

South Somerset District Council

Minutes of a meeting of the **District Executive** held as a **Virtual Meeting using Zoom meeting software on Thursday 4 March 2021.**

(9.30 am - 11.10 am)

Present:

Councillor Val Keitch (Chairman)

Jason Baker
Mike Best
John Clark
Adam Dance

Sarah Dyke
Peter Gubbins
Tony Lock
Peter Seib



Also Present:

Brian Hamilton
Sue Osborne
Crispin Raikes

Mike Stanton
Andy Kendall

Officers:

Alex Parmley
Clare Pestell
Martin Woods
Nicola Hix
Kirsty Larkins
Richard Ward
Jo Nacey
Jill Byron
Jo Wilkins
Robert Orrett
Vicki Dawson
Adam Burgan
Stephanie Gold
Angela Cox
Michelle Mainwaring
Becky Sanders
Angela Kerr

Chief Executive
Director (Commercial Services & Income Generation)
Director (Place)
Director (Strategy and Support Services)
Director (Service Delivery)
Monitoring Officer
Section 151 Officer
Monitoring Officer
Specialist (Strategic Planning)
Commercial Property, Land & Development Manager
Lead Specialist (Environmental Health)
Arts & Entertainment Manager
Specialist (Scrutiny & Member Development)
Specialist (Democratic Services)
Case Officer (Strategy & Support Services)
Case Officer (Strategy & Support Services)
Chief Executive Officer - Citizens Advice South Somerset
Chief Executive, SPARK Somerset
Voluntary Sector Development Adviser - SPARK Somerset
DCA Consultants
Charcoal Blue Consultants

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

266. Minutes of Previous Meeting (Agenda Item 1)

The minutes of the previous meeting held on 4th February 2021 were approved as a correct record and would be signed by the Chairman.

267. Apologies for Absence (Agenda Item 2)

An apology for absence was received from Councillor Henry Hobhouse.

268. Declarations of Interest (Agenda Item 3)

There were no declarations of interest made by Members.

269. Public Question Time (Agenda Item 4)

There were no members of the public present.

270. Chairman's Announcements (Agenda Item 5)

The Chairman thanked both officer and councillors for the work they were doing during the pandemic. She also thanked those staff who were assisting at vaccination centres across the district.

She noted that the existing legislation which allowed council meetings to be held on-line ceased on 5th May 2021 and that many local government organisations were lobbying the Government to allow them to continue

271. District-wide Strategic Grants - funding arrangements with CASS and SPARK 2021/2022 (Agenda Item 6)

The Chief Executive of SPARK Somerset and introduced the South Somerset Voluntary Service Adviser and they both provided Members with a short presentation on the work of the organisation, which included:

- They had provided support and advice to many Covid volunteer groups.
- They had held 7 South Somerset forums on-line to support local groups with advice and shared learning and 94 representatives had attended.
- 30 South Somerset residents had volunteered to be Covid-19 Community Champions to signpost groups and individuals to well-being services.
- Lottery funding in Chard allowed community groups to meet and work effectively for the health and well-being of local residents.

- Many on-line training sessions had been held including Mental Health Awareness, Adult Safeguarding, Child Protection Training, First Aid, Accounting for Your Project and Volunteer Management. 330 attendees.
- A new County wide volunteering on-line platform had been launched with 361 organisations and 1,972 volunteers already signed up on www.sparkachange.org.uk
- A support service for the NHS health staff and the voluntary sector to access emotional wellbeing support.

The Chief Executive of SPARK Somerset concluded that the core funding granted by SSDC was greatly appreciated and it enabled them to attract additional funding so they were able to do more for the residents of South Somerset.

Councillor Jason Baker said that SPARK Somerset had greatly assisted the Covid volunteer group in Chard when they first set up and it would be good to keep the younger volunteers engaged.

