

South Somerset District Council

Minutes of a meeting of the **District Executive** held as a **Virtual Meeting using Zoom meeting software on Thursday 10 February 2022.**

(9.30 - 11.37 am)

Present:

Councillor Val Keitch (Chairman)

Jason Baker
Mike Best
John Clark
Adam Dance

Sarah Dyke
Peter Gubbins
Tony Lock
Peter Seib



Also Present:

Charlie Hull
Mike Lewis
Sue Osborne
Gina Seaton

Mike Stanton
Gerard Tucker
Martin Wale

Officers:

Jane Portman
Kirsty Larkins
Jill Byron
Karen Watling
Mickey Green
James Divall
Anna Matthews
Alison Hann
Cath Temple
Peter Paddon
Anthony Morris
Hannah Brown
Angela Cox
Becky Sanders

Chief Executive
Director (Service Delivery)
Monitoring Officer
Chief Finance Officer (S151 Officer)
Managing Director, Somerset Waste Partnership
Assistant Director (Strategy & Support Services)
Chard High Street HAZ Project Manager
Specialist - Revenues
Specialist (Performance)
Lead Specialist (Economy)
Specialist (Finance)
Specialist (Finance)
Specialist (Democratic Services)
Case Officer (Strategy & Support Services)

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

123. Minutes of Previous Meeting (Agenda Item 1)

The minutes of the previous meeting held on 6th January 2022 were approved as a correct record and would be signed by the Chairman.

124. Apologies for Absence (Agenda Item 2)

An apology for absence was received from Councillor Henry Hobhouse,

125. Declarations of Interest (Agenda Item 3)

There were no declarations of interest made by Members.

126. Public Question Time (Agenda Item 4)

There were no questions from members of the public.

127. Chairman's Announcements (Agenda Item 5)

The Chairman noted that there would be a further Special meeting if the District Executive on Thursday 17 February as there were many reports for the Executive's attention during February. She further noted that the Full Council budget setting meeting had been moved to Monday 28 February due to the availability of the venue.

The Chairman advised that she had attended the new Chard Leisure Centre the previous day for the unveiling of a plaque in memory of Jeb Farrah who had been the Project Manager for the Chard Leisure Centre prior to passing away in June 2019.

The Chairman thanked all staff for their work and said they were all going above and beyond in their dedication to provide services to the community.

Councillor Peter Seib noted the length of the agenda papers during recent months which reflected the amount of work by staff in preparing for the Unitary Council as well as dealing with COVID and keeping the authority services running.

128. Somerset Waste Partnership Annual Report and Business Plan Update (Agenda Item 6)

The Portfolio Holder for Environment thanked the Managing Director of the Somerset Waste Partnership and his team for their work in maintaining services during the last year and for the roll-out of Recycle More. She noted further projects coming forward in the next year including further plastic recycling and a successful funding bid to support a repair vehicle for the County.

The Managing Director of the Somerset Waste Partnership provided Members with a short presentation of their work during the last year (slides published as a supplement).

In response to questions from Members, the Managing Director of the Somerset Waste Partnership advised:-

- Approximately 20 tonnes of plastic waste (0.08% of total) was too contaminated for UK recyclers and this was sent abroad to be recycled. This meant that 99.2% of the plastic collected was recycled in the UK.
- The SWP did not engage locally with large retail premises regarding recycling however nationally the UK Plastics Pact provided co-ordination at a national level. There was consultation through extended user responsibility for large retailers to face the true costs of their packaging and to make them more recyclable
- The Co-op & Post Offices had assisted in the Slim my Waste campaign and the Co-op and libraries stocked the blue recycling bags for collection locally by residents.
- There were variations across the Council areas of the types and amounts of recycling and this was currently being analysed.
- Commercial waste added to domestic waste for flats above commercial premises was sometimes problematic. If details were provided then SWP would speak to both the resident & business.

