

South Somerset District Council

Minutes of a meeting of the **Scrutiny Committee** held at the **Virtual Meeting** using **Zoom meeting software** on **Tuesday 2 February 2021**.

(10.30 am - 12.05 pm)

Present:

Members: Councillor Crispin Raikes (Chairman)

Robin Bastable	Oliver Patrick
Nicola Clark	Jeny Snell
Brian Hamilton	Gerard Tucker
Sue Osborne	Linda Vijeh
Robin Pailthorpe	



Also Present:

Sarah Dyke	Tony Lock
Val Keitch	Peter Seib

Officers

Nicola Hix	Director (Support Services)
Kirsty Larkins	Director (Strategy and Commissioning)
Clare Pestell	Director (Commercial Services & Income Generation)
Jo Nacey	Section 151 Officer
Jill Byron	Monitoring Officer
Paul Matravers	Lead Specialist (Finance)
Vicki Dawson	Lead Specialist (Environmental Health)
Katy Menday	Leisure & Recreation Manager
Ross Eaton	Specialist - Finance
Stephanie Gold	Specialist (Scrutiny & Member Development)
Anna-Maria Lenz	Specialist (Strategic Planning)
Jo Boucher	Case Officer (Strategy & Commissioning)
Becky Sanders	Case Officer (Strategy & Commissioning)
Michelle Mainwaring	Case Officer (Strategy & Commissioning)

223. Minutes (Agenda Item 1)

The minutes of the previous meeting held on 5 January 2021 were approved as a correct record and would be signed by the Chairman.

224. Apologies for absence (Agenda Item 2)

Apologies for Absence were received from Councillors Charlie Hull and Paul Maxwell.

225. Declarations of Interest (Agenda Item 3)

There were no declarations of interest.

226. Public question time (Agenda Item 4)

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

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

There were no issues raised from previous meetings.

228. Chairman's Announcements (Agenda Item 6)

There were no Chairman's announcements.

229. Verbal update on reports considered by District Executive on 7 January 2021 (Agenda Item 7)

There were no updates for reports to be considered by District Executive at the January meeting.

230. Reports to be considered by District Executive on 4 February 2021 (Agenda Item 8)

Members considered the reports within the District Executive agenda for 4th February 2021 and raised comments as detailed below. Responses to most questions and comments were provided at Scrutiny Committee by the relevant officers or Portfolio Holder – except those marked by an asterisk:

SSDC Annual Action Plan 2021-2022 (Agenda Item 6)

- Members questioned why The Digital Strategy is not mentioned as a priority project.
- Re: KPI's. Members highlighted the lack of data for refuse and recycling rates by district. This data has been difficult to obtain for some time now. All Members agreed this needs to be sought in order to measure district efforts for reductions to residual waste and recycling.*

2021/22 Draft Budget and Medium Term Financial Plan Update (Agenda item 7)

- Members thanked the finance team for producing the following four reports which are very detailed and well written.
- Page 51: One Member questioned the Octagon budget figure of 315,520. Has the Octagon made a loss due to Covid-19, or another reason? This question is linked to the redevelopment and investment plans shared with Members in late 2020.
- Page 52: Building control seems to be making a profit in this budget. Last year it was making a loss. How had this been achieved? Is Building Control making money, or losing it?

- Para 41: Revenue Support Grants showing as a minus. Para 37 showing as a plus. Clarification required on these figures.
- Business Support Grants and Business Rates - what assumptions have we based our figures on?
- A Member questioned where planning appears in the budgets. Confirmed it is now called Development Management.
- Annex D page 62 refers to a Costa Coffee spend. Members questioned whether this is a new investment?
- Some Members questioned the use of pluses and minuses to show income and expenditure. This could be misleading.
- With regards to the impact of planning and phosphate issues on council budgets, has the council factored in the risk of refunding fees for planning applications that have been held up due to the issues?
- Re: Requests for capital. Members asked at what point the council reviews capital requests in comparison to actual spend to identify under/over spend?

Capital, Investment and Treasury Strategies 2021/22 to 2023/24 (Agenda Item 8)

- Page 186 Table 1, a Member questioned Capital investments and general services figures for 22/23.
- Page 207 – 3 renewable energy projects? Are we counting Taunton as two phases, and the other is at Fareham?

