

South Somerset District Council

Minutes of a meeting of the **Scrutiny Committee** held on **Thursday 15th January 2009** in the Main Committee Room, Council Offices, Brympton Way, Yeovil.

(10.00 a.m. – 1.15p.m.)

Present:

Members: Councillor Sue Steele (Chairman)

Dave Bulmer
John Calvert
Geoff Clarke
Tony Lock
Pat Martin

Derek Nelson
Tom Parsley
Keith Ronaldson
Alan Smith

Also Present:

Councillors Peter Gubbins, Tim Carroll, Robin Munday and Martin Wale

Officers:

Phil Dolan	Chief Executive
Donna Parham	Head of Finance
Rina Singh	Corporate Director - Communities
Lyn Lockyer	Member Development Officer
Sue Eaton	Performance & Communications Manager
Jo Morris	Committee Administrator
Anne Herridge	Committee Administrator

67. Minutes (Agenda Item 1)

The minutes of the meeting held on 18th December 2008 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman subject to the following amendment:

Councillor Peter Gubbins to be included under the list of members present at the meeting.

68. Apologies for Absence (Agenda Item 2)

Apologies for absence were received from Emily McGuinness, Scrutiny Manager and Acting Democratic Services Manager and Councillors John Richardson and John Hann.

69. Declarations of Interest (Agenda item 3)

There were no declarations of interest.

70. Public Question Time (Agenda Item 4)

There were no questions from members of the public.

71. Issues Arising from Previous Meetings (Agenda Item 5)

There were no issues arising from previous meetings.

72. Chairman's Announcements (Agenda Item 6)

The Chairman informed members that together with Councillor John Calvert, she had attended the Pioneer Somerset Joint Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 19th December 2008.

73. Update from District Executive (Agenda Item 7)

The Chairman informed members of the items that had been considered by the District Executive at its meeting on 8th January 2009 including the Review of Community Grants Priorities and Policies and the Wincanton Community Sports Centre – Swimming Pool Tile Repairs, which had been considered as a confidential item.

Councillor Geoff Clarke referred to the Wincanton Community Sports Centre item and said that he had concerns over the way in which the matter had been addressed. Councillor Geoff Clarke agreed to the suggestion to meet with the Chief Executive and that if following this meeting he wished the issue to be discussed by the Scrutiny Committee a confidential item would be added to the agenda for the February Scrutiny Committee meeting.

74. Pioneer Somerset (Agenda Item 8)

The Leader of the Council introduced the report. He referred to the ten recommendations contained within the report and informed members of two additional recommendations agreed by the District Executive:

- That the Chief Executive present a challenging and innovative report to District Executive, detailing the full options and outcomes of the Pioneer Somerset Project, in June 2009.
- That the District Executive strongly promote the continuance of the Joint Scrutiny Committee as a prerequisite of the Pioneer Somerset Project.

The Chief Executive advised that the report was not the challenging and innovative report that he had hoped for and that a more challenging report would come back in April/May.

During discussion on this item, Members made the following comments:

- Communication across the board appeared to be extremely poor;
- Concern was expressed over communication with the unions and staff;
- There appeared to be no end projection of the project and progress was sketchy;

- Efficiency savings should be the focus of the project;
- Parish/Town Councils would also want the finance devolved to them and it was not clear whether this was the case;
- Disappointment was expressed over the role of the Joint Scrutiny Committee as there was little evidence of any progress;
- The Pioneer Somerset Project must work and be seen to work by Government or they may reconsider unitary authority status for the County;

