

South Somerset District Council

Minutes of a meeting of the **Scrutiny Committee** held on **Tuesday 13th November 2007** in the Main Committee Room, Council Offices, Brympton Way, Yeovil.

(9.30 am – 12.45 pm)

Present:

Members: Rupert Cox (in the Chair)

John Calvert	Hannah Lefevre
John Vincent Chainey	Pat Martin
Geoff Clarke	Tom Parsley
Peter Gubbins	Jean Smith
John Hann	Sue Steele

Also Present:

Tim Carroll	Peter Seib
Tony Fife	Sylvia Seal

Officers:

Rina Singh	Corporate Director (Communities)
Mark Pollock	Corporate Director (Economic Vitality)
Simon Gale	Head of Development & Building Control
Donna Parham	Head of Finance
Martin Woods	Head of Area Development (South)
Alan Brown	Yeovil Vision Projects Director
Gary Russ	Procurement & Support Services Manager
Emily McGuinness	Scrutiny & Acting Democratic Services Manager
Angela Cox	Committee Administrator

66. Minutes (Agenda Item 1)

The minutes of the ordinary meeting held on 9th October 2007 were approved as an accurate record and signed by the Chairman.

67. Apologies for Absence (Agenda Item 2)

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillors Derek Nelson, Paull Robathan, Keith Ronaldson and Alan Smith.

68. Declarations of Interest (Agenda Item 3)

There were no declarations of interest.

69. Public Question Time (Agenda Item 4)

There were no questions from members of the public.

70. Issues arising from previous meetings (Agenda Item 5)

It was noted that following the call-in of the report on the Provision of Public Conveniences in Yeovil at the September meeting of the Scrutiny Committee, a full report on this should have been presented to the District Executive on 1st November.

The Leader of the Council explained that although there was a policy on toilet provision across the district, it was only a financial policy not one determining the number of actual conveniences. He had decided to allow officers more time to compile a full report including the location of a new permanent site, sources of funding and adequate signage to the temporary toilets in Peter Street Car Park. This report would now be presented to District Executive on 6th December 2007.

The Chairman of Area South Committee confirmed that temporary toilets had been installed in Peter Street car park for the Christmas period, which had been part funded by Yeovil Town Council and Area South Committee.

71. Chairman's Announcements (Agenda Item 6)

The Chairman thanked Councillor Sylvia Seal as Portfolio Holder for Sport, Arts & Leisure for arranging the Yeovil Sports Zone event for Members on 22nd October which he said had been very informative and useful for those who attended.

The Chairman formally announced that Emily McGuinness was now Acting Democratic Services Manager as well as Scrutiny Manager. He advised that he had formally written to the Chief Executive and spoken to the Leader of the Council to request that this should not form part of any future budget savings.

The Chairman also welcomed two Councillors from West Somerset, who following the Beacon Council open day on 30th October, had requested to observe SSDC's Scrutiny Committee in session.

72. Progress Reports on Scrutiny Commissions (Agenda Item 7)

Members noted the following:

- The Economic Vitality and the Environment Overview Commission looking at Objective 19 of the Corporate Plan - CO₂ Emissions was still ongoing and the Scrutiny Manager said she would inform Members by e-mail of the progress made to date.
 - The Well Managed Services Overview Commission, looking at the Contact Centre would be meeting again on 20th November 2007.
 - The Economic Vitality and the Environment Overview Commission looking at Cycling Promotion would now be meeting in January 2008 with officers from Somerset County Council.
 - A Commission would be set up shortly to look at Members IT provision
 - A very successful meeting of the Well Managed Services Overview Commission, looking at the Octagon Theatre had been held the previous week.
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73. Yeovil Vision Progress Report (Agenda Item 8)

The Portfolio Holder, Councillor Tony Fife, announced that the prospective developer for the Foundry House site had finally been appointed the previous day. He felt that Cornhill Developments would treat the building sympathetically and had put forward a high standard of architecture. This was one of the first major steps towards the Yeovil Vision becoming a reality, to improve the architectural environment of the town. Also, Option 5a, for road improvements along Reckleford and Sherborne Road were progressing well with the Yeovil Vision Projects Director leading on this.

The Corporate Director (Economic Vitality) commended the report, which he said charted the progress of the Yeovil Vision since it was begun by the LSP in 2003. He said the Galaxy group of local community leaders had been praised by CPA Inspectors in 2004 and 2006 and the Vision was now moving from ideas and concepts to actual delivery. Funding of £800,000 over two years would be used to deliver and pump-prime developments and to fund the position of the Projects Director.

The Yeovil Vision Projects Director spoke of his role to turn the Yeovil Vision into reality over the following two years. He said that he would be working closely with both the private and public sector to manage and deliver the Vision and he spoke of the importance to refresh the Vision periodically in response to changes within the town.