2020/21 Revenue Budget Monitoring Report for the Period Ending 31st December 2020 (Agenda Item 9)

- No questions

2020/21 Capital Budget Monitoring Report for the Period Ending 31st December 2020 (Agenda Item 10)

- One member questioned: What is E5?

Planning and Phosphates - Adoption of a Phosphate Load Calculator (Agenda Item 11)

- Members agreed that the previous evenings' briefing for Members raised more questions than answers on the subject of phosphates and planning.
- Members were concerned about how this will impact the viability and affordability of building new homes in South Somerset. Will the cost of offsetting phosphates discourage developers and therefore risk losing the current 5YLS.*
- Some Members felt this is a legislative issue and therefore requires lobbying of central government.
- One Member questioned how this issue has impacted on the backlog of planning applications currently pending with SSDC. Do we have the resource to catch this up?
- Members emphasised the need for better communication with all stakeholders (particularly PC's & TC's) with regards to planning applications and any issues or concerns, not just developers. Suggest a policy on communications.
- One Member questioned at what stage developers have to show they have mitigated the phosphate risks before development starts? Concerns that some developers may not full deliver on this. i.e. building wetlands to offset*

- Members highlighted the detrimental financial impact this offsetting may have on livestock farming and agriculture.

Planning Reimagined - Changes to the Scheme of Delegation to Increase Efficiency of the Planning Service (Agenda Item 12)

- Members expressed concerns regarding consultation with ward members for householder applications. Ward Members are not always in agreement with officer recommendations. How do these differences of opinion get resolved?
- Members were concerned that some planning officers do not live in the area, have little knowledge of the local area, and do not always visit sites. This casts doubt on some of the decisions made by officers.
- Members highlighted the importance of managing expectations and maintaining suitable communication with PC's and TC's.
- Some Members felt uneasy with the proposed changes, suggesting this gives way for more decisions to be made behind closed doors.
- One Member suggested a flow chart or similar would be useful to illustrate how the new scheme of delegation works in different circumstances i.e. officer and ward Member conflict.
- Some Members sought reassurance that area committees would continue, despite the change in Scheme of Delegation for planning applications. Members felt the Area system, albeit unique in comparison to other authorities, works well and continues to be an asset to SSDC.
- One Member felt there can be lessons learned from the new ways of working adopted during Covid-19, and suggested that members and officers reconvene to review what has/has not worked and use these lessons to implement better planning processes and improvements to the service in the future, post Covid-19.

Future Delivery of the Environment Strategy (Agenda Item 13)

- Members were made aware of amendments to para 6 and para 26 re: £1.171m Windfall from New Homes Bonus.
- A Member questioned the difference between living environment and environment case officer roles.
- One Member questioned recruitment. If existing staff were to leave and there was a need to go through another recruitment process, where does this budget come from? The environment strategy budget or the council's overall recruitment budget?
- A Member questioned if and how this strategy aligns with the county wide climate emergency strategy.
- A Member asked what impact the unitary bids would have on the delivery and implementation of this strategy.
- A Member questioned the figures for staffing the delivery of this strategy, but commented that this leaves a small budget of 42k for project delivery.

Proposed Changes to the Senior Management Structure (Agenda Item 14)

- A Member questioned which other partner authority is being referred to. Confirmed as Mendip.
- A Member questioned if/how these changes will impact portfolio holder roles.

District Executive Forward Plan (Agenda item 15)

- A member pointed out there are often some inconsistencies in the style and level of detail in report writing across the organisation. Can this be standardised in any way so that there is a more consistent approach to report writing?

Note – Scrutiny Committee did not go into confidential session

231. Verbal update on Task and Finish reviews (Agenda Item 9)

The Specialist, Scrutiny confirmed The Environment Strategy Task and Finish meeting is arranged for 16th February 2021.

232. Update on matters of interest (Agenda Item 10)

There were no updates on matters of interest.

233. Scrutiny Work Programme (Agenda Item 11)

The Chairman confirmed that he would attend the Area committees to give a Scrutiny presentation once they re-commence.

234. Date of next meeting (Agenda Item 12)

Members noted that the next meeting of the Scrutiny Committee was scheduled for 10:30am on Tuesday 2nd March 2021 and will be held as a virtual meeting using Zoom.

.....
Chairman