

Scrutiny Committee – 3rd November 2009

1. Minutes

South Somerset District Council

Minutes of the meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held on **Tuesday 29th September 2009** held in the Main Committee Room, Council Offices, Brympton Way, Yeovil

(10.00 a.m. – 12.15 a.m.)

Present:

Members: Councillor Sue Steele (Chairman)

Dave Bulmer	Roy Mills
John Calvert	John Richardson
Geoff Clarke	Keith Ronaldson
Carol Goodall	Jo Roundell Greene
Pat Martin	Alan Smith

Also Present:

Councillors Tim Carroll, Robin Munday, Tom Parsley and Lesley Boucher.

Officers:

Donna Parham	-	Head of Finance
Jayne Beevor	-	Principal Accountant – Revenue Budgets
Sue Eaton	-	Performance and Communications Manager
Jo Gale	-	Scrutiny Manager
Jo Morris	-	Committee Administrator

51. Minutes (Agenda Item 1)

The minutes of the meeting held on Tuesday 1st September 2009, copies of which had been circulated were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

52. Apologies for Absence (Agenda Item 2)

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Tony Lock, Derek Nelson and Phil Dolan, Chief Executive.

53. Declarations of Interest (Agenda Item 3)

There were no declarations of interest.

54. Public Question Time (Agenda Item 4)

There were no members of the public present at the meeting.

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

One member referred to the wind turbine at the Innovation Centre being out of operation and the likely cost implications involved. She requested that this issue be considered at a future meeting of the Scrutiny Committee.

56. Chairman's Announcements (Agenda Item 6)

The Chairman:

- Welcomed Councillor Carol Goodall, as a new member to the Scrutiny Committee and Councillor Lesley Boucher as an observer.
 - Reported that she had attended the Equalities Framework Training in Taunton and that the Community Cohesion Officer would be submitting a report on progress of the Equalities Strategy to a future meeting.
-

57. Update on Task and Finish Reviews (Agenda Item 7)

Capital Strategy Review

Councillor John Calvert, as Chairman of the Capital Strategy Review Group reported that he had held one meeting and that another was due to be held the following day. The Review would involve looking at four possible areas:

- Treasury Management
- Reviewing the current method of ranking
- Links between financial policy and the Corporate Plan
- Current Policy on the maintenance of assets.

Choice Based Lettings Review

Councillor Jo Roundell Greene, as Chair of the Review of Choice Based Lettings, referred to the changes to the Constitution, which allowed all non-members to undertake Reviews and that there was an adequate number of members on the Review to undertake the work. Members noted that a Work Programme had been agreed and that the Senior Housing Options Officer would be attending the next meeting to inform members of how the system operates so that they fully understand the process. She explained that the other districts were very positive about the review and that the outcomes would be useful for all districts using the system. Finally, she thanked those members who had come forward to join the Review Group.

58. Verbal Update on Issues raised at the District Executive Meeting held on 3rd September 2009 (Agenda Item 8)

The Chairman reported that she had taken forward the questions and comments raised by the Scrutiny Committee to the meeting of the District Executive held on 3rd September 2009. Members noted the Chairman's comment including the following:

- With regard to the report on the Purchase of Park Homes, there was a typing error in the report and that there would be 8 Park Homes for Tintinhull and 10 for Ilton;
- More TENs training sessions were being arranged for members;
- That the Chief Executive had thanked Scrutiny members for their work on the Strengthening Communities consultation document.

59. Reports to be considered by the District Executive on 1st October 2009 (Agenda Item 9)

The Chairman of the Scrutiny Committee briefly ran through the reports due to be considered by the District Executive at its meeting on 1st October 2009.

The Chairman agreed to take forward the following points raised by members:

Scrutiny Committee comments to be considered by District Executive

Community Infrastructure Levy: Consultation Document

- This was a difficult report to read.
- It was hard to differentiate between the questions and the Officer's answers. It was suggested that the answers should be in a different format as the reply would be difficult to assess.
- It was unreasonable for members to understand the report, it should be simplified with less words.
- Concern if SSDC elect to charge CIL and set rates higher than other Local Authorities investment from developers may decline. If CIL goes ahead it should be applied across all LA's in a consistent approach regarding rates to prevent this problem occurring.

Improvements to Civic Facilities in Castle Cary

- There was no reference to a contingency plan when the work is going ahead?
- Would there be other toilets available in the area and if not would a financial contribution be made to the Town Council?
- Will the toilets continue to be open when the work is going ahead?
- Concerns over the costs incurred as the scheme was taking so long?
- The Scrutiny Committee supported the recommendation to reallocate funding to a revised scheme.
- The Scrutiny Committee would like to bring to the attention of District Executive that the recycling storage area that is proposed to be improved was one of the proposed bring banks to be removed as outlined in the report to the Scrutiny Committee on 13th August.

