

South Somerset District Council

Draft Minutes of the Scrutiny Committee held on Tuesday 3 September 2013 in the Main Committee Room, Council Offices, Brympton Way, Yeovil.

(10.05am –12.50pm)

Present:

Members: Councillor Sue Steele (in the Chair)

Cathy Bakewell
David Bulmer
Pauline Clarke

Nigel Gage
Carol Goodall
Pauline Lock

Tony Lock
Sue Osborne
Martin Wale

Also present:

Councillors Tim Carroll and Gina Seaton.

Officers:

Donna Parham	Assistant Director, Finance and Corporate Services
Rina Singh	Strategic Director, Place and Performance
Kirsty Larkins	Housing and Welfare Manager
Catherine Hodsman	Performance Officer
Charlotte Jones	Area Development Manager (North)
Emily McGuinness	Scrutiny Manager
Becky Sanders	Democratic Services Officer

44. Minutes (Agenda Item 1)

The minutes of the meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held on Tuesday 30 July 2013 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

45. Apologies for Absence (Agenda Item 2)

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Nick Colbert, Paul Maxwell, Graham Middleton and David Recardo.

46. Declarations of Interest (Agenda Item 3)

There were no declarations of interest.

47. Public Question Time (Agenda Item 4)

There were no members of public at the meeting.

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

There were no issues raised from previous meetings.

49. Chairman's Announcements (Agenda Item 6)

The Chairman congratulated Councillor Cathy Bakewell on her appointment to the House of Lords.

50. Finance Presentation (Agenda item 7)

The Assistant Director (Finance and Corporate Services) gave a comprehensive presentation on the background to the local government budget setting process and effect budget Scrutiny including:

- Legal requirements;
- The financial management process;
- Financial planning;
- What we do at SSDC;
- Medium Term Financial Strategy;
- Annual budget and potential budgets ;
- Sources of income, including restrictions, and how spend is allocated for 2013/14;
- How to scrutinise the budget;
- Who monitors the budget.

In response to questions from members, she provided information about:

- Work continuing to deliver services in partnership and reports would come forward for consideration by members;
- Timings and amounts of government grants, and the retention of business rates;
- The volatility of some budgets and income streams.

The Chairman thanked the Assistant Director for her informative presentation and reminded members that the budget Scrutiny meeting with Portfolio Holders would be held in mid December, and a Task and Finish meeting to consider inescapable bids would take place in late October.

*Donna Parham, Assistant Director (Finance & Corporate Services)
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51. Verbal update on reports considered by District Executive on 1 August 2013 (Agenda item 8)

The Chairman noted that the Scrutiny comments had been considered and were included in the District Executive minutes that had been circulated.

52. Reports to be considered by District Executive on 5 September 2013 (Agenda item 9)

Members considered the reports outlined in the District Executive agenda for 5 September 2013. It was agreed that the following comments would be taken forward to District Executive for consideration:

Quarterly Performance and Complaints Monitoring Report 1st Quarter 2013/14 – item 6

- It was queried if the Somerset Waste Board is monitoring the on going costs of covering increases in flytipping following the reduction in opening hours / introduction of charges at HWRC's? These measures were introduced to meet the budget reduction needs of the County Council, but SSDC flytipping figures are roughly twice the 2011 figures;
- PI 029 – Number of incidents of antisocial behaviour reported to SSDC (page 11) – it was noted that the figure had remained fairly constant with no sign of reduction. Detail was not readily available in the agenda to indicate the type or location of incidents. Scrutiny thanked the Performance Officer for providing further detail at Scrutiny Committee but it was commented that a brief breakdown of the info would be useful to include in future agendas.

Designation of Neighbourhood Area – East Coker Parish – item 7

- Mixed opinions were raised by Scrutiny members regarding the merits of the southern tip of the Wraxhill Road area being included, or not included, within the neighbourhood area;
- Members acknowledged that parish boundaries could change in the future;
- Scrutiny Committee was content that the recommendation go forward.

Transfer of the Chard Market Charter to Chard Town Council – item 8

- Cllr Martin Wale to bring forward issues relating to financial impact of the report.

