

Scrutiny Committee – 29th June 2010

1. Minutes

South Somerset District Council

Minutes of the **Scrutiny Committee** held on **Tuesday 1st June 2010** in the Main Committee Room, Council Offices, Brympton Way, Yeovil.

(10.00 a.m. – 12.55 p.m.)

Present:

Members:

Councillor Sue Steele (Chairman)

John Calvert
Geoff Clarke
Carol Goodall
Tony Lock
Pat Martin

Roy Mills
Angie Singleton
Alan Smith
Martin Wale

Also Present:

Councillors Tim Carroll, Robin Munday, Jo Roundell Greene, Tom Parsley and Sylvia Seal

Officers:

David Julian
Jo Gale
Jo Morris

Economic Development Manager
Scrutiny Manager
Committee Administrator

1. Minutes (Agenda Item 1)

The minutes of the meeting held on 11th May 2010, 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 submitted from Councillors Dave Bulmer and Keith Ronaldson.

3. Declarations of Interest (Agenda Item 3)

There were no declarations of interest.

4. Public Question Time (Agenda Item 4)

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

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

The Scrutiny Manager confirmed that following the last meeting she had circulated the CDRP Draft Assessment to members. Members agreed to defer consideration of the Draft Assessment until after the outcome of the review on the revised delivery structures for Community Safety in Somerset. A decision was due to be made by the District Executive in October.

At the last meeting, members questioned why the new website had not gone live. In response, the Scrutiny Manager reported that she had contacted Bruce Soord, Spatial Systems Manager. The reason for the delay was due to service contributors taking time to check that the content of the website was correct. He had also underestimated the amount of work needing to be done and was now working towards the website going live on 10th June.

6. Chairman's Announcements (Agenda Item 6)

The Chairman thanked Jo Roundell Greene for all her hard work whilst as a member of the Scrutiny Committee. She welcomed Carol Goodall, as the new Vice Chairman of the Scrutiny Committee and Chairman of the Choice Based Lettings Review.

The Chairman informed members that she would be attending a Joint Scrutiny Chairman's meeting with East Devon District Council on 16th June at Brympton Way.

The Chairman reported on the South West Councils Scrutiny Network event she had recently attended.

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

Choice Based Lettings

Members noted the following:

- Councillor Carol Goodall and the Scrutiny Manager had attended the Homefinder Review Group at Yarlinton Homes.
- There were some concerns that the timescales may slip again.
- The Theme Group for Web and Publications had reached the stage of producing a draft report.
- The Chair of the Project Review Group for Homefinder Somerset has requested on-going feedback, it has been agreed that the task and finish review will provide draft appendices when appropriate ahead of the final report.

Cultural Strategy

Members noted that Dave Bulmer had drafted the report. Scrutiny Committee and District Executive would consider the final report prior to it being submitted to the Somerset Cultural Strategy Partnership Group.

Partnerships Review

Members noted that Alice Knight, Third Sector & Partnership Manager would be bringing an update report to the Scrutiny Committee meeting on 29th June. Emily McGuinness, Scrutiny Manager would be looking to pull together a Task & Finish Review to commence in July.

The Leader of the Council informed members of Somerset County Council's intention to undertake a review of strategic partnerships.

8. Verbal Update on the Joint Integration Committee (Agenda Item 8)

Councillor Martin Wale referred to the Council agreeing to look at management levels 1 to 4 by next April and that this now seemed to be drifting into other areas.

Councillor John Calvert commented that there seemed to be a lack of direction.

In response, the Leader of the Council explained that the Chief Executive was looking for an indication of what services could be integrated and that this would give a general direction for a broad shape of structure.

Councillor Pat Martin commented that she was disappointed that the meeting lacked content and that there was no positive steer.

The Leader of the Council explained that he was proposing to defer Full Council in September to October in order to give Scrutiny members appropriate time to consider the draft management structure.

9. Presentation on the Progress of the Recession Strategy (Agenda Item 9)

The Economic Development Manager circulated a handout to members detailing the following:

- A graph showing the Job Seekers Allowance situation
- Job Seek Allowance figures for April 2010
- An update on Business support

He drew members' attention to the following points:

- Key figures commonly used in looking at local statistics are the readily measurable Job Seeker Allowance Claimants;
- When the Strategy was formulated JSA figures showed a headline rate of 2.1 % based on 1944 claimants in February 2009;
- There is an annual winter increased trend because of seasonal unemployment, but the graph nevertheless shows quite a steep upward curve in the winter of 2008;
- Although the figures remain close to their peak, there is no evidence to show continued increase in the number of people claiming JSA;
- The latest stats for JSA (April 2010) show 1883 claimants (the lower end of 2.1- almost 2%) with 440 jobs currently available;
- Comparators: South Somerset 2.1% South West 2.9% Great Britain 4.1%

