

MEETING AC.05:0708  
DATE 13.12.07

## South Somerset District Council

**Minutes** of a meeting of the **Audit Committee** held in Committee Room 3/4, Council Offices, Brympton Way, Yeovil on **Thursday, 13th December 2007**.

(10.00 a.m. – 11.40 a.m.)

### **Present:**

**Members:** Derek Yeomans (in the Chair)

Ian Martin  
Roy Mills  
Tom Parsley

John Richardson  
Peter Roake

### **Officers:**

David Stapleton  
Vega Sturgess  
Ian Potter  
Chris Cooper  
Joanne Garrett  
Tony Richbell  
Andrew Blackburn

Corporate Director – Health and Wellbeing  
Corporate Director - Environment  
Head of Revenues and Benefits  
Head of Streetscene Services  
Principal Accountant  
Safety Adviser  
Committee Administrator

### **45. Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting held on the 25th October 2007, copies of which had been circulated, were taken as read and, having been approved as a correct record, were signed by the Chairman.

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### **46. Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were received from Cllrs. Mike Best, Tim Inglefield, Alan Smith and Colin Winder.

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### **47. Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest.

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### **48. Public Question Time**

No comments or questions were raised by members of the public.

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### **49. Health, Safety and Welfare – Annual Report (Agenda item 5)**

The Safety Adviser referred to his report on the agenda, which informed members of health, safety and welfare issues relevant to the Council's activities and undertakings. He indicated that this was an annual report for the Committee, which contained an overview of

health and safety matters and/or concerns, details of new or recent health and safety legislation and comments on other health, safety or welfare matters considered to have some impact on Council activities.

The Safety Adviser further commented that although there were two more accidents than the previous year, the number of working days lost had reduced significantly. In response to a question regarding whether new risk assessments were undertaken where accidents had occurred, the Safety Adviser commented that such assessments would be carried out where appropriate but the accidents that had been reported during the period of this report had been extremely minor. He explained the procedure involved in respect of accident reporting and indicated that areas where it was considered that there may be potential problems of repetition or trends would be looked at. He also commented that work on risk assessments in relation to accidents tended to be dealt with through the Health and Safety Panel.

The Committee was informed that the Health and Safety Panel received a list at their meetings giving more details in respect of the accidents that had occurred and members agreed that a similar report on accidents as that submitted to the Panel should be used to inform future annual reports to the Audit Committee.

The Safety Adviser also responded to specific points raised by members in respect of the details of some of the accidents reported and also regarding the regulations relating to working at height.

With reference to business continuity, the Safety Adviser confirmed that he was putting together a report for the manager responsible with regard to developing a contingency plan for instances where one of the Council's buildings was evacuated as a result of an emergency but could not be reoccupied fairly soon after, and may necessitate leaving the site.

The Committee congratulated the Safety Adviser on the progress being made with matters regarding health, safety and welfare.

- RESOLVED:**
- (1) that the report of the Safety Adviser giving an update on health, safety and welfare issues be noted and accepted;
  - (2) that a similar report on accidents as that submitted to the Health and Safety Panel be used to inform future annual reports to the Audit Committee.

*(Tony Richbell, Safety Adviser – (01935) 462655)  
(tony.richbell@southsomerset.gov.uk)*

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## **50. Update on Homelessness and Stores Audit Reports (Agenda Item 6)**

Reference was made to the agenda report, which, in accordance with the request of the Audit Committee at its meeting on 26th July 2007 (Minute 20), updated members on actions that had been taken to improve processes and internal controls within the Homelessness and Stores Services.

The Committee noted that reports had been issued by Internal Audit, which included a plan that was agreed with the manager of the service outlining the actions that would be taken and a target date agreed for completion. It was also noted that follow up reviews would be carried out on these two Services before the year end and that the Committee would be informed of any outstanding actions resulting from those reviews that were not followed up by the agreed action dates.

The Committee considered the action plans attached to the agenda in respect of both services. The Corporate Director – Environment and Corporate Director – Health and Wellbeing together with the Head of Streetscene Services and Head of Revenues and Benefits attended the meeting to answer members' queries regarding progress in each case.

(1) **Stores Service**

The Head of Streetscene Services referred to the issues that had been identified by the Internal Audit report on the Stores Service and to the action plan that had been put in place. He indicated that members would be able to see from the action plan on the agenda that the matters of concern had been addressed and he was confident that the stores were now being run in an efficient manner.