The Chief Executive of Citizens Advice South Somerset advised that when the Covid lockdown began, because they had invested in new IT technology they were able transition their service to phone calls with a small number of face-to-face appointments. With funding from Somerset Community Foundation, they were able to make a number of films for the public on employment advice, managing money, applying for benefits which enabled the public to self-help. She said they had:-

- A package of help, provided in partnership with SSDC, for those affected by redundancy.
- Diversity Voice were a new partner who could assist with language support.
- A pilot for advice kiosks with touch sensitive screens for people with no internet connection.
- A new single point of contact website in partnership with the other Somerset Citizens Advice.
- Assisted more clients during 2020/21 than during 2019/20.
- There were more younger clients and working families seeking advice on redundancy, employment and furlough issues.
- More people were seeking help with food and charitable grants.
- Fewer clients seeking help with debt advice as there were safeguards in place during the Covid. This was expected to increase again.
- Partnership lottery funding had enabled them to set up the Somerset Advice Academy to train advisers so they could work remotely and answer client emails and phone calls.

She concluded that a full end of year report would be available by the end of the month.

The Portfolio Holder for Health and Wellbeing thanked the Chief Executive of SPARK Somerset and Citizens Advice South Somerset for attending to update the Committee on their work. He proposed the recommendations to fund both organisations and this was seconded.

Councillor Jason Baker thanked the Citizens Advice South Somerset for their invaluable assistance for the employees of Oscar Mayer in Chard.

In response to a question, the Specialist for Strategic Planning confirmed the funding for Citizens Advice South Somerset was slightly lower than the previous year as they had been mitigating for the lost funding from the County Council.

During discussion, several members voiced their support for both organisations who had provided key help to vulnerable residents during the Covid pandemic.

The Chairman of the Scrutiny Committee said they had been very supportive of the report and appreciated the work of both organisations. He said the Scrutiny Committee were happy to assist in the commissioning process for the future funding of both organisations.

At the conclusion of the debate, Members unanimously confirmed the funding as detailed in the recommendations for Citizens Advice South Somerset and Spark Somerset.

RESOLVED: That District Executive:-

- a. agreed to a further one year core funding agreement for the period April 2021 to March 2022, for Citizens Advice South Somerset and Spark Somerset;
- b. agreed to a one-off uplift of £11,335 for CASS to fund an additional 22.5 hours a week Adviser to support the significant increase in service demand due to Covid19 for the period April 2021 to March 2022;
- c. agreed to a one-off inflationary uplift of £1,500 for Spark Somerset for the period April 2021 to March 2022;
- d. agreed that the funding of CASS for 2022/23 and beyond will be subject to the outcome of the package of support work described in paragraph 8.1.3 of the report;
- e. agreed that the future funding of Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) infrastructure for 2022/23 onwards will be subject to the outcome of a commissioning process, based on an updated assessment of the future needs of the VCS post Covid.

Reason: To confirm the funding of our two strategic voluntary sector partners, Citizens Advice South Somerset (CASS) and Spark Somerset for the period 2021/2022.

272. The Martock Parish Neighbourhood Plan Referendum (Agenda Item 7)

The Chairman, as Portfolio Holder for Strategy and Housing, introduced the report and congratulated the local residents who had progressed the plan.

The Specialist, Strategic Planning congratulated the Neighbourhood Planning Steering Group for their work in reaching the referendum stage of their Neighbourhood Plan process. She confirmed the referendum would take place on 6th May 2021.

The Chairman of the Scrutiny Committee said that they had sought clarification on the date of the referendum and the effect of any unitary proposal and Government changes to planning policy on all Neighbourhood Plans.

At the conclusion of the debate, Members were content to confirm the recommendations of the report.

RESOLVED: That District Executive:-

- a. agreed the Examiner's report and accepted in full her recommendations for Proposed Modifications to the Martock Parish Neighbourhood Plan;
- b. agreed to officers organising a referendum later this year for local people on the Electoral Register. The aim of the referendum is to ascertain whether local residents want South Somerset District Council to use the Neighbourhood Plan for Martock to help it decide planning applications in the neighbourhood area;
- c. delegated responsibility to the Director for Strategy and Support Services to make any final minor text amendments to the Neighbourhood Plan, in agreement with the Martock Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group.

