

South Somerset District Council

Minutes of a meeting of the **Scrutiny Committee** held at the **Main Committee Room, Council Offices, Brympton Way, Yeovil BA20 2HT** on **Tuesday 5 January 2016**.

(10.00 am - 12.20 pm)

Present:

Members: Councillor Sue Steele (Chairman)

Jason Baker	Sue Osborne
John Clark	David Recardo
Gye Dibben	Garry Shortland
Val Keitch	Rob Stickland
Tony Lock	Martin Wales

Also Present:

Peter Gubbins	Angie Singleton
Ric Pallister	

Officers

Donna Parham	Assistant Director (Finance & Corporate Services)
Laurence Willis	Assistant Director (Environment)
Garry Green	Engineering & Property Services Manager
Colin McDonald	Corporate Strategic Housing Manager
Jo Gale	Scrutiny Manager
Emily McGuinness	Scrutiny Manager

93. Minutes (Agenda Item 1)

The minutes of the meeting held on 1st December 2015 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

94. Apologies for absence (Agenda Item 2)

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Clare Aparicio Paul, Dave Bulmer and Tiffany Osborne.

95. Declarations of interest (Agenda Item 3)

There were no declarations of interest.

96. Public question time (Agenda Item 4)

There were no members of public at the meeting.

97. Issues arising from previous meetings (Agenda Item 5)

There were no issues raised.

98. Chairman's Announcements (Agenda Item 6)

The Chairman informed the Committee that item 8 – Call-in of Portfolio Holder decision would be taken ahead of item 7 – Verbal update on Journey of Exploration as representatives from Yarlinton Homes were in attendance for item 8.

99. Journey of Exploration - Update (Agenda Item 7)

The Leader of the Council gave a verbal update to the Committee covering some of the following points:

- The Joint Leaders Advisory Group (JLAG) meeting of the 7th January had been rescheduled for the 14th January to allow emerging issues to be reflected in the draft headline business cases;
 - The Headline Business cases were still on track to be presented to Council in February;
 - The continually evolving Devolution Agenda will have an important impact on the final decision, a report on this will be presented at Full Council.
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100. Portfolio Holder Decision Called in by Scrutiny Committee: - Consent for Disposal of a Property in Rimpton by Yarlinton Housing Group (Agenda Item 8)

The Scrutiny Manager outlined the process for considering a Call-in. She informed the Committee that a Call-in had been received in accordance with the Council's Constitution and that it was now the role of the Scrutiny Committee to agree if the Call-in request should be upheld and the options available to the Committee. Committee Members were reminded that a Call-in could only be made on the following three grounds:

- The decision is outside for the Council's budgetary framework (i.e. no funds have been allocated in the budget to this matter);
- The decision is outside of the Council's policy framework (i.e. we don't have a policy covering this matter or the decision is counter to an agreed policy/procedure); or
- The decision making process is flawed (i.e. insufficient consultation, lack of evidence etc.)

Members were reminded that they could:

- Decide there were no grounds to support the Call-in and that the decision should stand; or
- Give specific reasons as to why the decision should be called in and refer it back to the Portfolio Holder to allow them to reconsider the decision in light of Scrutiny's comments; or
- Refer the decision to Full Council, again with specific reasons as to why the decision should be reconsidered.

Members were also reminded that SSDC's Constitution makes provision for 'call-in' after the decision is implemented – this provides an opportunity for Scrutiny to consider the implications of any decision. The scrutiny Committee can then make recommendations to the Executive or Full Council on changes to policy or practice in the light of their findings – this approach avoids the need to 'suspend' decisions whilst the matter is considered and is most appropriate where members may feel that an adopted policy is no longer appropriate – rather than where they feel that a decision does not comply with a particular policy.