During discussion, it was noted that:-

- The Leonardo Arts and Technology building at Yeovil College, which was opened recently by David Laws MP, was attributed as part of the Yeovil Vision although it was wholly privately funded.
- The progress of delivery of the projects within the Yeovil Vision must be carefully checked.
- Development work at Foundry House and Mill Lane would impact on public parking within the town and until these developments were complete, no other car parks within the town should be disrupted.
- Further promotion of the use of the Octagon Theatre during the day should be postponed until the issue of car parking nearby was resolved.
- There was currently no further commitment of funding to the Vision other than the £800,000 over two years and private funding for many of the projects would be actively sought.

One Member expressed concern at the lack of accountability of the Galaxy Group, however, the Leader of the Council assured him that they were not a decision making group and had no controlling right over the Yeovil Vision.

The Chairman then concluded that the report be noted and a further report of the Yeovil Vision be presented to the Scrutiny Committee prior to any future capital bid to the District Executive.

RESOLVED:

1. That the report be NOTED.
2. That a further progress report on the Yeovil Vision be presented to the Scrutiny Committee in November 2008.

*Alan Brown, Yeovil Vision Projects Manager – (01935) 462669
e-mail: alan.brown@southsomerset.gov.uk*

74. Review of the Development Control ** System – Referral of Applications to Regulation Committee (Agenda Item 9)

The Head of Development and Building Control said he had thoroughly reviewed the current two star system of referral of planning applications to the Regulation Committee. Due to the existing Scheme of Delegation, only 4% of planning applications were now referred to Area Committees and he had found no evidence within that 4% to warrant making any fundamental changes to the existing system. He drew Members attention to the highlighted changes within the report, particularly the flexibility at an Area Committee meeting to refer an application to Regulation even if it had not been previously marked as two stars on the Agenda.

The Portfolio Holder, Councillor Peter Seib, confirmed that it was for the lead planning officer, in consultation with the Chairman and the Solicitor to suggest referring an application from the Area Committee to the Regulation Committee, if they felt that the debate by Members warranted this. He said that there would always be clear instances where planning applications should be referred to Regulation Committee.

During discussion, Members noted that:-

- Sometimes Area Committees had referred applications to Regulation Committee because they wished to make a particular decision but were concerned that the cost of any future appeal of that decision could result in costs which could impact on the Area budget
- The award of costs was a material planning consideration but where the costs came from should not. There was a small central budget to meet the cost of appeals.
- It was for Area Committees to add local knowledge and value but for Regulation Committee to provide consistency of decision making across the district.
- The current Regulation Committee referral was a very fair system of determining contentious planning applications.
- Retrospective planning applications had to be treated the same as any other application.

The Chairman said that as Members still had some concerns on referral, he asked that the Head of Development and Building Control monitor the number and type of planning applications referred to Regulation Committee for the following 12 months, and, together with anecdotal evidence from Regulation Committee members, present an update report to the Scrutiny Committee in November 2008.

RESOLVED: That the Scrutiny Committee:

1. endorse the continuation of the Development Control ** System of referral of planning applications to Regulation Committee
2. support the minor changes to the criteria for referral to Regulation Committee
3. request an update report on the number and type of planning applications referred to Regulation Committee in the following 12 months, to be presented to Scrutiny Committee in November 2008.

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

75. Area Based Decision Making (Agenda Item 10)

The Head of Development and Building Control advised that he had compiled his response in consultation with members of his team. Although he had investigated the option of having one Planning Committee, this would result in an increase in cost as the Area Committees would continue to exist to conduct other executive functions. He said that performance within the department was still increasing with Area Based Decision Making (ABDM) as the Scheme of Delegation now meant that only 4% of all planning applications were determined by an Area Committee

The Portfolio Holder, Councillor Peter Seib, said that no one system was perfect as highlighted by the advantages and disadvantages of ABDM detailed in the review report. He felt there was more depth to a local decision and it was important to look at the benefits of ABDM, not just the cost.

During discussion, Members made the following points:-

- Area decision making allowed for the differences between Yeovil and the surrounding market towns and rural areas.
- Quality decision making came from regular training of Members in policy and practice changes.
- A centralised Planning Committee would have more applications to consider and could be a lengthy meeting.
- Ward Members should ensure that their Parish Councillors have the opportunity for planning training, if they request it.

The Chairman concluded that the Scrutiny Committee:-

- recognised and concurred with the response made by the Head of Development and Building Control and agreed that there would be no savings made by centralising the Planning Committee function.
- agreed that the current Area Committee structure promoted Democratic Representation and quality decision making
- promote and recognise the importance of ongoing training of all Councillors
- recognise the importance of the Regulation Committee to provide consistency of decision making in line with current Planning Policy across the district.

