RESOLVED:** That the District Executive:-

1. approved the updated Executive Forward Plan for publication as attached at Appendix A, with the following amendments;
  - Priority Project Accelerated Housing Report – July
  - Amendments to the Budget, Financial Strategy and Council Plan – moved to August
  - Budget outturn and 1<sup>st</sup> quarter monitoring reports – August
  - Covid 19 Update Report - financial and service impact – bi-monthly reports
  - Investment Asset update report – quarterly reports
  - South Somerset Supporting Families – quarterly reports
  - Remote meeting Protocol - August
2. noted the contents of the Consultation Database as shown at Appendix B.

**Reason:** The Forward Plan is a statutory document.

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#### **146. Date of Next Meeting (Agenda Item 13)**

At the conclusion of the meeting, the Chairman thanked all officers for providing their reports and Councillors for attending the on-line meeting.

Members noted that the next scheduled meeting of the District Executive would take place on Thursday 2<sup>nd</sup> July 2020 as a virtual meeting via Zoom meeting software commencing at 9.30 a.m.

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Chairman

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Date