

## South Somerset District Council

**Minutes** of an informal meeting of the **District Executive** held as a **Virtual Meeting using Zoom meeting software on Thursday 6 January 2022.**

(9.30 am - 11.53 am)

### **Present:**

Councillor Val Keitch (Chairman)

Jason Baker  
Mike Best  
John Clark  
Adam Dance  
Sarah Dyke

Peter Gubbins  
Henry Hobhouse  
Tony Lock  
Peter Seib



### **Also Present:**

Louise Clarke  
Brian Hamilton  
Andy Kendall  
Mike Lewis

Sue Osborne  
Gina Seaton  
Gerard Tucker  
Martin Wale

### **Officers:**

Jane Portman	Chief Executive
Jan Gamon	Director (Place and Recovery)
Nicola Hix	Director (Support Services & Strategy)
Kirsty Larkins	Director (Service Delivery)
Jill Byron	Monitoring Officer
Karen Watling	Chief Finance Officer (S151 Officer)
Angela Kerr	Chief Executive, Citizens Advice South Somerset
Katherine Nolan	Chief Executive, SPARK Somerset
David Crisfield	Specialist (Strategic Planning)
Natalie Fortt	Regeneration Programme Manager
Catherine Thompson	Specialist (Benefits)
Peter Paddon	Lead Specialist (Economy)
Leigh Rampton	Lead Specialist (Communities)
Stephanie Gold	Specialist (Scrutiny & Member Development)
Angela Cox	Specialist (Democratic Services)

**Note:** All decisions were approved without dissent unless shown otherwise.

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### **111. Minutes of Previous Meeting (Agenda Item 1)**

The minutes of the previous meeting held on 2<sup>nd</sup> December 2021 were approved as a correct record and would be signed by the Chairman.

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**112. Apologies for Absence (Agenda Item 2)**

There were no apologies for absence.

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**113. Declarations of Interest (Agenda Item 3)**

There were no declarations of interest made by Members.

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**114. Public Question Time (Agenda Item 4)**

There were no questions from members of the public.

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**115. Chairman's Announcements (Agenda Item 5)**

The Chairman wished all Members a very Happy New Year and said it would be a very busy year in the lead up to becoming a Unitary Authority.

The Chairman also advised that a letter of resignation had been received from Councillor Linda Vijeh as a District Councillor.

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**116. District-wide strategic grants - funding arrangements with Citizens Advice South Somerset and Spark Somerset 2022/2023 (Agenda Item 6)**

The Chief Executive of Citizens Advice South Somerset provided Members with a short presentation of the work of the organisation. She noted that:

- They had been open over the Christmas period and were very busy.
- They had helped to distribute the Somerset Household Support Fund of £250 grants to households who were struggling to meet essential living costs and had received 370 applications in South Somerset.
- The main advice issues were Universal Credit applications, benefit claims, seeking affordable housing and managing personal debt.
- There was uncertainty on the funding for debt casework for 2022/23 as the Money and Pension Service had recently advised they were not going to commission regional debt advice as the applications they received did not meet their requirements.
- There was currently a deficit budget forecast for the following year for the service and some funding schemes were ending or changing.

In response to questions from Members, the Chief Executive for Citizens Advice South Somerset and the Chairman advised:-

- The service received £34,000 grant funding from SCC public health and they had also awarded £400,000 as a one off grant to provide additional capacity on the Somerset Adviceline.
- CASS received no funding from the national body but membership allowed them access to insurance and quality of advice audit.
- She was not aware that Citizens Advice centres in London received funding to pay for officers rather than volunteers but would check this and confirm with Councillor Hobhouse. *(Subsequent to the meeting, it was confirmed that National Citizens Advice do not make any payments to London City Citizens Advice Centres).*
- Funding for CASS should continue when the new Unitary Authority was established.
- It would be helpful for SSDC and CASS to work together to prevent large council tax arrears for clients.
- Housing was a huge issue as some private landlords were selling their rented properties in the area.
- CASS would use their reserves to keep the service operating for one year while new funding sources were sought but the new Unitary Authority was expected to be a funding provider. Wessex Water and Western Power Distribution also contributed grant aid to the service.
- The Somerset Local Government Reorganisation Joint Committee would be discussing funding for the voluntary sector at their next meeting on 4 February 2022.
- SCC had granted £400,000 as an additional capacity grant to help on the Somerset Adviceline across the county. The funding was to cover 2 years to June 2023. In South Somerset it funded a full time employee to supplement the volunteers on the advice line.

During discussion, the following points were made:

- The new Unitary Authority should be able to make an arrangement for the future funding of Citizens Advice across Somerset.
- Debt often had serious mental health consequences which impacted on the health care service but the Unitary Authority was the opportunity to join together on this.

