

MEETING AC.03:0910
DATE 23.07.09

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, 23rd July 2009**.

(10.00 a.m. – 10.45 a.m.)

Present:

Members: Ian Martin (in the Chair)

Mike Best	Roy Mills
John Calvert	Peter Roake
John Hann (from 10.10 a.m.)	Colin Winder

Also Present:

Tim Carroll
Robin Munday

Officers:

Donna Parham	Head of Finance
Simon Gale	Head of Development and Building Control
Ian Potter	Acting Head of Housing and Revenues
Andrew Blackburn	Committee Administrator

20. Minutes (Agenda item 1)

The minutes of the meeting held on the 25th June 2009, copies of which had been circulated, were taken as read and, having been approved as a correct record, were signed by the Chairman.

21. Apologies for Absence (Agenda item 2)

Apologies for absence were received from Cllrs. John Richardson, Alan Smith and Derek Yeomans.

22. Declarations of Interest (Agenda item 3)

There were no declarations of interest.

23. Public Question Time (Agenda item 4)

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

24. Audit Review Section 106 Obligations and Commuted Sums Update Report (Agenda item 5)

The Head of Development and Building Control summarised the agenda report, which updated members on the actions taken to date in response to the Audit review carried out by the South West Audit Partnership (SWAP) in respect of Section 106 planning obligations and commuted sums and since the Committee's meeting of 22nd January 2009, when this matter was last reported.

The Head of Development and Building Control referred to the key actions set out in the agenda report as follows:-

Action Point 2

Reference was made to action point 2, which related to ensuring that the monitoring databases in the various service areas were merged with the current legal database and that the central database was developed so that key dates in each obligation were flagged at the appropriate time. The Head of Development and Building Control reported that IDOX, the company that provided the current UNIFORM (planning back office) system were rewriting their bespoke module that would run in conjunction with the UNIFORM system. He reported that the IT unit had advised that it may not be wise for the Council to be the first users of the module and that realistically its implementation was 9 months' away but the module would do what the Council required. He further referred to a Microsoft Access based system that had also become available, which seemed to be satisfactory and was being used successfully by another local authority. The IT unit had advised, however, that if the system was bought in from another local authority support for it would not be available and therefore it would not be such a good option. Also, it would mean that information would have to be input into both that system and UNIFORM, which would mean an element of double handling.

The Head of Development and Building Control commented that with the current economic climate, there were not so many planning applications coming forward that involved Section 106 obligations. He recommended, therefore, that the Council wait for the bespoke module from IDOX. In the meantime, however, there was still a need to ensure that a robust database was available and the Head of Development and Building Control reported that a database had been developed in consultation with the Legal and Finance units, an example of which was handed to members present at the meeting. In response to a question he confirmed that the information within the database would be accessible to everyone that needed to refer to it.

The Head of Finance commented that she felt that the database would provide a good interim process until the new system from IDOX was available. She mentioned, however, that it must be ensured that the spreadsheet was sent to lead officers in each relevant service area periodically, notwithstanding that the information was contained on a computer database, to make certain that they monitored their part of it.

In response to members' questions, the Head of Development and Building Control commented that it would be worthwhile to enter information relating to external agencies or town/parish councils onto the database but the responsibility for monitoring would lie with the relevant organisation unless it involved a matter that required some form of enforcement input. It was accepted that any requirements relating to Section 106 obligations should be included on the database regardless of who was responsible for monitoring them.

In response to a member's question, the Head of Finance reported that where a commuted sum with interest was paid by the developers it would stay as part of the

Section 106 obligation but where the interest was accumulated from monies already held in the Council's accounts, it would remain with the Council.

The Committee indicated its support for awaiting the availability of the new bespoke module from IDOX that would run in conjunction with the UNIFORM system and for the use of the interim database referred to by the Head of Development and Building Control in the meantime.

Action Point 4

The Head of Development and Building Control handed to members present at the meeting a copy of the process map for the handling of Section 106 obligations, which indicated the process before and after a Section 106 Agreement was signed. It was noted that the lead officers were being consulted on the content of the process map.

Members indicated their support for the process map shown by the Head of Development and Building Control.

Action Point 1

Reference was made to the need to ensure that there was a robust mechanism in financial services for allocating monies received from developers to the relevant service areas and the Committee showed its support for the process set out in the agenda report.

Action Point 3

The lead officers that had been designated in each relevant service area for the monitoring of Section 106 obligations were noted and supported by the Committee.

Action Point 5

The Committee noted the report of the Head of Development and Building Control that, once the new module from IDOX was in place, it would be able to run regular management reports.

Members indicated that they were content with the actions taken to date with regard to ensuring that an effective and robust system was in place for the monitoring of Section 106 planning obligations.

RESOLVED: that the report of the Head of Development and Building Control outlining progress with the actions being taken to ensure that an effective and robust system was in place for the monitoring of Section 106 planning obligations be noted and accepted subject to the comments of members set out above being taken into account.

(Simon Gale, Head of Development and Building Control - (01935) 462071)
(simon.gale@southsomerset.gov.uk)

25. Update on Homelessness Service Audit Action Plan (Agenda Item 6)

The Acting Head of Housing and Revenues referred to the agenda report, which provided members with an update on the actions being taken to improve processes and internal controls in the Homelessness Service. He summarised the background to this matter and reported that there had been significant progress made by the service since the original audit review took place in March 2007 when no assurance could be given. He reported that the latest audit undertaken by the South West Audit Partnership during the final quarter of

2008/09 had indicated that a reasonable assurance could now be given as most of the areas reviewed were found to be adequately controlled. It was noted in the latest audit that generally risks were well managed but some systems required the introduction or improvement of internal controls to ensure the achievement of its objectives and a new action plan had been produced. A copy of the key actions was attached to the agenda.

The Acting Head of Housing and Revenues further reported that the service had been hampered by the lack of a good IT system and a new system had now been introduced. Record keeping had now been improved with all records and information stored in one place, which had made the task of monitoring and case management easier.

In response to comments from members, the Acting Head of Housing and Revenues reported that a spreadsheet record was kept, which highlighted when a case needed a follow up. For example, landlords should inform the Council when tenants left their property, which most did, but the system would identify if that was not the case and that a landlord check was required. He also indicated that exit surveys had not been done initially because there was no system in place to identify when they were needed.

Reference was made to action 8.1 regarding the recovery of aged debt and a member questioned whether the implementation date of August 2009 was realistic. The Acting Head of Housing and Revenues commented that a Housing Administration Officer's post had recently become vacant and that there was a need to recruit, which could affect this deadline. He also mentioned that the intention had been to look at improving the recovery of this debt in conjunction with overpaid housing benefit, which followed a similar process, but under the current senior management restructure the two services would be separated. The Head of Finance informed members that she had been considering this issue and referred to part of the problem being tenants having to pay in small amounts, which could be difficult to collect, as well as dealing with vulnerable people. She reported that an officer from the Housing unit would be looking at the financial aspects of the Homelessness Service, the intention being that one officer would deal with the financial elements. She hoped that a system would be in place by the end of September and reported that an update on progress would be given as part of the next quarterly monitoring report in October 2009. The Committee indicated that it was content with the revised date in this case.

RESOLVED: that the actions and progress made to date to improve the processes and internal controls in the Homelessness Service be noted and accepted.

(Ian Potter, Acting Head of Housing and Revenues - (01935) 462941)
(ian.potter@southsomerset.gov.uk)

26. Date of Next Meeting (Agenda item 7)

Members noted that the next meeting would be held on Thursday, 27th August 2009 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