Upon considering the action plan, the officers responded to members' questions and comments. Matters raised included the following:-

- the Head of Streetscene confirmed that rolling weekly stock checks were in place to ensure that the required levels of stock were maintained. It was felt that such checks were manageable and would achieve the desired outcome;
- the Head of Streetscene also confirmed that if the storeman was away at any time, provisions had been made for other staff within the service to be able to provide cover;
- the Committee noted that the Health and Safety Officer had now been relocated from the stores and if the storeman left the stores at any time he ensured that they were secured;
- the Head of Streetscene referred to the good work carried out by the Support Supervisor and Storeman at Lufton and officers from the Finance Team who had assisted in dealing with the actions identified by the Internal Audit report.

The Committee concurred with the comments of the Chairman who thanked and congratulated the Head of Streetscene and the other officers for their work in dealing with the issues identified in the action plan, which had either been dealt with or were in hand. The Committee asked that continued vigilance be maintained in respect of the operation of the Stores Service.

(2) **Homelessness Service**

The Corporate Director – Health and Wellbeing explained the background and context in which the audit report should be considered. He referred to an initial audit having been undertaken in March 2007, since when considerable progress had been made. He mentioned that a revised audit report had been carried out in August 2007, which recognised the complexity and nature of the service. The revised audit report had also indicated that there had been improvements in certain aspects of the service, details of which he informed the Committee. The report also suggested that there could be further significant improvement over the coming months. The Corporate Director referred to there having been prolonged sickness at management level in the Housing and Welfare Team and that during that time the level of demand for housing advice had risen. He indicated that recording and monitoring had been held back because so much casework was being done. Bearing in mind the sickness in the team at management level, the Management Board had asked the Head of Revenues and Benefits to address the issues raised in the Internal Audit report.

The Head of Revenues and Benefits then gave the background to the action that he had taken since the end of May 2007.

Upon considering the action plan, the officers responded to members' questions and comments. Matters raised included the following:-

- members particularly referred to the issues regarding the recovery of rent in advance payments, non-returned deposits and removal expenses. A full discussion ensued during which the Corporate Director – Health and Wellbeing and Head of Revenues and Benefits explained how these payments operated, the benefits they gave to the operation of the Homelessness service and the arrangements that were put in place in respect of recovery of the payments including when they became repayable by the landlord or the tenant;
- arising from the above issue, members referred to the instances where a tenant may have left a property in poor condition, sufficient to require repairs to be carried out. In response to a question, the Corporate Director indicated that theoretically it was part of the Housing Case Officer's job to carry out an inventory at the beginning and end of a tenancy in agreement with the landlord and tenant. He mentioned, however, that the time was not available to do that in every case and only a sample was undertaken at present;
- the Corporate Director – Health and Wellbeing referred to the number of people on the Housing Register where there was a duty to house them and commented that although the Council had been remarkably successful in enabling a number of additions to the Social Housing Stock, there was insufficient accommodation to enable all those people to be housed. The Council could, therefore, only go to the private sector. He referred to the importance of a good relationship being maintained with private landlords and to the rent in advance and deposit schemes being money well spent in assisting the Council's duty to house homeless people. He also mentioned that the service was trying hard to keep the landlords they were currently working with as well as encouraging others. He also emphasised that it was far better to house people temporarily in the private sector rather than place them in bed and breakfast accommodation, which was far more costly and not an ideal situation for the homeless person;
- a member referred to landlord and tenant regulations, which now required payments to be made to a third party rather than to the landlords themselves. The Head of Revenues and Benefits confirmed that the Council was bound by those regulations and that future payments would be made to a third party. Historically, however, that had not been the case;
- the Committee asked that members be informed of the amount of funding spent on the rent in advance and deposit payment schemes and for an evaluation to be made of the proportion of that funding that may not be recoverable;
- the Corporate Director – Health and Wellbeing confirmed that the housing of migrant workers was creating more demand for accommodation;
- the Corporate Director – Health and Wellbeing explained the difficulties experienced by the Council in meeting the housing need and reported that a dialogue was taking place with the Executive with regard to ways of enabling that need to be fulfilled. He referred to £1.75m being required to meet the objectives in the Corporate Plan and a funding bid had been made. He also referred to the practice of the Council gifting land to registered social landlords

to enable housing development to be provided. The intention to try to provide housing in the most deprived areas was noted;

- the Corporate Director – Health and Wellbeing noted the Committee's suggestion that an informative document be prepared outlining the difficulties and the position of the Council in meeting the demand for affordable housing, which could be readily available for members;
- the Corporate Director – Health and Wellbeing further referred to the need to be yet more proactive in enabling the provision of further affordable housing developments. He reported that there was a need to put more emphasis on the strategic side (i.e. housing strategy and policy and enabling affordable housing development). Equally there was a need for more impetus and support for the operational side of the housing and welfare team. The Corporate Director informed the Committee that the strategic and operational aspects were to be split. The strategic side would be led by Colin McDonald as Corporate Strategic Housing Manager whilst the operational side would be combined with Revenues and Benefits to form a new Housing and Revenues Service, which would be led by Ian Potter as acting head of the combined team. He further reported that the changes were, in practice, already effective but would be presented to members of the Executive for approval early next year. Reference was made to the new arrangements giving greater resilience to cover staff sickness. The freeing up of resources to assist the operational matters was also being explored;
- the Committee noted that work was being undertaken in conjunction with other housing authorities in Somerset to procure a good housing computer system.