- Town Centre Retailing - most premises becoming vacant in 2008 and 2009 were as a result of National Retailing Outlets hitting problems. In recession it is often multiple outlets that have expanded from other locations that will contract their business operations. This is often the down-side of Inward Investment;
- Local retailers have shown considerable resilience to the recession and have been able to rely on a well-established customer base to see them through. That is not to say that there haven't been problems in retailing but South Somerset has shown a strong resilience in comparison to many areas of Great Britain;
- The Innovation Centre - this was modelled on a 2006 business plan that hadn't anticipated the recession, we had been told to expect 30% occupancy by the end of year 1. In March 2010 –after 13 months of operation and despite recession we had filled 13 units of the 36 which represents 36% occupancy (based on the number of units) and on line for a break even position;
- The recession is having less of an impact on South Somerset that might have been expected. Although South Somerset has a reasonable track-record of surviving recession;
- Our own figures indicate that the recession is stabilising. But stability remains fragile and there remains the possibility of a double-dip recession and there should be no grounds for complacency.

The Economic Development Manager referred members to the SSDC Recession Strategy – Action Plan (May 2009) within the Recession Strategy as circulated with the agenda and updated members on progress made against each of the actions 1-12. The following was noted:

	Action	Progress
1	Use of LABGI funding to promote Business Rate Relief	The Programme went live in January 2010 and it was chosen to advertise the existing programme of Rates Hardship Relief Advertising campaign and direct mail-out to small businesses in South Somerset. On- line application service was made available on SSDC website with around 80% of the applications made on-line. There were 90 initial enquiries with 47 businesses choosing to work with the ED team to assess the qualifying criteria for this form of rates relief (i.e. being able to proving hardship, proving community benefit, and proving that rates relief will actually make a difference to their businesses). It has proved quite a lengthy process, but officers are satisfied that the analysis of the cases are robust and defensible. Officers are now in the final stages of allocating rates relief to the majority of the applications although there will be a small number of disappointed applicants.
2	The Implementation of Development Management Principles	All the component teams of the Economy Group are now committed to the Development Management concept. Advice is offered, where relevant to an applicant at any stage of the Planning Application Process, including comprehensive advice offered at pre-app stage. Where more formal input is required a monthly pre-app surgery is arranged where applicants, particularly those submitting major applications can meet and discuss their application with a variety of officers

		ranging from Development Control to Environmental Health and Community Regeneration Officers. Applicants are assured access to a broad spectrum of advice from across the District Council.
3	Rapid Response Protocol	<p>Although not mentioned in the Recession Strategy, a rapid response strategy had previously been drawn up in 2006. Both Chard and Yeovil had been identified as showing an over-dependence on single employers. A European Grant had been available at that time and was successfully bid for by the Chard Group Action for Chard Town.</p> <p>The resulting study and Strategy was put together by consultants Anser Spa. It recommended an emergency response team of the main agencies involved in redundancy situations (Job centre+, Training providers, SWERDA, Local Authorities, the Company suffering the redundancies, other major local employers and Local Authorities.</p> <p>The strategy was used almost immediately in June 2006. The Strategy proved successful in matching those with jobs at risk to local employers with job capacity and to trainers able to expand the skill sets of some of the employees. It is believed that around 100 redundant employees were assisted through the strategy at the time.</p> <p>A stumbling block to the process is always likely to be gaining full co-operation from the company in difficulties, who for a variety of reasons may not want to become fully engaged in the process.</p> <p>The rapid response protocol is in place as a model, but has not been tested in the current recession. With irony the one company that has engaged, is probably capable of retaining all its employees providing they are prepared to travel or relocate.</p>
4	Review Area East Business Mentoring Scheme	<p>The next two or three years will be turbulent.</p> <p>Two key areas will be the skills and education agenda and workspace to encourage developers to work with SSDC more proactively. The demise of the RDAs may also affect business support significantly.</p>
5	Contact Major Employers of 50 or more across the district	Carried out by Gerard Tucker in 2009. Made initial contact with all bar 4 of the major employers and visited 47%. Visited as many as were willing to meet Gerard. Getting above the 47% can only be with the willingness of the company themselves. All thoroughly aware of the services SSDC can provide.
6	Complete detailed design work for elements of the (A30) Eastern Corridor Study	This will improve Yeovil Junction connections with Penmill.

