

South Somerset District Council

Minutes of a meeting of the **Scrutiny Committee (Informal)** held as a **Virtual Meeting using Zoom meeting software on Tuesday 10 May 2022.**

(10.30 am - 12.10 pm)

Present:

Members: Councillor Gerard Tucker (Chairman)

Robin Bastable
Brian Hamilton
Charlie Hull

Sue Osborne
Robin Pailthorpe



Officers

Paul Huntington	Specialist (Compliance & Enforcement)
Joe Walsh	Specialist (Economic Development)
Peter Paddon	Acting Director (Place and Recovery)
Lynda Pincombe	Specialist - Strategic Planning
Brendan Downes	Lead Specialist - People, Performance & Change
David Crisfield	Specialist (Strategic Planning)
Kate English	Specialist (Strategic Planning)
Sharon Jones	Customer Focussed Team Manager
Kirsty Larkins	Director (Service Delivery)
Karen Watling	Chief Finance Officer (S151 Officer)
Jill Byron	Monitoring Officer
Michelle Mainwaring	Case Officer (Strategy & Support Services)
Becky Sanders	Case Officer (Strategy & Support Services)

146. Minutes (Agenda Item 1)

The minutes of the previous meeting held on 5 April 2022 were approved as a correct record and would be signed by the Chairman.

147. Apologies for absence (Agenda Item 2)

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Karl Gill, Andy Kendall, Mike Lewis, Paul Maxwell and Oliver Patrick.

148. Declarations of Interest (Agenda Item 3)

There were no declarations of interest.

149. Public question time (Agenda Item 4)

A member of the public addressed Scrutiny Committee raising strong concerns following the report made by the external auditors to the March meeting of the Audit Committee. Some of her comments included:

- as a Chartered Accountant who had spent much of her career as an auditor with major international firms, she had been very shocked to see the report to the Audit Committee made by the district auditor, and to hear what he said at the meeting. In all the years in the profession, she had never seen such comments in relation to a corporate or public body by an external auditor.
- The Audit Committee seemed to try to absolve themselves of responsibility by claiming that the March meeting was the first opportunity to hear what was happening - when guidance states that audit committees can request reports and seek assurances from relevant officers, and this could have been done at any time.
- The finance department was clearly understaffed for the work it was required to do. The district auditor also referred to the loss of experienced staff in the department, and together, should have resulted in an immediate appraisal of staffing requirements, rather than a belated recruitment process.
- There is to be a report on what happened, but this situation should never have developed in the first place.
- The accounts for 2020- 2021 are now well overdue and the external audit fees will be enormous.
- Internal audit reports have also highlighted the council's poor handling of section 106 orders. The February internal audit report was critical of the way the finances have been handled for the Chard regeneration project. The budget was wildly inaccurate, and despite some councillors pointing out the flaws, they were overridden.
- She considered that the Audit Committee was very reactive and needed to understand developments in audit and risk management. In the private sector such condemnation of financial management and reporting would result in resignation or dismissal. She saw no reason why those who presided over the finances in the Audit Committee at SSSC should not be subject to censure, and asked the Scrutiny Committee to seek the removal of Councillors Peter Seib and Martin Carnell.

The Chairman acknowledged to the member of the public that it was evident from her presentation that she felt very strongly about the matters raised. He noted that some of the comments raised had also been discussed informally by Scrutiny, and it might result in there being a request that goes from Scrutiny Committee to District Executive. He thanked the public for raising her observations and comments on the matter.

In response, a couple of members briefly commented they shared the concerns raised by the member of the public, and acknowledged that some points echoed comments that had been raised informally by Scrutiny members.

The Chairman reminded everyone present that there was no right of debate under this item on the agenda. He again thanked the member of the public for her time attending the meeting.

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

There were no issues raised from previous meetings.

151. Chairman's Announcements (Agenda Item 6)

There were no announcements from the Chairman.

152. Verbal update on reports considered by District Executive on 7 April 2022 (Agenda Item 7)

The Chairman thanked members for the comments and questions from last month that were well received and considered by District Executive at the April meeting. He noted that the Lead Specialist (Planning) had appreciated the feedback and said he would take on the feedback for future reports. i.e if something needed a bit more clarity or definition. The Chairman felt a strong link had been established, particularly with the planning service, and that the quality of our Scrutiny work was sound, and he thanked members for that.

153. Reports to be considered by District Executive on 12 May 2022 (Agenda Item 8)

Members considered the reports within the District Executive agenda for 12 May 2022 (Informal Consultative Meeting) and raised comments as detailed below. Responses to most questions and comments were provided at Scrutiny Committee (Informal Meeting) by the relevant officers – except those marked by an asterisk:

Extension to Existing Dog Control Public Space Protection Order (PSPO) (Agenda item 6)

- A member asked if local wardens had any concerns regarding compliance with the Order or the area it covered?

Covid Recovery & Renewal Strategy Annual Progress Report (Agenda item 7)

- Page 33, Appx 2.- Social mobility study – Nearly £200k spent on Levelling up Fund? One member asked if we have got this report at the moment? And what do we hope to achieve by spending this money?
- One member asked about the Yeovil Innovation Centre support up to £30k – what kind of support will be available there?
- A member suggested that this was a long list of aspirations, rather than a confirmed list of what we are currently trying to do.

Leisure Facility Capital and Decarbonisation Programmes – Consideration of Additional Funding (Agenda item 8)

- One member expressed concerns around this extra budget requirement. These budgets were only agreed in the budget setting meeting at Full Council February 2022. Why has this increase in costs occurred in such a short time? If this had been known at budget setting in February, would we have achieved a balanced budget?
- The member also felt that this report is very complex, and in some places it is contradicting itself.

