

Scrutiny Committee

At their meeting on 5th April 2016, members of Scrutiny Committee considered the following items:

Musgrove Park Hospital Report

Members asked how effectively Somerset County Council are discharging their statutory Health Scrutiny role across the County?

SSDC Council Plan 2016

Members noted that this is first iteration of the Council Plan and that as it passes through Scrutiny, District Executive and ultimately Full Council there will be some opportunity for wider member engagement in the Plan – although it was noted that this involvement is not as extensive as it has been in the past.

Whilst accepting that the plan is a realistic analysis of the Council's aims and objectives over the coming years and that more service level detail would be available in the annual plan members felt that the one page plan would benefit from more SMART targets where appropriate – allowing for more effective public monitoring of progress.

Members questioned if the information from some residents gained in the pre-election period in 2015 was an adequate assessment of the communities priorities – bearing in mind this is now 12 months old?

It was suggested that the appendices of the plan be amended to include a specific action to work in partnership with the appropriate agencies to reduce carbon emissions?

It was noted that Town and Parish councils no longer provide licensing services.

Members suggested that a document needs to be created of potential future plans – aspirational projects that will be brought forward as and when conditions are right. This will ensure the public can see the status of projects within their own communities and will be able to see that SSDC remains committed to such projects.

Scrutiny suggest that the 'Economy' element of the Plan should also make explicit reference to the importance of agriculture and the very rural nature of the district. Members felt that as it currently reads, the plan does not accurately reflect the rurality of South Somerset.

Members preferred the new format of the Plan stating that it is very accessible.

Members sought clarification as to the numbers of actions defined as 'High' priority – they noted that Management Board feel that whilst it will be a stretch, the priorities are spread fairly evenly across the authority. Are all 'high' priorities equally 'high' or are there degrees of importance?

Scrutiny welcomed the Leader's commitment that Scrutiny will be actively involved in the reassessment of the Corporate Performance indicators that will flow from the adoption of this Council Plan.

Members recommended that 6 monthly updates on progress be submitted to the Scrutiny Committee.

Gypsy Site Management

Members agreed with the recommendations in the report and thanked the officers for their work in bringing forward this option for the future management of this service. The Committee were reassured to note that the sinking fund created to cover the costs of replacing the Park Homes at the end of their useful life will be maintained.

Members were reassured that SSDC would maintain a presence on the sites through quarterly site inspections.

Huish Episcopi Swimming Pool

Members commended the officers concerned for securing Sport England funding for two SSDC projects.

Members noted that Academies are considered as any other legal entity in terms of awarding funding.

The Committee was pleased to note that progress is being made to secure a future collaboration with Somerset County Council regarding swimming pool provision in Area West.

Members sought clarity about Para. 25 in the report - in the table entitled 'confirmed funding' it is stated that £20k of community funding remains to be raised.

The Committee noted that any over contractual overspends would be the responsibility of the Academy.

The Committee support the report recommendations.

Affordable Housing – Direct Access Hostel Provision

Members noted that this represents the best short term solution for SSDC to meet our statutory obligations whilst a more sustainable county wide solution is drawn up and therefore support the recommendations.

Members did comment that in the past, SSDC has made public statements that we would not cover any shortfall in service provision caused by a reduction in funding from Somerset County Council – this seems to represent a move away from this stance.

Asset Transfer of Castle Cary Market House

Members supported the recommendations.

Designation of Neighbourhood Area – Martock Parish

Members noted that the report states that government funding that was initially available to SSDC for administering the Neighbourhood Planning process is now reducing whilst the number of applications to create Neighbourhood Plans is increasing. Members queried whether insufficient district council resources could be cited as grounds for refusing to designate a Neighbourhood Plan area?

Members also asked how many applications need to be received before there needs to be a reassessment of priorities within the Spatial Planning Team?

The Scrutiny Committee noted the potential risks to capacity mentioned in the report and asked that they are updated as necessary.

Community Right to bid

Members noted the recommendations contained within the report.

Task and Finish Reviews

Homefinder Somerset / Consent for Disposal

After the first meetings of these two Task and Finish Groups it became evident that there was overlap between the scope of each review and that in terms of gathering evidence from Registered Providers within the district, it would make sense to hold a combined evidence gathering session. Such a session is now being arranged for later on this month.

Community Council for Somerset

The Scrutiny Committee have agreed to conduct a review of the Community Council for Somerset, in particular the services provided by the Community Council and how they work in partnership with the District Council.

Task and Finish Groups have now commenced work to monitor the Council Tax Reduction Scheme and to review the Housing Benefit Discretionary Housing Payment Policy; invitations to participate in these have been circulated to all members. If members have not yet responded and wish to be involved in these reviews, please contact Emily McGuinness as soon as possible.

Scrutiny Committee encourages all members to participate in Task and Finish work; it provides an excellent opportunity for members to review an area of work in detail, work with officers and help formulate recommendations for the creation and amendment of policy and working practice. All Task and Finish groups agree their own scope, project plan and meeting timetable to best suit the group, so should be able to work around existing commitments.

Councillor Sue Steele
Chairman of Scrutiny Committee