The Chairman of the Scrutiny Committee noted that a member had attended the SWP Scrutiny Committee the previous day and had taken the Committees questions to that meeting.

At the conclusion of the debate, the Portfolio Holder thanked the Managing Director of the Somerset Waste Partnership and the Assistant Director for Strategy and Support Services and their teams. Members unanimously confirmed the recommendations for approval by the Chief Executive.

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

- a. Approve the Somerset Waste Partnership's (SWP) Draft Business Plan 2022-2027 and draft Budget 2022-23 (see Appendix A);
- b. Recommend to Full Council at its meeting on 28th February 2022 to approve an increase to the 2022-23 revenue budget of £235,120 that will arise from approving the Business Plan;
- c. Note the progress of the continued implementation of Recycle More across the county.

Reason: To approve the draft Business Plan 2022-2027 and draft budget 2022-2023 for the Somerset Waste Partnership (SWP).

129. Adoption of the Future Chard Strategy (Agenda Item 7)

The Portfolio Holder for the Chard Regeneration Scheme advised that the public consultation had seen over 100 people over 3 dates in October and overall the public comments supported the report. He noted that the Scrutiny Committee had questioned the low number of responses but he said there had been significant consultation in the town in recent years and he felt there had been a fair balance of responses which were a good foundation for moving the strategy forward with the future Unitary Authority. He concluded by thanking the Project Manager for her work on the strategy and in the town.

During discussion the following points were made:

- The report did not reflect that it was 19.5 miles distance to Yeovil whereas it was only 7 miles to Taunton where local residents mainly travelled to which was a chance missed to balance the report.
- The response was comparable to many surveys and consultations across the country.
- The report mentioned travel to Yeovil and Taunton in its public transport section.

The Chairman of the Scrutiny Committee noted that their questions had been summarised by the Portfolio Holder.

At the conclusion of the debate, Members unanimously recommended the Future Chard Strategy to Council for approval.

RESOLVED: That District Executive:-

- a. noted the feedback provided through the public consultation;
- b. noted that the strategy had been updated in response to the public consultation;
- c. recommends the Future Chard Strategy for adoption by Full Council.

Reason: To receive an update on the Future Chard Strategy public consultation and to propose it for adoption by Full Council.

130. Council Tax Policies (Agenda Item 8)

The Portfolio Holder for Finance and Legal Services advised that the report was a collation of policies relating to empty properties and also to approve amendments to the discretionary reduction in council tax liability. He noted there were no substantive changes proposed. Discretionary relief was available in cases of hardship and for other exceptional reasons

He noted that appeals for empty property relief sometimes occurred where someone had taken on a building project which had taken longer than anticipated

and in some business situations and in these cases a Portfolio Holder decision was made rather than by a policy. He concluded the report was comprehensive and he proposed the recommendations be accepted.

The Principal Specialist for Revenues said the codification of the empty homes policy did assist in the administration of the policy and it sometimes helped to explain why a discretionary relief was refused in some cases. For this reason she proposed it was posted on the SSDC website.

In response to a question from the Scrutiny Committee it was noted that there was a standard appeals process for any Council Tax liability decision and appeals had to be in writing initially to SSDC. Any further appeal was to the Independent Valuation Tribunal

At the conclusion of the debate, Members unanimously confirmed the recommendations be approved by the Chief Executive.

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

- a. approve the introduction of a policy document which collates current Council practice in the administration of discounts and premiums for empty properties;
- b. approve the amendments to the S13A (1) (c) Local Government Act 1992 Policy (Discretionary Reduction in Council Tax Liability).

Reason: To request the approval of the Policy for Second Homes, Long Term Empty Properties and determining discounts for certain dwellings and, the amendments to the Council Tax S13A (1) (c) Local Government Act 1992 Policy (Discretionary Reduction in Council Tax Liability).

