

South Somerset District Council

Minutes of the meeting of the **Scrutiny Committee** held on **Thursday 18th June 2009** in the Main Committee Room, Council Offices, Brympton Way, Yeovil.

(10.00 a.m. – 1.05 p.m.)

Present:

Members: Councillor Sue Steele (Chairman)

Dave Bulmer
John Calvert
Geoff Clarke
Tony Lock
Pat Martin

Roy Mills
Derek Nelson
John Richardson
Jo Roundell Green

Also Present:

Councillors Tim Carroll and Robin Munday

Officers:

Jo Gale	Scrutiny Manager
Lyn Lockyer	Member Support Officer
Jo Morris	Committee Administrator

1. Minutes (Agenda Item 1)

The minutes of the meeting held on Thursday 14th May 2009, copies of which had been circulated were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

2. Apologies for Absence (Agenda Item 2)

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Keith Ronaldson, Andrew Turpin and Alan Smith.

3. Declarations of Interest (Agenda Item 3)

There were no declarations of interest.

4. Public Question Time (Agenda Item 4)

There were no questions from members of the public.

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

There were no issues raised from previous meetings.

6. Chairman's Announcements (Agenda Item 6)

The Chairman introduced Jo Gale, the new Scrutiny Manager.

The Chairman reported that she and the Scrutiny Manager had attended the annual Centre for Public Scrutiny Conference held in Nottingham. She referred to the role of Overview and Scrutiny and the need to make an effort and find new ways of working. She hoped that the Scrutiny Committee could aspire at its meeting today to achieve some of this work.

The Chairman referred to the difficulties some authorities were facing where BNP members on Scrutiny were in the majority. She felt that all members should be aware of the difficulties people were having.

The Scrutiny Manager referred to the Conference header 'Critical Friend for Critical Time's' as being appropriate and an area that needed to be built on by the Scrutiny Committee. She commented on the key points from the Conference as follows:

- Consultation and community engagement
- The need for good questioning
- Always reflecting on why the question is being asked
- How we as an authority connect with people
- The need to generate media interest
- Feeding back and actively promoting scrutiny to the public had been recognised as good practice
- Partnership working and the importance of a common goal
- Always ensuring that better value is being achieved
- Reviews needing to be outcome based
- Monitoring how impact is taken forward

The Scrutiny Manager commented that SSDC were already carrying out a lot of the recommended best practice but she was keen to introduce as much as possible.

7. Update from District Executive (Agenda Item 7)

The Vice Chairman gave an update from the District Executive meeting held on 11th June. The main areas for noting were as follows:

- Performance Monitoring Report – the following areas were below target:
 Planning - Officers were working on the backlog.
 Waste and Recycling – this was due to the usual seasonal reduction in garden waste.
 Affordable Housing
 Staff Sickness
- Capital Outturn Report - the revenue outturn was under spent by £300,000
- Treasury Management Report – a lot of savings had been achieved.
- The Executive had approved the updated Anti Money Laundering Policy.
- Affordable Housing Development Programme – the Executive had approved an allocation of £77,555 to the Stiby Road/ St Annes Gardens housing scheme.
- Business Rate Relief – the Executive had agreed to have an assessment criteria
- Reimbursement of Bus Operators – year on year the Council would be in a better position

8. 'Raising the bar in Overview and Scrutiny' Training Day held on 15th June 2009 (Agenda Item 8)

The Scrutiny Manager said that this item was an opportunity for Scrutiny members to look at how they could use the training to develop the overview and scrutiny function at SSDC.

The Scrutiny Manager gave a powerpoint presentation which reminded members of the key areas from the training and ways of improving efficiency and effectiveness. A copy of the presentation slides are attached to these minutes for information.