Councillor Sue Osborne, as one of the two signatories of the Call-in was given the opportunity to present her grounds for the Call-in to the Committee. The following points were raised:

- The Portfolio Holder Decision referred to the disposal of property in Rimpton and that the decision had been taken under provision made in October 2012.
- Under these provisions 3 disposal decisions had been taken in 2013, 2 in 2014 and 10 in 2015 (the majority of which were in rural settlements) – these figures show that the number of such requests for disposal are increasing significantly.
- The majority of such disposals would seem to occur in the rural areas of the district, although it is understood that funds from the disposal will be spent locally, this is restricted by the sites that come forward. What is done to ensure funds are invested in the rural area?
- The 'donut' principle used so effectively in the SSDC Rural Lettings Policy does not seem to be applied in the case of disposals. Could properties be amended to help meet demand?
- Each request for a disposal is essentially a matter of balance and judgement.
- This call-in had been instigated to allow an open and transparent discussion of the issues associated with the adopted policy and processes.

Councillor Ric Pallister, as the responsible Portfolio Holder, and the Corporate Housing Strategy Manager (SSDC) were then given an opportunity to respond. The following points were raised:

- SSDC are only a consultee on each decision to dispose of a property. Yarlington Homes are required to seek the views of the relevant Local Housing Authority but the ultimate decision will be taken by the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA).
- The recent decision of SSDC not to support the request to dispose of a property in Curry Rivel is the first time Local Authority support has been withheld and it will be interesting to see what impact this may have on the decision of the HCA.
- The number of requests to dispose of properties is more than likely to increase as Yarlington Homes responds to further financial pressure from government
- With regard to the money from a disposal of a property being spent locally, SSDC has no powers to ensure it is spent in SSDC, The decision called-in was made in accordance with the existing policy. In particular, there are no direct budgetary implications and the relevant Ward member was consulted
- It was reiterated that a decision to dispose did not set a precedent – each request is considered on its merit, even within the same settlement.
- Yarlington may wish to dispose of properties in rural locations where they only own a couple for management purposes.

Mr Richie Horton, Managing Director – Property (Yarlington Homes) added the following points:

- There was some speculation that within 6 months, due the acceleration in government requirements that it will not even be necessary to secure HCA approval.
- All of our properties have to achieve a Standard Assessment Procedure (SAP) rating of 69, those properties with a low SAP rating are problematic.
- The disposal programme will accelerate, we have to ensure that the properties we have, meet local demand and help meet the bottom line, Yarlington Homes is a business.

In considering the information presented to them, members of the Scrutiny Committee made the following comments:

- The Call-in had provided a useful opportunity to discuss various issues around this topic,
- Whilst this decision had been taken in accordance with adopted policy, there would seem to be some merit in revisiting the policy as agreed in October 2012 and ensuring that all members are clear about the process involved.
- The Call-in was in no way intended as a criticism of the officers or Portfolio Holder involved, more an attempt to clarify the policies and processes involved.

Following a unanimous vote, the Scrutiny Committee agreed to recommend:

That the Portfolio Holder decision as proposed stands and that further work is carried out to clarify the SSSDC process for consideration of such disposal requests in the future. Such a review will be conducted once the outcome of the HCA decision regarding the request to dispose of a property in Curry Rivel is known.

101. Update on SSSDC Telephony (Agenda Item 9)

The Assistant Director – Finance and Corporate Services presented the report. During discussion, the following points were made:

- Monday 4th January had seen an unprecedented level of demand in the contact centre with in excess of 2000 calls received – this had resulted in some customers waiting 8 minutes or abandoning their calls.
- However, this was very much the exception and the new software had now been successfully installed.
- The majority of previously identified issues had now been successfully resolved.
- Work is currently being undertaken to allow key messages to be played to callers – such as waste collection information and when the best times are to call, using historic call data to identify off peak times.
- The possibility of introducing a function to tell callers where they are in the queue is also being investigated.
- The Quarterly performance report scheduled for March would include a full set of call handling data.
- Members clarified that if a customer terminated their call ahead of speaking to an advisor it would be reported as an abandoned call even if the information they had been provided while on hold answered their query.