131. Business Rate Reliefs (Agenda Item 9)

The Portfolio Holder for Finance and Legal Services advised that there were 4 elements to the report:

- The announcement in October of a business rates relief scheme for Retail Hospitality & Leisure grant through the discretionary system.
- The COVID additional relief fund gained Royal assent in December so it could now be acted upon.
- Mandatory business rates relief for public toilets.
- Transitional arrangements for supporting small businesses rates relief

He said they would be publicised through advice to businesses on the SSDC website to explain the discounts and also social media & promotion by

Councillors to their local businesses. He concluded that there would be no change to charitable relief as mentioned by the Scrutiny Committee.

In response to a question, the Portfolio Holder advised that non-charitable Community Interest Companies who were registered with HMRC were not in a position to qualify for charitable status. However, there may be a public interest situation for discretionary relief, subject to checking the guidelines and he asked for specific examples to research. Not in our discretion to change as there are clear rules and guidance

In response to questions from the Scrutiny Committee, the Portfolio Holder advised:-

- Officers had been administering a number of COVID business relief schemes and earlier lists of local businesses had been provided to Councillors to help identify businesses to claim the grants.
- The rural rate relief policy identified a rural settlements with a threshold of 3,000 population and if a village was close to the threshold then officers would consider this. But the settlement may not necessarily include the whole parish area.

At the conclusion of the debate, Members unanimously confirmed the recommendations be approved by the Chief Executive.

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

- a. approve the use of the Councils local discretionary powers to award retail, hospitality and leisure relief of 50 percent from April 2022 for one year.
- b. approve the use of the Councils local discretionary powers to award CARF relief retrospectively from 1 April 2021 to 31 March 2022. And delegate final approval of the scheme adopted to the Director of Service Delivery and the Portfolio Holder for Finance.
- c. approve the use of the Councils local discretionary powers to award transitional relief and supporting small business rates relief from April 2022 for one year.
- d. approve the updated Discretionary Business Rates Relief Policy.

Reason: To request the Chief Executive approves the various updated powers and policies relating to business rates.

132. Corporate Performance Report 2021-22: 3rd Quarter (Agenda Item 10)

The Chairman introduced the report and advised that measures were being put in place to improve the red areas in the report but some were beyond the control of the Council. She noted that:

- There had been some issues with the on-line accounts on the website but this was now corrected
- Council Tax collection rates were improving
- Housing Benefit claims were not on target which was a concern but there was an improvement plan should make an impact in the next quarter
- Planning applications and planning appeals were a concern
- Staff retention had improved which was welcome at time of uncertainty

She concluded that improvement plans were in place and there should be movement in the next reporting quarter.

The Specialist for Performance thanked her fellow officers for their assistance in providing the data for the report.

The Portfolio Holder for Economic Development noted the reference to improved rural transport and he said they were exploring the use of digital demand responsive transport (DDRT) on digitally operated routes along with SCC, bus operators and the Local Enterprise Partnership. They had commissioned simulations of DDRT in pilot areas (Yeovil and Somerton) and hope to roll out a pilot scheme before May 2023.

During discussion, it was noted that

- Some of the annual targets in the report were set before the impact of COVID was known.
- The KPI's were due to be refreshed and planning enforcement was expected to be discussed.

In response to questions from the Scrutiny Committee, the Director for Service Delivery and Specialist for Performance advised

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- The call centre time taken to answer phone calls was part of a larger IT issue with on-line services which resulted in an increase in phone calls.
- A number of call centre staff had secured new jobs within the Council and so there was a need to recruit and train new staff.
- The costs of the Civica contract had been provided and officers now had monthly service improvement meetings with them.
- SSDC now had 1.6 FTE Planning Conservation Officers.
- Staff sickness was reported in general but not specifically due to data protection but this is recorded within the People team.
- The time spent by staff on the transition towards the Unitary Council would be reported to the Scrutiny Committee meeting on 15 February

At the conclusion of the debate, Members were content to note the Corporate Performance Report 21-22: 3rd Quarter.

RESOLVED: The District Executive noted the Corporate Performance Report 2021-22: 3rd Quarter.