Reason: To agree the Independent Examiner's report and recommendations for Proposed Modifications; and to set out the process for 'making' the Plan in the event that there is a favourable outcome to the local referendum to be organised by the District Council.

273. Private Sector Housing Grant Policy (Agenda Item 8)

The Lead Specialist for Environment introduced the report and advised this was a revision to the existing policy and there was a requirement to set out how grant money was spent. The changes allowed for flexibility on how the Better Care funding was allocated on discretionary elements as well as mandatory for Disabled Facilities Grants. The repair element had been increased because the cost of works had increased year on year. This provided essential repairs to households who were financially vulnerable to weatherproof their home. There was also increased flexibility on energy efficiency measures to align with the Council's Environment Strategy.

The Chairman of the Scrutiny Committee said they had sought assurance that protocols and safeguarding procedures were in place to protect officers when their decisions faced criticisms in the event of refusal of grant funding.

The Lead Specialist for Environment confirmed that the mandatory element of Disabled Facilities Grants was capped at £30,000 and the discretionary element allowed to provide for larger scale adaptations to properties. There was an Exceptions and Appeals Panel for controversial or unusual grant requests. All decisions were made in accordance with the policy.

At the conclusion of the debate, Members agreed the amendments to the Private Sector Housing Grants/Loans and other Financial Assistance policy.

RESOLVED: That District Executive agreed the amendments to the existing policy concerning the provision of financial assistance for private sector housing and associated matters, including disabled facilities grants, to be adopted as the future policy of the Council. The changes are highlighted in yellow in the Policy document Private Sector Housing Grants/Loans and other Financial Assistance.

Reason: To agree the proposed amendments and adopt the Policy for Awarding Private Sector Housing Grants/Loans and other Financial Assistance in Appendix 1 of this report.

274. Investment Assets Quarterly Update Report (Agenda Item 9)

The Portfolio Holder for Economic Development and Income Generation introduced the report and advised that the commercial investments provided a vital income for the Council so that services were maintained. He drew attention to the recommendations which noted the resilience of the property investment portfolio so far in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Progress in acquiring new investments was on track and rent collection was in excess of 98% which

was a tribute to the team. The net return being achieved was slightly below the target of 7% but the income target of £3.35m p.a. was on track to be achieved.

The Commercial Property, Land and Development Manager advised that additional liaison with tenants, some temporary rent concessions and allowing flexibility on the payment pattern had meant that the quarterly rents collected had been between 95% to 98%. One tenant had broken their lease early and that space would be marketed and re-let, and one other lease had not been renewed at another property in Bristol. Trafalgar House in Taunton was now fully let and the lease on the Ralph at Marlowe was restructured to the advantage of both the tenant and SSDC. The investment market had been strongly affected by the lockdown period during 2020 but it was now recovering. Industrial and distribution investments had generally gained in value, the office sector had weakened slightly and the expectation was for a one-time reduction in demand, high street retail had weakened considerably and the expectation over 4 years was a 50% reduction. Other retail sectors were faring well as were out of town sites. A recent acquisition was a leisure facility on the south coast and due diligence was being progressed on a food production facility and a data centre in the Midlands. A battery storage scheme in Fareham had also been acquired.

The Chairman of the Scrutiny Committee said that disappointment at the progress on the Marlborough development had been expressed at their meeting and the Commercial Property, Land and Development Manager had subsequently circulated a briefing note for them on the development. He said they had been impressed with the level of rent collections under the circumstances and the Commercial Property, Land and Development Manager had answered their questions on points of detail.

The Portfolio Holder for Finance and Legal Services said the income derived from the asset investments was essential to keep council services funded.

At the conclusion of the debate, the Chairman thanked the Director for Commercial Services and Income Generation and her team for their work in progressing the Council's investments. Members were content to note the report.

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 investments and the asset management following acquisition;
- c. noted continued rent collection averaging in excess of 95% over the last three Quarters despite the pandemic;
- d. noted the return being achieved across the portfolio which is slightly below the Council's target of 7% as a result of lease

renewals, securing the future of the asset;

- e. noted progress being made in securing income from our existing assets and the contribution to the revenue budget towards the revised £3.35m target.