In response, the Chief Executive and the Leader advised that:-

- The original report had identified 9 work streams and out of these 3 had been identified as being key, although work was still happening in the other areas;
- In South Somerset, discussions had taken place with staff and the unions, although at the present time there was nothing concrete to tell them;
- There were huge frustrations with the project and it was acknowledged that communication was slow;
- It was the intention from the start for the project to be ambitious and if the project leaders were not careful the initial vision may disappear;
- The Government Office would expect to see progression;
- Solace Enterprises had been appointed to lead the project. They were responsible for ensuring that authorities were delivering to deadlines. It was now hoped that the project would gain momentum and focus;
- So far very few parishes were interested in seeing services devolved to them. The deadline for responses to the questionnaire had been extended to assist parishes. It was hoped that the information would be available within the next 4 weeks;
- The responsibility for preparing reports sat with each individual authority. South Somerset was responsible for Political Leadership and it was up to each authority to complete the work;
- It was recognised that this was a vast bureaucratic process that shouldn't be a constraint on co-operation. The process shouldn't constrain each authority from looking for other savings with other authorities;
- South Somerset had a record of discussing devolution/finance, however this was not always the case with other authorities;
- Credit should be given to the Joint Area Committees with Somerset County Council, as the first example of partnership working alongside the Pioneer Somerset Project.

RESOLVED: That the comments of the Scrutiny Committee be submitted to Full Council in February.

*Philip Dolan, Chief Executive, 01935 462101
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75. Capital Programme (Agenda Item 9)

The Portfolio Holder for Finance and Support Services introduced the report.

The Head of Finance explained that the District Executive had agreed to remove the allocation of £364,000 in 2009/10 for the Sports Zone – Outline Planning Permission from the Profile of Capital Bids and that the allocation would be returned to balances for future schemes.

In response to a member question, the Head of Finance explained the scoring mechanism used to score each bid. She explained that the process took into account how closely aligned the bid was to the Corporate Plan, and also whether the project would receive partnership funding. She further explained that a cut off point was then made on scoring depending on affordability and the need to keep capacity for other projects. The schemes held over could bid again next year. Members were informed that Officers undertook the scoring process and that there was no personal or political in put, it was based purely upon the information received from officers. The Project Resource Group was tasked with pulling the evidence together and the process was about scoring the project and not about the cost of each project.

In referring to Appendix B – Profile of Capital Bids, the Head of Finance agreed to take on board the suggestion of clearly marking the cut off point for bids in the presentation of future reports.

One member referred to Yeovil Town Council being informed of the decision not to include a particular scheme in the Capital Programme prior to Area South being informed. In response, members were informed that no final decision had been made on schemes that would go forward to Full Council for approval.

In response to member questions, the Head of Finance advised that:

- Although the Frontline Community Grants Scheme was a non-scoring scheme there was nothing to stop a future bid being put forward. Due to issues around revenue funding, the scheme had not been put forward this year;
- Mortgage Rescue had not been put forward as a prioritised scheme as the scheme would only assist very few families for such an amount of capital. The government had also now launched its own scheme.

One member referred to the projects that have slippage in expenditure in the current capital programme. He particularly mentioned the Gypsy Sites and the E-gov projects and asked whether any savings could be made and how long the projects would be delayed. The Head of Finance confirmed that the slippage figures related to this year only and that some projects were partnership schemes and therefore the Council needed to show a commitment to these and that she was trying to push Officers to be more realistic over timescales. In response, the member commented that he had concerns over match funding and the amount of money held and whether some of the projects were really deliverable within the outlined period.

The Leader commented that many of the schemes were partnership projects and that some were difficult and took a long time to complete and that the Council was required to put down commitment. He highlighted the Innovation Centre as an example of this.

In response to a member question, the Head of Finance informed members that Cedar was the in-house finance system. For future reports she would ensure that further detailed information would be provided to members. Members would receive a further report on the Capital Programme at the end of the year.

The Head of Finance reported that slippage was monitored on a quarterly basis and that Portfolio Holders were looking to press their service areas to deliver and to ask questions as to how they will rectify slippage. Members were also informed that there was a vigorous process for returns and that for instance the Waterlinks project had been removed from the Capital Programme for 2008/09.