Reason: To note the current position of the Council's agreed key performance indicators and covers the period from October to December 2021 (Q3).

133. 2021/22 Revenue Budget Monitoring Report for the Period Ending 30 December 2021 (Agenda Item 11)

The Portfolio Holder for Finance and Legal Services advised this was the 3rd quarter of the revenue budget and should give guidance to the year end, however, there were some COVID related changes. He drew Members attention to:

- Table 1: 2021/22 Year to-date figures and Forecast Outturn
- Table 3: Transfers to and from reserves
- Appendix A: Budget virements made under delegated authority
- Appendix B: Year-end position forecasts for reserves

He noted that the budget was generally in line as expected and an underspend was predicted. There was a risk in interest rates as the Council had relied on short term borrowing which had been low but there was a risk that costs may increase and there may be a provision to cover this risk in the future.

There were no questions from Members and the report was noted.

RESOLVED: That District Executive:-

- a. noted the variances being forecast against the 2021/22 revised revenue budget agreed by Council in December 2021 as set out in Table One.
- b. noted the transfers made to date to and from reserves outlined in Table Three.
- c. noted the budget virements made under delegated authority as detailed in Appendix A.
- d. noted the forecast year-end reserves position shown in Appendix B.

Reason: To provide the current projection of the forecast spending and income against the Council's approved Revenue Budget for the financial year, and to explain projected variations against budget.

134. 2021/22 Capital Budget Monitoring Report for the Period Ending 30 December 2021 (Agenda Item 12)

The Portfolio Holder for Finance and Legal Services advised that the report was for noting except that there were two recommendations to Council which were detailed at Appendix C. There were a number of capital schemes which were either of a lower priority or beyond the timescales of Local Government Reform or were deferred to the Unitary Authority to determine their position.

In response to questions from the Scrutiny Committee, the Portfolio Holder and the Chief Finance Officer advised:-

- A written response would be provided on the loan to SWP for new vehicles.
- A report on the Wincanton Regeneration budget was to be presented to District Executive the following week.
- CIL funding was for the new Unitary Authority to set after April 2023 although the distribution of it was set out in statute.
- Land was considered for purchase which was adjacent to a property already owned by SSDC in Bridgwater to enhance the overall scheme, however treasury advisers indicated it would not be in accord with the prudential code as it could be viewed as investing for gain.
- The Gypsy and Traveller acquisition fund was held to produce a transit site for gypsy and travellers but this would now be resolved by the new Unitary Authority.

At the conclusion of the debate, Members were content to note the report and propose Recommendation B to Full Council.

RESOLVED: That District Executive:-

- a. noted the contents of the report.
- b. recommends to Full Council on 28th February 2022 to:
 - Increase the capital programme by £782k as set out in Table One, noting that £552k of this increase will be funded from Section 106 funds.
 - Remove £5.156m from the capital programme as described in paragraph 12 of the report.

Reason: To note the forecast of the 2021/22 year-end spend (“outturn”) against the Council’s approved Capital Programme Budget, and to explain projected variations against individual projects and the Programme as a whole.

135. District Executive Forward Plan (Agenda Item 13)

There were no amendments to the Executive Forward Plan.

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

1. approve the updated Executive Forward Plan for publication as attached at Appendix A.
2. noted the contents of the Consultation Database as shown at Appendix B.

Reason: The Forward Plan is a statutory document.

136. Date of Next Meeting (Agenda Item 14)

Members noted that there would be a Special meeting of the District Executive (informal) on Thursday 17th February 2022 as a virtual meeting via Zoom commencing at 9.30 a.m.

Members further noted that the next scheduled meeting of the District Executive (informal) would take place on Thursday 3rd March 2022 as a virtual meeting via Zoom commencing at 9.30 a.m.

137. Exclusion of Press and Public (Agenda Item 15)

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).

138. Briefing on Local Government Reorganisation (Confidential) (Agenda Item 16)

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