The Process to Acquire Land for Purpose of Gypsy and Traveller Provision

- Ward members should be involved earlier in the process at the stage where the Corporate Strategic Manager completes the report.
- Councillors have a duty to be community leaders

60. Medium Term Financial Strategy (Agenda Item 10)

The Portfolio Holder for Finance and Support Services introduced the report, which advised members of the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) and the current position on the Medium Term Financial Plan (MFTP) (Revenue budgets for 2010/11 to 2014/15). He referred to the process at the current time as being good but the situation becoming more and more difficult and that all District Councils were facing similar problems.

The Head of Finance introduced Jayne Beevor, Principal Accountant – Revenue Budgets who she worked closely with on the budget detail.

The Head of Finance explained that the report included more information on the strategies linking to the MTFS and that she had provided clear information about assumptions so members were more aware of how the figures had arisen. She further explained that savings of £1/2 million had already been found and that Assistant Directors were being asked to find a further 7% savings (this would include procurement savings) within their service areas to bridge the financial gap. She drew attention to the assumptions made in the report and in particular the standstill in Formula Grant from 2011/12 onwards and that this would mean that further savings would need to be made, likely to be in the region of £2 million per year. She was developing scenarios in preparation for potential changes to the Formula Grant on how it would affect the Councils service provision. A great deal of work was also being done on risks, looking at income and sensitivity analysis and that Managers were good at feeding through information to the MFTP including any inescapable bids.

Members noted that the MFTP did not include any growth bids at present, although new growth bids were likely to be made including the Sort It+ Scheme and Controlling Urban Seagulls and that members would have to make some difficult decisions in the future. The bids would go forward to be scored but savings would need to be achieved first by looking at areas such as removing vacant posts, reducing non-priority area and procurement savings.

During the discussion, questions raised by Scrutiny Committee included the following:

- At what stage would difficult decisions need to be made by members on the budget?
- How much notice would SSDC receive of a reduction in grant from central government and what would the Finance team do to prepare for this?
- How were non-priority areas identified?
- What did the Council's spend on consultants and who had the authority to use them and did they offer value for money?
- How was the Capital Contingency budget established?
- Were Partnerships Value For money?
- The Council had a lot of vacant office space and was anything being done about this?
- Did the public understand the impact of the choices they made when completing the Place Survey?

The Head of Finance responses to member questions and comments included the following:

- Priority should be given to providing the Councils statutory services as efficiently as possible and then consideration should be given to cuts in the discretionary services.
- Reference was made to the costs associated with reducing staff and that a lot of scenario analysis was being undertaken in preparation for possible future cuts;
- Portfolio Holders were asked to look at their services to identify non-priority areas through the efficiency savings exercise. The process was about looking at the key areas the Council wants to deliver to the public and what is required to deliver the Corporate Plan;
- The appointment of consultants was undertaken in line with the Councils Procurement Procedure Rules. Value for money was looked at when the consultants were appointed and were necessary for providing certain aspects of specialist work. Those consultants who were not performing would be removed from the list of recommended consultants;
- The District Executive Contingency budget was agreed on an annual basis and consisted of council tax fund surpluses;
- Regarding the assumptions made for pension contributions, the report would be updated to include an increase in contributions of 1% from 2010/11 onwards;
- With regard to vacant office space, the Council was trying to fill vacant space and share as much as possible. She had taken on the responsibility of asset management and was looking to be more aggressive in selling some of the Councils assets as they could be seen as future liabilities for the Council. As part of the review she was planning to look at an asset class at a time and look in terms of cost against profit;
- A review of Partnerships was due to be undertaken by the Third Sector and Partnerships Manager. The Council may need to look at doing partnership working on a smaller scale i.e. joining up with one or two partners rather than five;
- Central Government was very descriptive about the Place Survey and the letter that accompanied the Place Survey was very general.

The Scrutiny Committee concluded that the Finance Team had a detailed and accurate assessment of the current position on the Medium Term Financial Strategy and were content with the processes in place to:

- Identify savings in-line with the Corporate Plan.
- Plan for potential loss of money in the form of grants and income.
- Deal with a change in government.
- Review assets.
- Revise the strategy.

The Chairman thanked the Head of Finance and her team for all the work undertaken on the Medium Term Financial Strategy.

RESOLVED: (1) That the current position and process of the Medium Term Financial Strategy be noted;
(2) That the comments of the Scrutiny Committee on the strategy, position and process be forwarded to the District Executive.

*Jayne Beevor, Principal Accountant – Revenues – (01935 462225)
e-mail:jayne.beevor@southsomerset.gov.uk*

61. Strategic Improvement Plan (Agenda Item 11)

The Leader of the Council introduced the report which set out the Strategic Improvement and Development Plan covering the 6 months to 31st July 2009/10. The Performance and Communications Manager explained that the Plan monitored the key drivers of the Council and had now come to a natural end and that a new Plan would be started.

She drew members' attention to the following items listed as being still in progress:

27 – Develop a country-wide housing strategy and revise the country-side supporting people strategy – the target date for these actions have been revised to June 2010

31g – Statement of Internal Controls 2007 – this was behind progress but was due to be completed by October 2009.