The Chief Executive of SPARK Somerset provided Members with a short presentation of the work of the organisation. She noted that:

- The merger of the NHS Trusts in Somerset and the new Unitary Authority were creating opportunities and risks for the voluntary sector and discussions should take place around sustainability for the voluntary sector.
- Spark helped to support voluntary groups, represented them, ran a volunteers service and helped communities to develop. They also helped with networking and partnerships between voluntary groups.
- During the previous 6 months they had supported 95 groups with varying issues.

- Training continued to be popular, particularly on-line training.
- Employer led volunteering was popular for the health and well-being of employees as well as benefitting local communities or charities.
- They had been researching how the pandemic had impacted communities and the voluntary sector and identify what it needed to renew. The main themes were around care and carers, young people, mental health and well-being, debt, poverty and housing. The report would be available shortly.

In response to questions, the Chief Executive of SPARK Somerset and the Chairman advised:-

- Volunteering had moved toward emergency response volunteering and discussions had taken place on how to capture and direct them to other longer term volunteering opportunities such as village halls and established community groups.
- Organisations and groups need to think differently about how they use volunteers in the future.
- The number of under 50's who access Spark had increased.
- There was an opportunity with the Local Community Networks in the Unitary Council to reinvigorate volunteering.

During discussion, the following points were made:

- Long term funding for voluntary organisations help them to strategically plan for the future.
- The Chard Connect project had helped to bring voluntary organisations together to benefit the community and identify issues like the lack of transport to vaccination clinics.
- Many village halls in Somerset would not have been built without strong local volunteers.

The Specialist for Communities advised that the proposal from the previous year's District Executive meeting was to look at commissioning voluntary sector community support and involve the Scrutiny Committee in that process, but this had been put on hold by the Unitary Council proposal. It was hoped that there would be a decision on funding the voluntary sector during 2023/24 very shortly.

The Chairman of the Scrutiny Committee noted that most of their comments had been answered by officers during the presentation, however, it would be useful for Members to have a regular dashboard on a Ward basis on general headlines, themes and emerging trends regarding work cases, in particular those with a rural perspective. He also noted that council tax debt recovery by SSDC was an issue for CASS and he asked if this was a risk to SSDC.

The Portfolio Holder for Finance and Legal Services confirmed that SSDC sought debt recovery within a support scheme which was due to be discussed under a

later agenda item. SSDC would recover council tax debt from those who could afford to pay but the support scheme was there to help those struggling to pay.

At the conclusion of the debate the Chairman thanked the Chief Executives of CASS and Spark for their work in helping the residents of South Somerset.

The Portfolio Holder for Health and Well-Being also thanked the Chief Executives of CASS and Spark for the work of their organisations in the local community. He proposed that the inflationary uplift of 2% in the report be increased to 5% because inflation was currently at that level. He said this would protect the core grant figure and would increase the total funding to £208,687.50. This would reduce the remaining district-wide voluntary and community sector grants budget to £23,273.

This amended proposal was seconded and unanimously agreed by Members.

**RESOLVED:** The District Executive recommend that the Chief Executive:-

- a. agrees a one-year core funding agreement for the period April 2022 to March 2023, for Citizens Advice South Somerset of £127,816.50 inclusive of a 5% inflationary uplift;
- b. agrees a one-year core funding agreement for the period April 2022 to March 2023, for Spark Somerset of £80,871 inclusive of a 5% inflationary uplift (a total of £208,687.50 between the two organisations);
- c. confirm that in addition to the above a further £7,000 in the Corporate Grants budget, which is allocated to support SSDC's contribution to the countywide Disability Consultation and Engagement Service.

**Reason:** To confirm the funding of our two strategic voluntary sector partners, Citizens Advice South Somerset (CASS) and Spark Somerset for the year 2022 to 2023.

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## 117. Project Closure Report - Chard Leisure Centre (Agenda Item 7)

The Portfolio Holder for Finance and Legal Services confirmed that major projects required a closure report and the Chard Leisure Centre was part of a wider initiative within the town. The report helped to learn through the experience and improve programme management for the future. In particular the costings had not taken account of a potential ground contamination issue and the public consultation which requested a full size 5 lane pool. The early feedback had been very positive and the project had been delivered on time and to budget, but not all the elements that had originally been envisaged were completed. The cost of the project had increased as construction industry costs increased, supply

chain interruptions due to the pandemic and Brexit had all impacted. The lessons learned from the project would assist in planning other projects in the future.

The Regeneration Programme Manager advised that 11 of the proposed capital programme projects for the following year would be impacted by the report recommendations. Four of the projects were part of the Regeneration Programme which she would be monitoring and the remaining 7 projects would be required to produce a staged assessment plan.

In response to questions from Members, the Regeneration Programme Manager and Chief Finance Officer advised:-

- As the project progressed, external project management and cost consultants were consulted but the budget had been set very early in the process and the feasibility study had produced costs to build a standard leisure centre and not how much it would cost to build the Chard leisure centre with its subsequent issues.
- The new budget set with appropriate contingency levels was correct and the project was delivered on time and within that budget.
- A Contingency Budget would be proposed as part of the new Capital Programme for the next financial year.