The main points of discussion from the meeting are summarised as follows:

- On the whole the training was a success although a couple of members felt that the Council was already undertaking many of the suggestions covered and did not like the style of presentation.
- One member felt that many aspects of scrutiny are being undertaken but were not necessary labelled under the scrutiny umbrella.
- The Leader of the Council commented that as Chair of the District Executive, Scrutiny had an important role. Scrutiny was only affective if focussed and meaningful and the Committee should be focussing on the higher level issues that make a real difference to people lives.
- It was felt that the process of scrutiny was not clear to officers. The suggestion of providing an ambition statement to officers when asking for a report was supported by members of the Committee. It was important that the right questions were asked.
- Members needed to understand the need for participation, commitment and engagement in the Scrutiny process.
- It was recognised that people only became engaged in areas that were of interest to them. It was suggested that the Member Support Officer contact all members to obtain a bank of information covering members' skills, experiences and areas of interest and also preference of meeting days/times. This information could then be used to appoint appropriate members to the Commissions.
- The need to emphasise to backbenchers the necessity for them to offer their views. Members needed to be reminded of the opportunity for backbenchers to attend District Executive and Scrutiny Committee meetings.
- It was suggested that if members were unable to attend meeting they could put forward their comments on paper to be relayed at the meeting.
- The possibility of appointing substitutes to attend Scrutiny Committee meetings was raised. The Scrutiny Manager agreed to check with the Head of Legal concerning this.
- Members discussed the linkage between Scrutiny and District Executive and the timing of Scrutiny meetings. The Scrutiny Manager would look to make future Scrutiny meetings on a day following the dispatch of the District Executive agenda but prior to the District Executive meeting. This would give an opportunity for Scrutiny members to raise any issues having looked at the reports. The Committee's views would be put forward to the Executive via the Chair and Vice Chair and this would also hopefully reduce the potential need for call in. It was suggested that an item on the District Executive agenda outlining the title and purpose of the report should be added to the Scrutiny Committee meeting agenda.
- Clarification with regard to calling in decisions at Area Committees was required as members were unsure of the process.
- One member felt that Scrutiny should be involved in ensuring that the Council were adhering to the Corporate Plan.

- Members supported the continuation of the scoring system for selecting items for the work programme. The scoring system may need to be further developed if a subject falls across multiple organisations.
- It was suggested that when an issue was requested on the Work Programme, members should devise the questions for the Officers. The Scrutiny Manager to create a type of specification form to give to officers.
- Members supported the continuation of the briefing notes template. It was agreed that the Briefing notes would be sent out with the agenda for members to complete prior to attending Scrutiny Committee at 9.30am. Discussion of agenda items and prepared questions would take place between 9.30am and 10.00am. Following the Committee meeting, members would complete the evaluation forms and return to the Scrutiny Manager, this could be done via e-mail if more convenient.
- With regard to Scrutiny measuring the impact it has had, members felt that outcomes should be reported in a simplified way on a quarterly basis.
- With regard to sources of topic for the Work Programme, the Scrutiny Manager made reference to the District Executive agenda/Forward Plan and the Place Survey. Members noted that the Place Survey was the largest survey undertaken nationally which aimed to find out local people's views, experiences and perceptions on a wide range of issues. She agreed to circulate a copy to all members of the Committee.
- One member felt that the role of Scrutiny should be mentioned in the Corporate Plan.

RESOLVED: That the points from the discussion above be noted and taken into consideration.

*Jo Gale, Scrutiny Manager – (01935) 462077
e-mail: joanna.gale@southsomerset.gov.uk*

9. Overview Commissions (Agenda Item 9)

The Scrutiny Manager asked members to consider the re-establishment of the following Overview Commissions:

- Economic Vitality and Environment
- Well Managed, cost effective services
- Safe sustainable communities and health and well-being

She reminded members of the amount of work involved for the Committee if commissions were not to be re-established.