- The member also asked if it would not be more sensible to leave further decarbonisation projects to the new unitary authority?
- Paragraph 29 Option 1: A member felt that SSDC are being incredibly generous with Freedom Leisure by paying for the decarbonisation works, and added that there were big financial risks to this approach.
- The member also asked about Paragraph 32: Is this a best case, or worst case scenario?
- The member also asked why these two projects had not been linked from the start? Why were the allocated separate budgets, but now they have been interlinked?
- The member asked what is the risk that further money will not be needed from the 4million reserves budget?
- A member felt that this request is unacceptable, and added that it was concerning that this had taken a year to be addressed.
- *One member asked if Chard Leisure Centre had been built as a fully decarbonised building? Is the authority using Chard Leisure Centre as an exemplar for these other decarbonisation projects?
- One member felt that it was disappointing that Chard Leisure Centre is not 100% decarbonised.
(the officer advised that she would come back with a full response on this)
- A member asked if there could be more definitions of Acronyms in reports.

Achievements of the South Somerset Families Project (Agenda item 9)

- Page 59 item 10 – 174 new families referred to SSDC by 20 agencies. What agencies are these and what is the nature of their work before they refer families to SSDC?
- Paragraph 16 and 17 – Financial implications of 382k. How was this shortfall missed from budget setting in February 2022. How did this oversight happen, given that this is a large sum of money and flagship project for The Council?
- One member asked members to focus on the positives and good things that this project is delivering to vulnerable families across district
- A member asked for reassurance that this project was being delivered across both rural and urban areas in South Somerset.
- A member felt that a cost benefit analysis for this project would be very helpful, and also more data on where these referrals are coming from? She asked if this could be added as a supplementary paper or as an appendix to the Scrutiny minutes.
- One member asked about the contingency plan, if S151 officers across Somerset cannot agree on this budget?

Equalities Progress Report (Agenda item 10)

- The Chairman felt that this was a very good report that is well explained.
- There were no questions or other observations from members

Quarterly Corporate Performance Report (Agenda item 11)

- *Page 125, PCS 16 (Income received from commercial property) – a member asked if a further narrative could be included to provide more explanation as to what this included.

- *Para 17 (first para), page 116 – there is reference to having switched to a renewable energy tariff – members queried if this was a 100% renewable energy tariff? When a Task and Finish group had looked at the energy contracts several months previously, it had been understood we could not change contracts due to various reasons, and the existing contract was only part renewable energy?
- Regarding Protecting Core Services – a member commented that she was area SSDC had been working with the Department for Work and Pensions to improve benefits claims processing times – it was queried if this work was still ongoing? And when do you forecast getting back on track with this?
- Page 136, PWWL 6 (Number in Bed and Breakfast Accommodation) – a member noted the figure of 17 for Q4 however the narrative referred to 14 single people and 3 families – hence queried what the figure of 17 referred to?
- Page 136 – regarding homelessness in general – was it known, on average, how long people stayed in Bed and Breakfast accommodation? Are officers seeing a trend in problems sourcing long-term accommodation?
- Slightly aside, referring to Ukrainian refugees, a member asked if SSDC was doing any work to support their resettlement in Somerset? Members noted it would be useful if information could be circulated to all members to advise on the support that is being provided.

District Executive Forward Plan (Agenda item 12)

- No comments or observations.

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

The Chairman provided a brief verbal update on the progress of Task and Finish groups including:

Productivity Analysis - The Specialist (Scrutiny & Member Development) will do some follow up work to ascertain what is happening with this Task and Finish work.

Flooding in South Somerset - this work is still on hold and awaiting sight of the S.19 report from Somerset County Council (SCC). In response a member commented she believed some of the delay with the report may be due to a lack of staff resources and she suggested that the concerns of Scrutiny Committee were raised with SCC. The Director (Service Delivery), acknowledged the concerns and noted she would raise the concerns with the relevant director at SCC.

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

A member referred to the comments made by a member of the public earlier in the meeting who had raised here concerns about the Audit Committee. He considered they were relevant points, and he noted he had also raised comments about Audit at the previous Scrutiny meeting in April, where he had suggested Scrutiny look into the role and governance of the Audit Committee as he felt it was not recognised by the Council. In his view the Audit Committee were not informed of problems with the external audit in time to make enquiries.

The Chairman summarised that concerns seemed to be regarding the governance arrangements relating to Audit Committee, and members were seeking clarity on that

matter. He acknowledged that the comments raised by a member of the public could not be ignored. In response, the Monitoring Officer noted she had been absent at the start of the meeting but she would be meeting with the Specialist (Scrutiny & Member Development) to pick up on the issues raised.

The Chairman encouraged the Monitoring Officer to listen to the start of the meeting to hear the comments raised by the member of the public about Audit Committee. He felt it of relevance that the comments were raised by a qualified person who understood audit, and not just a casual observer.

156. Scrutiny Work Programme (Agenda Item 11)

The Chairman noted that the matter discussed under Matters of Interest would probably become an item on the Scrutiny Work Programme.

A member noted there had not been any meetings of the Joint Scrutiny Panel of Somerset Waste Board or the Joint Scrutiny Panel of Somerset Rivers Authority for several months, and he was unsure of dates for the next meetings.

Members were content to note the Work Programme.

157. Date of next meeting (Agenda Item 12)

Members noted that the next meeting of Scrutiny Committee was scheduled for Tuesday 7 June 2022 at 10.30am, and would likely be a virtual meeting using Zoom. (a week later than usual as District Executive has been moved by a week due to the Bank Holiday for the Queen's Platinum Jubilee).

.....
Chairman