The Committee concurred with the comments of a member who was appreciative of the explanation of the difficulties within the Housing service and thanked the officers for the report.

- RESOLVED:** (1) that the actions taken to date in respect of both the Stores and Homelessness Audit Action Plans be noted and accepted;
- (2) that members of the Committee be informed of the amount of funding spent on the rent in advance and deposit payments schemes and an evaluation be made of the proportion of that funding that may not be recoverable.

*(Donna Parham, Head of Finance – (01935) 462225)*

*(donna.parham@southsomerset.gov.uk)*

*(Vega Sturgess, Corporate Director - Environment – (01935) 462200)*

*(vega.sturgess@southsomerset.gov.uk)*

*(Chris Cooper, Head of Streetscene Services – (01935) 462840)*

*(chris.cooper@southsomerset.gov.uk)*

*(David Stapleton, Corporate Director – Health and Wellbeing – (01935) 462388)*

*(david.stapleton@southsomerset.gov.uk)*

*(Ian Potter, Acting Head of Housing and Revenues – (01935) 462270)*

*(ian.potter@southsomerset.gov.uk)*

## 51. 2007/08 Statement of Internal Controls Action Plan (Agenda Item 7)

The Principal Accountant introduced the agenda report and the Committee reviewed the progress with the 2007/08 Statement of Internal Controls Action Plan.

Upon considering the action plan a number of comments were made including the following:-

- reference was made to issue 3 regarding the provision of management reports on risk management. It was noted that reports were being made but that some reassessment of individual risks by managers were still required. The Committee indicated that it would expect to see completion of those reassessments in the New Year;
- in referring to the register for potentially violent warning markers and dangerous buildings (issue 5), members felt that the register should be completed as soon as possible. The Committee asked to be informed of the progress being made with the register;
- reference was made to the improved process for regular monitoring of actions identified in Internal Audit reports that had been agreed by the Corporate Governance Group (issue 8) and the Committee asked to be informed of the expected date for its implementation;
- having noted the proposal to implement cash machines at the Chard Office (issue 7), members asked to be informed of what measures had been implemented to protect staff in the meantime;
- in referring to the new project management guidance, the Committee noted that it was now in place and asked that a copy be deposited in the Members' Room at Brympton Way.

The Committee suggested that the response to the questions set out above be attached to these minutes for members' information.

**RESOLVED:** that the progress report in respect of the 2007/08 Statement of Internal Controls Action Plan be noted.

*(Donna Parham, Head of Finance – (01935) 462225)  
(donna.parham@southsomerset.gov.uk)*

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## 52. Date of Next Meeting (Agenda item 8)

Members noted that the next meeting would be held on Thursday, 24th January 2008 at 10.00 a.m. in the Main Committee Room, Council Offices, Brympton Way, Yeovil.

**NOTED.**

*(Andrew Blackburn, Committee Administrator – (01460) 260441)  
(andrew.blackburn@southsomerset.gov.uk)*

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Chairman

## 2007/08 Statement of Internal Controls Action Plan

### Responses for Audit Committee Members

Further to the meeting held on 13th December 2007, the following additional information is provided on the 2007/08 Statement of Internal Controls Action Plan.

#### Risk Management

The risk register is reported to Management Board every 2 weeks. It is then the responsibility of the relevant director to progress and manage any risks in their particular area.

#### Register for Potentially Violent Warning Markers and Dangerous Buildings

A free software system is currently being evaluated which will act as a register, produce standard letters, allow intelligence to be shared within the organisation, and allow users to easily update the information.

#### Improvements in Internal Audit Findings

When will the monitoring process be rolled out ?

The Group has already rolled out the list of actions. Training sessions have also already been held with staff on financial procedure rules including ethics and the role of internal audit. There has also been a presentation to the Senior Managers Forum.

#### A Review of Cash Office Security in Chard

Current security measures are:

- Staff have undergone specialist training for potentially dangerous situations.
- There are panic alarms in place, and these have been checked as working effectively. These are linked to a security centre; if the button is pressed the security centre then contacts the police.
- Measures are taken to ensure that a cashier is never on their own, i.e. there is either a customer advisor present or a librarian close at hand.
- There is also CCTV coverage of the area.

#### Project Management Guidelines

A copy should now be in the Members Room.