During discussion members put forward the following points:

- Commission meetings should be well diarised;
- It was felt that commissions should be undertaken on an ad hoc basis as and when required;
- Commissions should not be too ambitious and should be focussed on a key issue;
- It was felt that the three current overview commissions should be replaced by non politically balance ad hoc groups;
- The use of the one page strategy was supported and would be developed to it make it SSDC's own style;
- It was suggested that the Scrutiny Committee produce guidance material to assist commission groups including a sample one page Strategy;
- Commission groups would have their own work plan that would be organised by the Chair. Provision would be made in the Scrutiny Work Programme for feedback

reports from the Commission Groups and also for future monitoring at appropriate times post successful recommendations.

The following suggestions were put forward as subjects for future Commissions:

Police resource for South Somerset
 Budget inescapable commitments and challenges
 Capital Projects
 Partnerships – Do they offer value for money?
 Choice Based Lettings
 Configuration of housing in developments, do they reflect the needs of the community?

Following a suggestion for a commission involving an audit of Town and Village Halls, Members were informed that a booklet was already available listing halls, equipment and contact information etc. It was agreed that the book should be re-issued to members.

The Leader of the Council commented that prior to any work being undertaken on issues outside of district council remit, consideration needed to be given to duplication of work and other the agencies involved.

RESOLVED: (1) That non-politically balanced Overview Commission Groups be established on an ad hoc basis subject to legal advice being sought on the composition of the Groups;
 (2) That a pack of guidance material be produced by the Scrutiny Committee to assist Commission Groups to include an example of a one page Strategy.

*Jo Gale, Scrutiny Manager – (01935) 462077
 e-mail: joanna.gale@southsomerset.gov.uk*

10. Annual Scrutiny Work Programme 2009/10 (Agenda Item 10)

The Scrutiny Manager asked members to re-visit the items currently included in the Scrutiny Work Programme for 2009/10 and consider any additional items to be brought forward.

The Scrutiny Manager informed members of the items to be considered at the July meeting as follows:

- Quarter 4 Corporate Performance Report including implementation of the performance management system – Performance & Communications Manager
- IT support to 3rd party organisations and the impact of Gov Connect – Procurement and Office Services Manager
- Update report on Pioneer Somerset – Chief Executive

Members noted that at present there were no planned items for August Scrutiny and therefore agreed the following items to be considered at meeting:

- Frontline Members Grant Scheme – Voluntary Sector Support Officer
- Impact and progress of Risk Management Strategy – Procurement and Office Services Manager
- Future of Recycling Bring Bank Provision – Corporate Director - Environment
- A discussion on the Housing Improvement Plan

The Scrutiny Manager informed members of the following reports for the Work Programme:

- Budget setting report to be added to the work programme for October
- Capital Strategy to be considered prior to District Executive possibly at the September meeting
- Capital budget setting report to be added to the work programme for December
- Update report on the budget setting to be added to the Work Programme for December/January

Members were informed that the District Executive would consider the Wincanton Community Sports Centre report at its August meeting followed by Scrutiny in September. The Leader of the Council reported that the pool had been officially re-opened on 8th June. He reminded members that the envisaged closure programme was originally only 7 weeks.

Councillor John Calvert requested an item on 'How will SSDC maintain service standards if the flu pandemic or equivalent affects staff' to be added to the Work Programme.

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

*Jo Gale, Scrutiny Manager – (01935) 462077
e-mail: joanna.gale@southsomerset.gov.uk*

11. Executive Forward Plan (Agenda Item 11)

Members were content to note the Forward Plan as outlined in the agenda.

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

*Angie Cox, Democratic Services Manager – (01935) 462148
e-mail: angela.cox@southsomerset.gov.uk*

12. Date of Next Meeting (Agenda Item 12)

Members noted that the next meeting of the Scrutiny Committee would be held on Thursday 16th July at 10.00am in the Committee Rooms 3 & 4, Brympton Way, Yeovil.

Members of the Committee are invited to attend at 9.30am to scope questions on the report in the Agenda.

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Chairman