- RESOLVED:** (1) That the process for agreeing new schemes to the Capital Programme for 2009/10 be noted;
- (2) That the progress to date be noted

*Donna Parham, Head of Finance – (01935 462225)
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76. Medium Term Financial Plan (Agenda Item 10)

The Chairman referred to page 33 of the agenda – Notes from the Budget Scrutiny Commission and said that Councillor Pat Martin had also been part of the Commission.

The Portfolio Holder for Finance and Support Services introduced the report and explained that the Scrutiny Committee was being asked to comment on the process to date and the MTFP progress to date. He pointed out that the government settlement did not cover the uplift of concessionary bus fares.

The Head of Finance reported that it had been a difficult year with a downturn in car parking and land charges and energy costs increasing by 50%. She explained the issues around investments and said that the District Executive had approved the transfer of £500,000 to a specific reserve to allow for the predicted fall in interest rates.

In response to questions, Members were informed of the following:

- The costs for the subsidised swimming programme had been capped in order to avoid a shortfall and a repeat situation of the concessionary bus fare scheme;
- The Council was tied into a partnership contract for another two years with SCC for the provision of its energy. The fluctuation in oil prices was huge and this would be looked at when the contract was up for renewal. It was noted that the figures at Lufton had decreased;
- The Head of Sports, Arts and Leisure was currently liaising with Crewkerne Pool regarding their energy costs;
- It was important for the Council to continue to budget throughout the year and adjust accordingly.

In response to a member question relating to whether the efficiency savings were realistic, the Head of Finance commented that any savings would not be made at the detriment in service provision to members of the public. However, the Council would be able to deliver what was planned for but it may not be able to deliver anything extra.

The Head of Finance reported that she had applied to the Government to request approval to capitalise voluntary redundancies to replenish the Voluntary Redundancy reserve and assist with the lean thinking programme.

In referring to a question regarding the saving plan, Members were informed that Heads of Service had been given a target of 3% and that they had delivered more savings than originally asked for.

It was felt that there should be no increase in car parking charges until all car parks in South Somerset introduced a charge. In response, members noted the significant delays in the implementation of CPE/DPE and that there was still ongoing debate with SCC over TPE and that no charges could be implemented until CPE/DPE was in place.

The Head of Finance explained that the income for car parking in the MTFP would be removed for next year.

In response to a member concern regarding the level of enforcement provided by the Development Control Service, it was noted that staffing levels were monitored and considered by the Project Board and that improvements had come forward. There was no reduction in the enforcement process and that in the current economic climate consideration needed to be given to the level of resource against need.

It was noted that Portfolio Holders were very much involved in the process by liaising with Senior Officers over agreeing their budget lines.

In response to a member question over whether the process was vigorous enough and the next steps over the coming 12–18 months, the Head of Finance commented that the Capital Strategy would be reviewed in 2009 and that the funding gap within the MTFP was an ongoing issue.

One member questioned whether consultation was in place with the public and partners. Members were informed that consultation was not undertaken on an annual basis and that overall it was very difficult. A consultation exercise had been undertaken the previous year and that the information gained was valid from between 2 - 3 years and that the participatory budgeting exercise in the areas enabled local resources to meet local needs.

RESOLVED: That the current position of the Medium Term Finance Plan be noted.

*Donna Parham, Head of Finance – (01935 462225)
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77. Review of Role of the Chairman for South Somerset District Council and Elected Member Profiles (Agenda Item 11)

The Chairman of the Scrutiny Commission Councillor Sue Steele introduced the report and drew members' attention to the recommendations suggested by the Commission as outlined on page 37 of the agenda report.

The following points were made during the discussion on this item:

- It was felt that the role of Chairman should be available to all members and could be undertaken with or without a partner;
- Some members were not supportive of recommendation iv) that the Chairman takes a greater influencing role in the preparation of the Full Council agenda, as they felt that the order and notice of agenda was governed by the constitution. Those in support of the recommendation felt that it gave the Chairman a greater sense of authority;
- It was felt that if possible the Chairman should always attend events and if this was not possible the Vice Chairman should attend in his absence;
- It was recognised that some members were able to take on a more involved role than others and that this was very much up to the individual.