Reason: To note the quarterly update on progress with implementing the commercial investment component of the Commercial Strategy agreed by Council.

275. Octagon Theatre Development (Agenda Item 10)

The Portfolio Holder for Health and Well-Being noted that District Executive had agreed in principle to the project at their meeting in January 2021. Officers had investigated if VAT could be reclaimed on the project and it had been confirmed that it could which was a significant impact upon the project. He was also pleased to announce that the Arts Council budget had set aside £10m for the project which was good news to help fund the project. He noted that if the project did not go ahead as planned then significant refurbishment work would still need to be carried out at the theatre. He proposed the recommendations be progressed to Full Council.

The Arts and Entertainment Venues Manager said the confirmation of the funding from the Department of Culture, Media, and Sport upon the recommendation of the Arts Council was very welcome towards the project and the financial projections would be updated prior to presentation to Council.

During discussion, the following points were made:-

- the £10m grant made the project more viable.
- The scale of the expenditure being underwritten by the Council was still large and it was a substantial public project.
- The highest level of scrutiny during the project was required.
- The period of closure during the rebuilding work must be minimised.
- A user requirement document needed to be produced and the seating arrangements must be laid out correctly.
- This was good news for Yeovil and the surrounding area.
- The theatre was surrounded by car parks within a 5 minute walk.

The Chairman of the Scrutiny Committee said that some members had expressed concern at the impact on the smaller theatres across the district. They had also asked for information on progress reports during the development however, they had voiced their support for the project.

It was proposed and agreed that the Project Board also include the Portfolio Holder for Finance and Legal Services and recommendation c. was amended to reflect this.

At the conclusion of the debate, Members confirmed the amended recommendations to Full Council.

RESOLVED: That District Executive:-

- a. noted the confidential appendices, including the report by Charcoal Blue and associated business case documents, to refurbish the existing site and facilities; and to extend the site with both additional educational and income earning facilities, which will assist in repaying the costs of the proposed project over time.
- b. recommend to Full Council to approve the underwriting of the total project costs by SSDC, of up to £23.01m, to be partially offset by successful future grant funding applications, yet to be applied for; with the remainder of the capital sum to be repaid as proposed in the business plan attached to this report.
- c. if approved, recommend to Full Council to give delegated authority to a Project Board that consists of the Portfolio Holder for Health & Well-Being (Chair), the Leader of the Council, the Portfolio Holder for Economic Development, the Portfolio Holder for Finance and Legal Services, the Director of Commercial Services and S151 Officer to progress the project, take appropriate decisions for the project governance set up and reporting arrangements to District Executive on project progress.
- d. recommend to Full Council to approve the cashflow forecast in the business plan.

Reason: To recommend to Full Council the proposal to refurbish and develop The Octagon Theatre and underwrite the full value of the project, up to £23.01 million (excluding VAT that is recoverable in respect of this project), subject to the successful application for various forms of grant funding which would partially offset the overall project costs.

276. District Executive Forward Plan (Agenda Item 11)

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

- SSDC Traded Services – Elleston Services Ltd – May 21
- Capital & Revenue Budget Outturn reports for Quarter 4 – moved to July 21

The Chairman also asked to be updated on the Allowenshay mains water project.

RESOLVED: That the District Executive:-

1. approved the updated Executive Forward Plan for publication as attached at Appendix A, with the following amendments;
 - SSDC Traded Services – Elleston Services Ltd – May 21
 - Capital & Revenue Budget Outturn reports for Quarter 4 – moved to July 21
2. noted the contents of the Consultation Database as shown at Appendix B.

Reason: The Forward Plan is a statutory document.

277. Date of Next Meeting (Agenda Item 12)

Members noted that the next scheduled meeting of the District Executive would take place on Thursday 1st April 2021 as a virtual on-line meeting using Zoom meeting software commencing at 9.30 a.m.

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Chairman

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Date