Report in respect of emergency funding for urgent works to protect a listed building – item 9

- Scrutiny Committee acknowledged that the owner partnership had accepted the financial offer (as informed by the Conservation Manager);
- Members queried the merits of saving the building given its current state. They also questioned if consideration had been given to applying to de-list the building and when a building was determined to be beyond repair;
- Regarding conditions in para 6.1 – members were of the opinion the three year time frame should be extended;
- Members requested a report be made to Scrutiny in the near future to look at the SSDC policy regarding historic buildings.

Appointment of a Principal Spatial Policy Planner – item 10

- Scrutiny Committee was content that the recommendation go forward but did seek reassurance that there would not be any duplication of roles. They thanked the Strategic Director for clarifying why it was not appropriate for this post to be appointed on a fixed term basis.

District Executive Forward Plan – item 11

- No comments were made.
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53. Homefinder Somerset Lettings Policy (agenda item 10)

The Housing and Welfare Manager presented the report as detailed in the agenda, and explained the background that had led to the proposed changes being required. If the changes were to be approved by the four other local authorities in Somerset, it was likely the proposed changes would be introduced in January 2014. She highlighted the proposed main changes to the policy which included:

- To go onto the Housing Register applicants will have to have a local connection to Somerset;
- Gold band harassment - time limited, and bid on properties away from the location of the harassment;
- Silver relationship breakdown – removed;
- Silver need to move for work/support - needs to be significant;
- Silver band shared facilities – restrictions added;
- Bronze band – clearer wording regarding deliberately worsening circumstances;
- Armed forces – additional priority;
- Bedroom eligibility – in line with Housing benefit criteria;
- Refusals – suspend from register;
- Foster Carers – additional bedroom.

In response to comments and questions raised by members, the Housing and Welfare Manager commented that:

- The wording in paragraph 13.6 of the policy would be amended to include adopting as well as fostering;
- People who would be directly affected by the proposed changes would receive a letter beforehand to explain the changes;
- The policy is due to be considered by District Executive in October, and it was hoped by then that the number of households likely to be affected by the changes would be known;
- There were currently limited powers to deal with housing tenancy fraud, however a new Bill was going through parliament which would provide similar powers to dealing with benefit fraud.

Members were content that the policy changes went forward to District Executive. The Chairman thanked the officer for her comprehensive report and presentation.

*Kirsty Larkins, Housing and welfare manager
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54. Verbal Update on Task & Finish Reviews (Agenda Item 11)

Council Tax Benefit Changes

The Chairman of the Task and Finish group commented that they had received an update on the number of applications to the hardship scheme and the non-payment statistics – neither of the figures were as high as expected. A document was also being produced for customers to explain ways of paying Council Tax and the implications of late payment.

National Non Domestic Rates (NNDR) – Discretionary Rate Relief

The Chairman noted that the Task and Finish group had examined various case studies at their last meeting, and work was ongoing.

Inescapable Bids

The Scrutiny Manager informed members that a meeting would take place in late October to consider inescapable bids. Councillor Martin Wale expressed an interest to be on the group.

ACTION: Members to note the updates.

55. Update on matters of interest (Agenda Item 12)

The Scrutiny Manager provided three updates:

- Somerset Homelessness Strategy – a report was due for consideration at the October Scrutiny Committee;
- County Wide Review of Flooding – the steering group were due to meet in late September;
- Connecting Somerset and Devon Broadband – the Scrutiny Manager informed members that a joint Scrutiny meeting had been arranged for 27 September. The review would be time limited, and it was anticipated there would be a total of three meetings. It was likely that four members from each authority would be invited to the meetings.

ACTION: Members to note the updates.

56. Scrutiny Work Programme (Agenda Item 13)

There were no updates to the Scrutiny Work Programme.

ACTION: Members to note the Scrutiny Work Programme.

57. Somerset Waste Board – Forward Plan (Agenda item 14)

ACTION: Members to note the Somerset Waste Board Forward Plan.

58. Date of Next Meeting (Agenda Item 15)

Members noted that the next meeting of the Scrutiny Committee would be held on Tuesday 1 October 2013 at 10.00am in the Main Committee Room, Brympton Way, Yeovil.

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Chairman