The Member Support Officer pointed out that the Chairman's budget went up with inflation on an annual basis and that the budget had never been overspent.

Following discussion, members agreed not to support the following recommendations:

- (iv) That the Chairman takes a greater influencing role in the preparation of the Full Council meetings.
- (vi) That at the July meeting of Full Council each year the elected chairman puts forward a proposal, within the allotted hospitality budget, for any major civic events to be hosted.

RESOLVED: That the following recommendations be endorsed to go forward to be considered by the District Executive:

1. that the revised role profile for the Chairman of SSDC be approved;
2. that the role of Chairman should be achievable by any eligible member of Council who wishes to stand for election;
3. that the role of Chairman is non-political and impartial;
4. that any member newly elected to the role of Chairman of Council must attend a comprehensive chairing skills course relevant to the role of Chairing Council meetings;
5. that the Chairman informs all members with a list of forthcoming events on a fortnightly basis;
6. that currently the Chairman's hospitality allowance should not be increased other than in line with inflation;
7. that the revised role for all members of SSDC be approved.

*Lyn Lockyer, Member Development Officer – (01935) 462001
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78. Quarterly Performance Monitoring Report – 2nd Quarter (Agenda Item 12)

The Performance & Communications Manager introduced the report, which contained the performance monitoring report covering the period to the end of the second quarter (1 July – 30 September 2008). She drew member's attention to those areas where performance was below target levels and explained the reasons for any variances. She particularly mentioned:

BVPI8 - % of invoices paid on time
 BV109 a) - % of major planning applications determined in 13 weeks
 % of calls to contact centre resolved in the contact centre
 BVPI 183a – average stay in bed and breakfast
 BV199 – Improved street and environment cleanliness

In response to a member question, the Corporate Director – Communities informed members that the tolerance levels were set at 10% and that this could be reviewed on an annual basis as part of the review of the Strategy and protocols.

The Corporate Director – Communities clarified the role of scrutiny in performance management and explained the reasons for the 3 month delay in presenting the information to the Scrutiny Committee. She explained that the role of performance

management sat with the District Executive and that one of the key principle of scrutiny was holding the executive to account. Members agreed that it would be useful for the Corporate Director – Communities and the Performance & Communications Manager to provide members with a timetable of the data process.

The Performance & Communications Manager was happy to take on the suggestion of presenting the information for annual results in a different format for future reports.

RESOLVED: That the Quarterly Monitoring report covering the period to the end of the second quarter be noted.

*Sue Eaton, Performance & Communications Manager - (01935) 462565
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79. Scrutiny Work Programme (Agenda Item 13)

The Chairman advised that:

- The Strategic Improvement and Development Plan would be submitted to the April and September meetings of the Scrutiny Committee.
- A report outlining the business model for the Pioneer Somerset approach to developing effective governance arrangements for the Somerset Tourism Partnership would be submitted to the February meeting of the Scrutiny Committee.

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

*Emily McGuinness, Scrutiny Manager and Acting Democratic Services Manager – (01935) 462148
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80. Executive Forward Plan (Agenda Item 14)

Members were informed of the following addition to the Forward Plan:

- A report amending the Development Control Scheme of Delegation would be presented to the February meeting of the District Executive to allow County Councillors to participate and vote on planning applications at the newly formed Joint Area Committees.

RESOLVED: That the Executive Forward Plan be noted with the update as above.

*Ian Clarke, Head of Legal & Democratic Services – (01935) 462184
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81. Date of Next Meeting (Agenda Item 15)

Members noted that the next meeting of the **Scrutiny Committee** would be held on **Thursday 12th February 2009** at **10.00am** in the **Main Committee Room**, Brympton Way, Yeovil.

Members of the Committee are invited to attend at 9.30 a.m. to scope questions on the reports in the Agenda.

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Chairman