- Members asked if a note could be prepared and circulated to Parish Clerks outlining the best times to contact the Council and the most appropriate channels (e.g. email, direct dial or Contact Centre)

Members congratulated both the teams involved for their work in addressing the issues previously raised and improving the service.

The Assistant Director – Finance and Corporate Services agreed to update the Committee on any issues should they arise in the future.

102. Verbal update on reports considered by District Executive on 3 December 2015 (Agenda Item 10)

Members noted the update given by the Chairman of Scrutiny Committee.

103. Reports to be considered by District Executive on 7 January 2016 (Agenda Item 11)

The Scrutiny Committee considered the reports contained in the District Executive Agenda for the 7th January and made the following comments:

Setting the Council Tax Reduction Scheme (CTRS)

Scrutiny members have considered this matter in great depth through a Task and Finish Group and Scrutiny Committee – they would like to thank officers for all their hard work on this topic and fully support the recommendations in the report.

Approval of the Somerset District Authorities Regulatory Services Enforcement Policy

Members supported the recommendations in the report but noted that the report contains no financial implications – even if there are no resource implications, the report should make this clear so that members have the full picture before taking any decisions.

Proposed leasing of 80 South Street

Members support the recommendations in the report and noted that consideration had been given to SSDC carrying out the building works ourselves, but that it was not appropriate in this case and that the recommendations contained in the report effectively turned the property from a liability into an asset.

Medium Term Financial Plan

Members noted that the Capital Programme element of the report was not included as details were not currently available for all bids – members would be presented with the complete picture in due course.

Members noted that the report outlined the likely impact of the Government settlement and that early indications are that the necessary savings needed by 2020 are achievable.

Regarding the temporary SRA precept, members asked what would happen if one or more Somerset authority did not support its introduction?

Members discussed the potential £200k additional income from Automatic Number Plate recognition for car parking and look forward to further reports prior to implementation.

Members queried the two separate amounts shown as savings against Vacant Posts, Donna Parham Assistant Director (Finance and Corporate Services) explained that the £143,500 represented the sum that had been achieved to date primarily from people reducing their hours and the £108,000 is a target for further saving.

The Committee queried the savings allocated to the cessation of the CEO contract – a saving of £88k is allocated for this. Members asked what would happen if a decision is taken to appoint a CEO in the future?

Members noted the detailed work that officers had done to investigate the possibility of introducing up to 2 free hours parking. The Committee noted that the findings would seem to indicate that the costs would seem to be prohibitive but did ask that further work be done to cost various options for free parking for periods of less than one hour – members accepted that such work would probably be dependent on the outcome of discussions re: automated number plate recognition.

Members asked when the report of the Strategic Director Place and performance outlining the Transformation Programme would be coming forward to members?

Community Right to Bid

Members noted that All Saints Church in Yeovil Marsh had been nominated and asked for clarification as to whether functioning/ active churches could be nominated?

Confidential Item – Urgent Executive Decision

Members noted the report and asked if in future it would be possible to include how much interest the capital sum would have earned if not allocated to such a project? This would provide a useful comparator for members.

104. Verbal update on Task and Finish reviews (Agenda Item 12)

The Scrutiny Managers updated the Committee on the work of the Task and Finish Group established to review the on-going Journey of Exploration. The next meeting scheduled for the 8th January had been cancelled due to the fact the Joint Leaders Advisory Group meeting on the 7th January has been rescheduled for 14th January. The Task and Finish Group would meet again on 15th January at 2.30 p.m.

105. Update on matters of interest (Agenda Item 13)

There were no updates on matters of interest.

106. Scrutiny Work Programme (Agenda Item 14)

Members noted the Scrutiny Work Programme.

107. Date of next meeting (Agenda Item 15)

Members noted the next meeting of the Scrutiny Committee would be held on Tuesday 2 February 2016 in the Main Committee Room, Brympton Way.

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Chairman