

South Somerset District Council

Minutes of a meeting of the **Scrutiny Committee** held on **Thursday 12th February 2009** in the Main Committee Room, Council Offices, Brympton Way, Yeovil.

(10.00 a.m. – 12.25 p.m.)

Present:

Members: Councillor Sue Steele (Chairman)

Dave Bulmer
John Calvert
Geoff Clarke
John Hann
Tony Lock
John Hann

Tony Lock
Pat Martin
Derek Nelson
Tom Parsley
Keith Ronaldson

Also Present:

Councillors Tim Carroll, Robin Munday, Sylvia Seal and Martin Wale.

Officers:

Donna Parham	Head of Finance
David Julian	Head of Countryside, Heritage & Tourism
David Stapleton	Corporate Director – Health & Well-being
Emily McGuinness	Scrutiny Manager and Acting Head of Democratic Services
Jo Morris	Committee Administrator

82. Minutes (Agenda Item 1)

The minutes of the meeting held on 15th January 2009 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

83. Apologies for Absence (Agenda Item 2)

An apology for absence was received from Councillor Andrew Turpin.

84. Declarations of Interest (Agenda Item 3)

There were no declarations of interest.

85. Public Question Time (Agenda Item 4)

There were no questions from members of the public.

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

The Chairman informed Members that a verbal update by Councillor Geoff Clarke on the Wincanton Community Sports Centre would be added as an additional item to the agenda. The item would be considered in Closed Session at the end of the meeting.

87. Chairman's Announcements (Agenda Item 6)

The Chairman informed Members that earlier that week she had attended an IDEA meeting in London together with the Leader of the Council. She had attended the Housing Workshop, which had been very useful.

88. Update from District Executive (Agenda Item 7)

Councillor Tom Parsley updated Members on the meeting of the District Executive held on Thursday 5th February 2009. He made the following points:

- The main focus of the meeting was on the budget and the work of the Finance Team had been endorsed;
- The Council Tax increase had been endorsed by the Executive;
- With regard to the Somerset Pioneer Project, West Somerset District Council had declined to sign up to the government agreement. The issue was due to be considered by their Full Council next month;
- With regard to Joint Area Committee training, there had been a lack of response from County Councillors. It was stressed that members needed to be fully trained;
- There had been a vigorous discussion regarding the Sort It Plus Scheme and the future direction of the Somerset Waste Partnership. The Leader of the Council advised that Taunton Deane was the only Council to sign up to the Sort It Plus Scheme. He referred to the issues of affordability and volatility associated with the collection of plastic/cardboard and for these reasons the Council would not be committing to the Scheme at the present time.

The Executive decisions from the meeting held on 5th March were circulated to members for information.

An update on the acquisition of an existing site for Gypsy & Traveller Provision would be given at the end of the meeting in Closed Session.

89. Revenue Budget 2009/10 Medium Term Financial Plan and Revised Capital Programme (Agenda Item 8)

Councillor Robin Munday, the Portfolio Holder for Finance and Support Services introduced the report. In particular, he mentioned:

- The shortfall in revenue budget projections;
- The inflationary income was not keeping pace with the inflationary interest;
- The Government grant was being reduced year on year;
- The intense pressure on the Finance Team needed to be reduced;
- The recommended increase in the Council Tax of 3.75% (1.75% inflationary increase plus 2% to fund the capital programme). 1.75% was below any figure from other authorities in the District.

- The position of the budget would be closely monitored in view of the current economic climate.

The Head of Finance said that she was asking the Scrutiny Committee to comment on whether the budget process was robust and if any improvements could be added to the process for next year. She advised that the Capital Strategy was due for review in 2009/10 and asked whether the Scrutiny Committee would like to be involved. In response, members supported this suggestion and it was agreed that a Scrutiny Commission would be set up next year to consider the Capital Programme and in particular to look more closely at the bids.

The Leader of the Council referred Members to the amendments made at the District Executive as outlined in the Executive decisions previously circulated to members. He particularly mentioned the recommendation to approve an increase in Council Tax of 3.75% (1.75% inflationary increase plus 2% to fund the capital programme) The Head of Finance said that the directive from the Government was anything less than 5% and that South Somerset was in the lower quartile.

In response to a member question concerning public and stakeholder consultation, the Leader of the Council advised that the information gained from the consultation exercise was valid for 2 to 3 years and that it gave a general guide on the Councils priorities and that this was the best scientific approach for the Council.