During discussion, the following points were made:

- Allocating a large contingency budget would mean there was less funding for other projects.
- Public opinion should be taken into account in the towns regeneration projects.
- The ground conditions at the site had been highlighted by local members on a number of times in the early stages of the project.

The Director for Place and Recovery said that significant changes had been made to the governance arrangements of regeneration projects to clarify when decisions should be referred to Executive or Council for approval. Also financial monitoring had been improved to ensure future regeneration projects were closely monitored.

The Chairman of the Regeneration Board said they knew it was going to be a challenging development site and the lessons would be learnt for future projects. In response to questions from the Scrutiny Committee the Director for Place and Recovery advised:-

- This was the lessons learned report which was agreed to be presented to Members.
- The detailed breakdown of the finances were in the report presented to District Executive in September 2021.

The Regeneration Programme Manager advised that there was an open planning application for building 11 at the site and depending on the outcome of the

planning application, there may be further costs to recover from the remaining project budget.

At the conclusion of the debate, the recommendations were unanimously approved by Members.

**RESOLVED:** That District Executive recommend that Full Council agree to:-

- a. Implement End of Stage Assessments for all capital projects over £1,000,000;
- b. Implement End of Stage Assessments for all capital projects over £250,000 that also have a risk impact score of moderate or above in one or more risk categories.

**Reason:** To provide members with a completion report for the Chard Leisure Centre Project and to seek agreement to implement End of Stage Assessments to capital projects with a value exceeding £1,000,000 or those over £250,000 that have a risk impact score of moderate or above.

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#### **118. Council Tax Support Scheme 2022/23 (Agenda Item 8)**

The Portfolio Holder for Finance and Legal Services said the Council were required to review their Council Tax Support Scheme each year and following the substantial changes made in the previous year, implemented in April 2021, it was early to revise those changes. There were no revisions to the Equality Impact Assessment as there was no evidence that it was out of date, and there were no other adverse indications and therefore the proposal was to keep the scheme the same without change.

The Benefits Specialist explained the graph in the report relating to the dip in Universal Credit between April and June due to period of assessment now being on a rolling basis. This was not the case for pensioners claims for council tax help as they were not eligible for Universal Credit and tended to have a more stable income.

The Portfolio Holder for Finance and Legal Services noted that the risk of continuing the scheme without review was not a risk to the clients but the drop in £20 per week in Universal Credit would impact on them. He said that SSDC would react to any severe impacts but he was happy with the level of risk carried by the Council.

There was no debate and the recommendations were proposed and seconded and unanimously proposed to Council for confirmation.

**RESOLVED:** That District Executive recommend that Full Council agree:-

- a. The Banded Council Tax Support Scheme introduced from 1st April 2021 remain unchanged;
- b. The income bands are maintained at their current thresholds;
- c. The hardship scheme budget be maintained at £30,000 for the 2022/23 financial year.

**Reason:** Each year the Council is required to review its Council Tax Support Scheme in accordance with the requirements of schedule 1A of the Local Government Finance Act 1991 and to either maintain the scheme or replace it.

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**119. District Executive Forward Plan (Agenda Item 9)**

The Chairman noted that there were a high number of reports due to be presented to District Executive in February 2022 and so it was proposed to hold two meetings to allow proper debate on all the reports.

The Chief Finance Officer confirmed that one of the District Executive meetings would be specifically to discuss budget related reports.

Subsequent to the meeting, it was agreed that two District Executive meetings would be held on Thursday 10<sup>th</sup> February and Thursday 17<sup>th</sup> February 2022 at 9.30am as a virtual meetings via Zoom.

**RESOLVED:** That the District Executive recommend that the Chief Executive:-

1. approve the updated Executive Forward Plan for publication as attached at Appendix A, with the following amendments;
  - Decarbonisation programme phase 2 proposals - February 2022
  - Ensuring sufficient staffing capacity during 2022/23 – February 2022
  - Octagon Theatre Outline Business Case gateway stage – February 2022
2. noted the contents of the Consultation Database as shown at Appendix B.

**Reason:** The Forward Plan is a statutory document.



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**120. Date of Next Meeting (Agenda Item 10)**

Members noted that the next scheduled meeting of the District Executive would take place on Thursday 10<sup>th</sup> February 2022 as a virtual meeting using Zoom meeting software commencing at 9.30 a.m.

There would also be a subsequent meeting on Thursday 17<sup>th</sup> February as a virtual meeting using Zoom meeting software commencing at 9.30am.

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**121. Exclusion of Press and Public (Agenda Item 11)**

The Chairman asked Members to agree that the press and public be excluded from the following item and this was agreed without dissent.

**RESOLVED:** That the following item be considered in Closed Session by virtue of the Local Government Act 1972, Schedule 12A under Paragraph 3: Information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information).

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**122. Briefing on Local Government Reorganisation (Confidential) (Agenda Item 12)**

The Chief Executive provided members with a brief verbal update on the progress of Local Government Reorganisation in Somerset.

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Chairman

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Date