7	Seek to establish Yeovil as a 'growth point' or equivalent	RDA not forthcoming with increased funding for Yeovil Vision Projects, but SWERDA did allocate up to £70k of funding for the Economic Appraisal of Yeovil and a complete refresh of the Yeovil Vision. This work was commissioned in January and is due for completion in late June/early July. The exercise will compliment work carried out for the county-wide economic appraisal and allow a comprehensive refresh of the District Economic Development Strategy.
8	Support the Future Development of Yeovilton	This action is on hold pending the outcome of the MOD Review.
9	Empty Shops and Town Centre initiatives especially Yeovil and Crewkerne	The Council have supported Arts In Empty Shops Schemes in Chard and Crewkerne in 2009/10 and are offering grants towards Shop Front improvements in Chard. We continue to support the Market Towns through strategic Investment in the market town economies. In 2010/11, £80k will be invested in Capital projects that support and promote Tourist Visits to the Town.
10	Working to bring forward 'stalled' key sites	<p>The Council has secured sufficient funding to deliver a programme of over 800 new affordable homes during the current three year period;</p> <p>For 2010/11 we expect to deliver 317 affordable homes (previous annual record 227) Achieved through £20M from HCA, £750k from SSDC and approx £125k SCC subsidy</p> <p>For 2011/12 funding is secured for 370 affordable homes with approx. £18M from HCA and £500k from SSDC</p> <p>The affordable housing totals realistically look like being 800 +317+370 in the years to 2012</p> <p>The 4 significant sites remain the same. Jocelyn Park should complete this year, both Wincanton Sites will start to deliver this year and straddle 2011/12 and Lyde Road will start to deliver this year and continue for several years to come.</p>
11	Communicate and sign-post the Recession Strategy	<p>Housing and Council Tax Benefits</p> <p>The Council has received and processed 1100 more new benefit applications during 2009/10 than in 2008/09, an increase of 20%. In the Autumn of 2009 a piece was put in the South Somerset News publication sent to all residents with the slogan "Are you missing out?" to raise awareness of the help available. This is being followed up with a further article in the next South Somerset News. A benefit take up campaign was undertaken for pensioner households, an objective in the Corporate Plan. There was a nett increase of 174 households receiving council tax benefit and it is estimated that this has</p>

		<p>resulted in additional awards of approximately £1/4 million a year.</p> <p>A number of redundancy meetings were undertaken across the district in partnership with Job Centre Plus, providing advice and support to several hundred people facing redundancy. Good or excellent feedback was received from the work places visited. The Council is continuing with this support in 2010/11.</p> <p>Business Rates</p> <p>An article was put in South Somerset News in the Autumn promoting the hardship relief take-up campaign and followed up with a press release in Jan 2010. Promotional postcards were sent to small businesses across the district and shortly a decision will be made on what awards of hardship relief to make. Approximately 50 full applications have been received, although 90 businesses enquires were received. Business rates relief's advice on the website has been reorganised and improved to sign post all businesses to the range of help that is available. So far in 2010 304 applications for small business, charity, rural and hardship relief applications have been received. This is in addition to the 50 hardship applications.</p> <p>The second stage of the work on business rate relief, looking specifically at rural rate relief will commence shortly after the hardship work is completed in early June.</p>
12	Refresh the District wide Economic Strategy	<p>The refreshed Economic Strategy will be based on the Economic Appraisals being undertaken by Consultants on behalf of SCC (the Somerset Economic Appraisal) and SSDC (the Yeovil Economic Appraisal). These documents will result in the following documents in 2010:</p> <p>Refreshed Yeovil Vision New Economic Development Strategy for South Somerset</p>

Members referred to work-based learning and apprenticeships being affected due to funding cuts and that this was likely to have an effect on working in and around Yeovil. It was felt that linkages with key industries and colleges was not strong enough. Councillor Sylvia Seal commented that colleges were also under financial pressure and that they were able to get more money in for certain courses.

The Chairman thanked the Economic Development Manager for attending the meeting.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

*Simon Gale, Assistant Director (Economy) – (01935) 462071
e-mail: simon.gale@southsomerset.gov.uk*

10. Verbal Update from Councillor Tony Lock on the Somerset County Council meeting held to discuss the adverse weather conditions in January (Agenda Item 10)

Councillor Tony Lock reported on the Somerset County Council Scrutiny Committee Review on Winter Maintenance he had recently attended.

In advance of the meeting, Members had been provided with a paper outlined the three recommendations put forward by officers following their desk top review together with details of the debate and points that Councillor Tony Lock felt needed to be addressed together with the Snow Summit report.