In response to a member question concerning the funding shortfall for the Concessionary Fares Scheme, the Head of Finance commented that this was a continuous problem and that there was very little that the Council could do other than continue to lobby for increased funding. She mentioned that another area affected by government requirements was the Disabled Facility Grants. The Leader of the Council reported that the Council had continued to lobby through the LGA and the local MPs. He mentioned that local discussions were ongoing with the Government Office South West over the distribution of inaccurate funding to District Councils.

In response to concerns raised regarding the current economic climate, the Head of Finance informed Members that the Council would be encouraging those people experiencing difficulties to apply for Council Tax Benefit and that the Council had received a grant of £90,000 from the DWP to help in the economic downturn.

With regard to improvements for the future, the Leader of the Council reported that the extension of lean thinking would roll out throughout the organisation and there would also be a review of the senior structure. This would be an ongoing exercise and it was stressed that it needed to be a managed process.

In response to a question regarding the lack of member involvement in the scoring system it was noted that Scrutiny Committee members would be involved through the review of the Capital Programme next year as part of the Scrutiny Commission.

The Head of Finance advised that all financial information was available to any member upon request.

The Leader of the Council advised members that as a result of lobbying the Council had been informed it would receive an increase in Disabled Facility Grant.

The Leader of the Council and the Portfolio Holder for Leisure and Culture informed members of the funding situation for the Free Swimming Initiative. It was noted that the

initiative was cost neutral to the authority and that the gap in government funding had been filled by a grant from the PCT and an LAA Pump Priming Grant.

Members agreed that a Scrutiny Commission should be set up next year to consider the Capital Programme and in particular to look more closely at the capital bids.

RESOLVED: That a Scrutiny Commission be set up next year to consider the Capital Programme and in particular to look more closely at the bids.

*Donna Parham, Head of Finance – (01935 462225)
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90. Participation of South Somerset District Council in the Somerset Tourism Partnership (Agenda Item 9)

Councillor Sylvia Seal, the Portfolio Holder for Leisure and Culture introduced the report, which outlined the Somerset Tourism Partnership's Business/Delivery Plan and the current governance arrangements for the Somerset Tourism Partnership.

In response to members' questions, the Head of Countryside, Heritage and Tourism advised that:

- The £30,000 committed to the Somerset Tourism Partnership (STP) did result in the brochure, which was an important headline project but this was not the only work undertaken by the STP. He referred members to 3.2 of the report which set out the STP work programme and achievements to date;
- South West Tourism had been re-organised and as a result certain elements of the service delivery had been picked up by the Somerset Tourism Partnership and in return a grant of £30,000 was payable in 2007/08 and a grant of £50,000 pa would be paid by SWDRA from 2008/09 until 2010/11.
- He was looking to bring a full and complete report to the Scrutiny Committee on an annual basis in October;
- The governance arrangements for the Somerset Tourism Partnership had been agreed for the immediate future as outlined in the report;
- The £30,000 committed to the Somerset Tourism Partnership was part of the £210,000 budget committed by this authority for the provision of tourism services. This work included the running of the Tourist Information Centres, producing bespoke South Somerset brochures and interest leaflets such as gardens and biking, engaging at a local level with businesses and running the website. A trade event was being held on 4th March at the Fleet Arm Museum.

Members were informed that STP was currently considering the offer of a SCC Officer to work on and develop the Business Plan for the Partnership. It was recognised that the developments/linkages with the LAA needed to be made.

It was noted that Taunton Deane Borough Council currently audited the figures of the Partnership and that further information would be included in the report to Scrutiny Committee in October.

In response to a member question regarding cross boarder operation, the Head of Countryside, Heritage and Tourism advised that they had tried not to be too precious about boundaries as tourists don't visit local authorities. He said that the South Somerset TIC would take bookings in other Districts such as Devon and Dorset. A comprehensive range of literature from other Districts was also available at the TICs.

In response to a question regarding SWDRA funding, the Head of Countryside, Heritage and Tourism said that it was often difficult to secure the funding payments from SWRDA. Payments for 2007/08 had been received but they were still trying to get the 2008/09 funding. He explained that the Partnership was having to look for efficiency savings and that the future could not just rest on public funding and that it needed to look at other income streams in the private sector. He also mentioned that none of the funding from other authorities was secure.

One member felt that the Partnership should be looking to do a lot more promotional work.

In response to further questions, Members were advised of the following:

- the print and distribution costs for the Visit Somerset brochure would be reduced for next year as the STP had over estimated the numbers required for this year;
- the STP had been successful in getting a representative from West Somerset and that the private sector were also very supportive of the brochure;
- the main literature exchange was being held on 26th February at Brean;
- if there was any question over the Partnership not working the Council could reconsider its options, however at present the STP was working well and had recognised the need to strengthen its governance arrangements.