RESOLVED: that the report be noted with the comments as above to be incorporated into the Council's response to the Area Based Decision Making consultation document.

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

76. Medium Term Financial Plan (Agenda Item 11)

The Head of Finance said that this had been the first reported to District Executive on 4th October and she was eager to receive pre-budget comments on it from Scrutiny

Committee Members also. The full cost of the Countywide Concessionary bus fares was still unknown and she was still waiting to hear what the Government grant would be. The Council Tax setting was generally in line with inflation, with an additional 2% to fund capital projects. The drop in car park fees plus the unknown cost of the Countywide Concessionary bus fares had contributed to the projected £2.4m budget shortfall the following year. Bentley Jennison had been engaged to take a corporate view of lean thinking/business re-engineering and their report was due shortly. She expected it would report a reduction in non-priority areas of work and with some process re-engineering, should produce some savings. However, although services had been split into compulsory/discretionary and priority/non-priority, Portfolio Holders would be consulted before any decisions were made. She said that she was also formulating a matrix and scoring mechanism for the bids to the Corporate Plan.

The notes of the Budget Overview Commission meeting, held on 2nd November 2007 were circulated at the meeting.

During discussion, it was noted that:-

- The reduction in car parking fees was partly the result of a town centre supermarket offering 3 hours free parking and partly due to the concessionary bus fare scheme.
- Although there would be difficult decisions to cut services, there would be avenues for all Members to comment on any proposed reductions.
- Members Frontline Community grants could be reduced or discontinued.

The Head of Finance said she would be presenting a Capital report to Scrutiny Committee in December 2007 and the Annual Budget report in January 2008.

RESOLVED: that the report be noted with the comments as above to be passed to the District Executive.

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

77. Procurement Activity Update Report (Agenda Item 12)

The Corporate Director (Communities) explained that this was a staged progress report and it presented a good position of savings accrued via the procurement strategy, thanks to the work of the Procurement Manager and finance staff.

The Procurement and Support Services Manager said that procurement activity was an ongoing, continuous process but the foundations of the Strategy were now in place. He worked with Managers and advised them of potential areas of savings within their service.

In response to questions, the Procurement and Support Services Manager explained that:-

- The E-Auction was a funded through the South West Centre of Excellence for printing companies to use an electronic medium to bid down to an agreed price to deliver Council printing work.
- Although it was a Council requirement to support the local economy and local businesses, this was not always appropriate for some large Council contracts.

However, as far as possible, contracts were flexible to allow local companies to tender.

The Head of Finance confirmed that the Procurement and Support Services Manager's post had originally been appointed as self-financing, however, this was no longer deemed appropriate and so an inescapable bid had been submitted to regularise this post. The cost of the post was more than paid for in the savings it achieved across the Authority.

Members were content to note the report and to receive another progress update in November 2008.

- RESOLVED:**
1. that the report be noted with the comments as above to be passed to the District Executive.
 2. that a further progress report be presented in November 2008.

*Gary Russ, Procurement & Support Services Manager – (01935) 462076
e-mail: gary.russ@southsomerset.gov.uk*

78. Scrutiny Work Programme 2007/08 (Agenda Item 13)

The Scrutiny Manager advised that:-

- the Chief Executive would be attending Scrutiny Committee in December to brief Members on the latest CPA Assessment.
- A briefing paper on the work of the Scrutiny Commission looking at Objective 19 of the Corporate Plan - CO₂ Emissions, would be issued shortly.
- The Head of Finance would be presenting a Capital report to Scrutiny Committee in December 2007 and the Annual Budget report in January 2008.
- An further update on the Post Office and Village Shops Commission would be made following the Government's announcement of closures in February 2008.

It was requested that a report on the sale of Council-owned land to private developers be brought to Scrutiny Committee.

Concern was noted at the reduction in the Meals-on-Wheels service by Social Services and the Scrutiny Manager offered to investigate this through other Scrutiny Managers across the county and report back.

RESOLVED: That the Scrutiny Work Programme 2007/08 be noted with the updates as above.

*Emily McGuinness, Scrutiny Manager – (01935) 462148
e-mail: emily.mcguinness@southsomerset.gov.uk*

79. Executive Forward Plan (Agenda Item 14)

Members were content to note the report.

RESOLVED: That the Executive Forward Plan be noted.

*Ian Clarke, Head of Legal & Democratic Services – (01935) 462184
e-mail: ian.clarke@southsomerset.gov.uk*

80. Date of Next Meeting (Agenda Item 15)

Members noted that the next meeting of the Scrutiny Committee would take place on **Tuesday 11th December 2007 at 9.30a.m. in the Main Committee Room, Brympton Way, Yeovil.**

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Chairman