Councillor Tony Lock suggested that a Task and Finish Review be established to look at strategic salting routes and indemnity for clearing snow. Members felt that there needed to be a time limit on the Review and that a report should be submitted to District Executive in July.

RESOLVED: That a Task and Finish Review be established to look at Winter Salting and that a report be submitted to District Executive in July.

11. Verbal update from the Local Strategic Partnership (South Somerset Together) meeting held on 28th May 2010 (Agenda Item 11)

The Chairman reported on the Local Strategic Partnership meeting she had attended on 28th May 2010. The following points were noted:

- The LSP AGM would be held on 16th June at 6.30pm at Long Sutton Golf Club. The Chairman of the Chamber of Trade asked if the two Somerset MPs could be asked to attend;
 - The Governance workshop on 15th June 2010 had been cancelled due to the recent government announcement and the emergency budget on 22nd June;
 - The LSP had considered the Active and Low Carbon travel – A transport Vision for Yeovil report;
 - A progress report was received on Migrant Workers Support – there were no actual figures available on the number of migrant workers across Somerset;
 - A presentation was received from Sue Place, Manager of the Balsam Centre. One of the main projects undertaken was supporting people with mental health issues.
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12. Verbal Update on Issues Raised by the Scrutiny Committee at the District Executive meeting held on 13th May 2010 (Agenda Item 12)

The Chairman reported that the comments raised by the Scrutiny Committee had been taken forward to the District Executive meeting held on 13th May 2010. She particularly mentioned the following:

Housing and Planning Delivery Grant Award and Area Based New Burden Grant Award

Each District Council within Somerset was contributing £1,000 towards the County wide Gypsy and Traveller Assessment.

Recommendations of the Joint Integration Committee of 8th April

Further comments were made at the Joint Integration Committee meeting regarding Joint Scrutiny as it was not clear whether the Scrutiny Committee comments had been taken on board at District Executive.

Replacement of Existing Air Cooling Equipment in the Brympton Way Data Centre

Monitoring of the running and maintenance costs of the new equipment would be recorded as requested by Scrutiny members.

13. Reports to be considered by District Executive on 3rd June 2010 (Agenda Item 13)

The Scrutiny Chairman agreed to take forward the following comments to the District Executive meeting on 3rd June 2010:

Quarterly Performance and Complaints Monitoring Report – 4th Quarter 2009/10

What is the take up on green bins?

Scrutiny members requested an update on how we are managing our sickness rates.

What is the procedure on the use of fit notes, which have recently replaced sickness notes

Recommendations of Joint Integration Committee of 13th May 2010

Scrutiny members were concerned about the lack of direction of the Joint Integration Committee.

Capital Budget Outturn 2009/10

Clarification needed over whether carry forwards are being allowed.

Revenue Budget Outturn 2009/10

Scrutiny members were concerned about the number of services (Legal, Dev Control) overspending money and felt that they needed to know the reasons why.

Land Transfer at Burrowfield Close, Bruton

Members felt that the land transfer was unfair to the residents of 17 Burrowfield Close who purchased a section of the verge some time ago.

Revised Procurement Strategy

With reference to page 24 – 6a – there is no target date?

With reference to page 26 10a – has this already happened?

Scrutiny members commented that although the Strategy was a way of showing the way forward it was not clear how it would be achieved. Will there be a revision of policies to show how this will be achieved.

West Coker Ropeworks

Which budget will be used to underwrite the loan?

14. Scrutiny Work Programme (Agenda Item 14)

The Scrutiny Manager updated the Scrutiny Work Programme as follows:

- An overview of the TENS system to be given at the 3rd August meeting;
- The Voluntary Sector Strategy would be considered as an item at the 29th June meeting under items on District Executive Agenda;
- There would be a one off Task & Finish Review meeting to look at inescapable bids;
- A Task & Finish Review to be established to review the capital bids;
- It was likely that the Committee would not be in a position to have a scoping day until after Christmas;
- The Task & Finish Review report on the Somerset Cultural Strategy would need to be considered by Scrutiny Committee;
- Donna Parham may attend meetings as appropriate to give updates on the budget.

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

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

15. Executive Forward Plan (Agenda Item 15)

Members noted that the report on the Portfolio Statements and Performance Matters would be considered by Scrutiny as part of the District Executive reports and not a separate item.

RESOLVED: That the Executive Forward Plan be noted.

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

16. Date of Next Meeting (Agenda Item 16)

Members noted that the next meeting of the Scrutiny Committee would be held on Tuesday 29th June 2010 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.

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Chairman