Members supported the work of the STP and agreed to receive an annual report in October.

RESOLVED: That an annual report on the work of the Somerset Tourism Partnership including its outputs and achievements be submitted to the Scrutiny Committee in October.

*David Julian, Head of Countryside, Heritage & Tourism - (01935 462279)
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91. Review of Report Writing (Agenda Item 10)

The Scrutiny Manager and Acting Democratic Services Manager introduced the report. She referred to the survey, which was sent to all 60 members asking them about the quality of current committee reports. There was a very disappointing response rate of 21%. She explained that several members who had responded to the survey had identified the need for a one-page synopsis to be included in all committee reports and an example was included in the agenda report for Members consideration and comment.

During discussion, Members made the following points:

- One of the problems with reports was that people didn't read them and that a one page synopsis could encourage people not to read them even more;
- A lot of the debate at meetings could be avoided if members were to ask questions to the officers before the meeting which would mean that officers were more prepared;
- Reports could be categorised into two different levels – those at a statutory level and the more routine reports which could be abbreviated more;
- The possibility of putting word limits on each section of the Executive Summary was suggested;
- It would be useful if the comments of the Scrutiny Committee could be included in the one page synopsis;

- The suggestion of reports being limited to 2 pages was not supported by some members;
- Reports should be shorter and made more to the point, 6 sides of A4 was more than adequate for a report;
- Officers should not be doing more work on reports;
- A front page would make it easier to pick up the concept of reports;
- The financial implications were one of the most important sections of the report;
- The public would not understand the risk matrix.

The Scrutiny Manager and Acting Democratic Services Manager commented that the Front Page Summary was not a replacement for an Officers report and that report authors would transfer information from the main report onto a front page. She also reminded members that reports were also for the public. She commented that she would be reluctant to put word limits on a synopsis report, as this would be very time consuming to control. She further commented that the risk matrix was supported by the Audit Commission and needed to remain in reports.

Members generally supported the need for a one-page synopsis containing all the key information to be included in all committee reports.

- RESOLVED:**
- (1) That the Scrutiny Committee supports the need for a one-page synopsis containing all key information to be included in all committee reports; and
 - (2) That the comments of the Scrutiny Committee be submitted to Management Board and the District Executive for consideration.

*Emily McGuinness, Scrutiny Manager & Acting Democratic Services Manager – (01935) 462148
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92. Scrutiny Work Programme (Agenda Item 11)

- RESOLVED:** That the Scrutiny Work Programme be noted as outlined in the agenda.

*Emily McGuinness, Scrutiny Manager & Acting Democratic Services Manager – (01935) 462148
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93. Executive Forward Plan (Agenda Item 12)

The Scrutiny Manager and Acting Democratic Services Manager agreed to seek clarification, before the next Scrutiny Committee meeting, from the Head of Legal and Democratic Services regarding the timescale for the report on the proposal to indemnify members/officers as a consequence of a change on the legal position in respect of servicing on outside bodies. It was noted that this report had been on the Forward Plan for a consideration amount of time now but with no report coming forward.

- RESOLVED:** That the Executive Forward Plan be noted as outlined in the agenda.

*Ian Clarke, Head of Legal & Democratic Services – (01935) 462184
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94. Date of Next Meeting (Agenda Item 13)

Members noted that the next meeting of the **Scrutiny Committee** would be held on **Thursday 12th March 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.

95. Confidential Item (Agenda Item 14)

The Committee agreed that the following items be considered in Closed Session by virtue of the Local Government Act 1972, Schedule 12A under Paragraph 3: "Information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information)". It is considered that the public interest in maintaining the exemption from the Access to Information Rules outweighs the public interest in disclosing the information.

Wincanton Community Sports Centre – Swimming Pool Tile Repairs

Councillor Geoff Clarke gave a verbal update following his meeting with the Chief Executive.

The Director - Corporate Director – Health & Well-being and the Portfolio Holder for Leisure and Culture updated members on the current situation at Wincanton Community Sports Centre.

Members were informed that all procedures undertaken were in line with the Council's constitution.

Members were informed that a further report was due to be considered by the District Executive in March and that all members would have access to this report.

Members requested a report on the lessons learnt at a future meeting. The Portfolio Holder for Leisure and Culture said that a report would be going to a future meeting of the District Executive and would then go to Scrutiny for comment.

RESOLVED: That any future report submitted to the District Executive on the lessons learnt at Wincanton Community Sports Centre also be considered by the Scrutiny Committee.

Acquisition of existing site for Gypsy & Traveller Provision

Members were informed of the decision taken by the District Executive at its meeting on 5th February.

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Chairman