In response to a member question regarding the monitoring of outstanding actions, the Performance and Communications Manager reported that the outstanding actions would go forward to the new Plan.

The Leader of the Council updated members on progress with developing a countrywide housing strategy. Members noted that the initiative had been separated from Pioneer Somerset. A PID had been completed with funding and a structure in place and SSDC were leading on the project. Members noted that the 'Comprehensive Area Assessment' (CAA) had been replaced by 'One Place', which was due out in November, and that one particular area of concern raised was Housing.

RESOLVED: That the Strategic Improvement and Development Plan be noted.

*Philip Dolan, Chief Executive – (01935 462101)
e-mail: Philip.dolan@southsomerset.gov.uk*

62. Quarterly Performance and Complaints Monitoring Report – 1st Quarter 2009/10 (Agenda Item 12)

The Leader of the Council introduced the Performance Monitoring report covering the period to the end of the first quarter. He referred members to page 57 of the report, which outlined cases where performance was below target levels.

The Performance and Communications Manager updated members with new figures that had been received since the report was circulated. Members noted the following updates under Theme 2:

NI191 – the performance figure to date was 99.2 kilos, which was well within target
N192 – the performance figure to date was 42.7%, which was below target. This was due to a decrease in glass recycling and was to be expected because of the current climate.

LI001 – the performance to date was 54.6%. There was no target set for this but compared to last year the figure had gone up. The Somerset Waste Partnership was making some changes to how they deal with certain materials and a target was expected soon.

In response to a member question regarding how SSDC waste figures compared to other Councils, the Performance and Communications Manager agreed to provide these figures to the member.

In response to member questions, the following points were noted:

- The target set for the number of incidents of anti-social behaviour reported to SSDC had been set by using last years actual figure and would be monitored closely;
- The backlog in Planning was decreasing as the number of new applications being received was reducing. Members were assured that new applications were still being processed at the same time.
- There was no national indicator for Enforcement. Any enforcement complaints received would be part of the complaints monitoring procedure. Enforcement performance was looked at by the LDF Monitoring Group.
- With regard to the review process for monitoring staff sickness, Managers actively undertake monitoring and staff have reviews when they hit a certain number of days/sickness periods. Return to work interviews were also held between the member of staff and their Manager. It was felt that sickness was being controlled under the circumstances, as it was a difficult area to predict. HR was responsible for managing the process and held the individual figures for each Department. Management Board also looked at the figures. The target for sickness days was set using trend information and comparisons were also made with other Councils within the Councils Family Group.

The Scrutiny Manager referred to the complaints figures and said that Scrutiny Committee members were keen to look at issues logged against policy particularly in relation to the Somerset Waste Partnership and that it would be useful to have these figures broken down. The Performance and Communications Manager said that she would be able to ask each Service for a breakdown on the figures.

The Leader of the Council urged all members to attend the TENS Training Session being held after the meeting of the Scrutiny Committee.

- RESOLVED:**
- (1) That the quarterly performance monitoring report for the first quarter 2009/10 be noted; and
 - (2) That the summary of complaints for the first quarter of 2009/10 be noted.

*Catherine Hodsman, Performance Officer – (01935 462112)
e-mail:catherine.hodsman@southsomerset.gov.uk*

63. Scrutiny Work Programme (Agenda Item 13)

The Scrutiny Manager reported that the Scrutiny Committee would consider reports on the Impact and Progress of Equalities and the Procurement Strategy in December.

The Scrutiny Manager said that she had been in contact with the Scrutiny Manager at Somerset County Council regarding their Forward Plan. She explained that there had been a major change to the Scrutiny structure with the removal of the five sub groups that fed into the Scrutiny Committee. This meant that they would be looking

at fewer topics and were also keen to develop greater opportunities for joined up and shared working with all Councils and other relevant bodies.

Reference was made to the monitoring of the Somerset Waste Partnership and it was felt that this should be an item for a future meeting. It was agreed that questions would be scoped at a future meeting and that the Scrutiny Manager would make all the other authorities aware that the Scrutiny Committee would be considering this issue.

Members discussed the following as possible items to be considered at future meetings of the Scrutiny Committee:

- Development of the Web pages
- Post Restructure Report
- Update on S106 Agreements
- Review of Partnerships
- CAA/One Place report
- Fear of Crime/Policing/Community Safety Partnership
- Wind Turbines
- Report on the Review of Octagon Theatre following the Scrutiny review

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

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

64. Executive Forward Plan (Agenda Item 14)

Members noted that the District Executive would be considering the Wincanton Sports Centre report in November.

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

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

65. Date of Next Meeting (Agenda Item 15)

Members noted that the next meeting of the Scrutiny Committee would be held on Tuesday 3rd November 2009 at 10.00am in the Main Committee Room, Brympton Way, Yeovil.

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