

Scrutiny Committee

The Scrutiny Committee met on 4th October and made the following comments on the reports due to be considered by District Executive on 6th October:

Community Right to Bid

Members noted the content of the report and agreed with the suggestion from Portfolio Holder, Angie Singleton, that 6 monthly updates would be appropriate going forward.

Somerset Armed Forces Covenant

Members asked for clarification on paragraph 16 of the report where it states that with the exception of three service areas, SSDC knows very little about the Armed Services community within the district. Members asked what specific actions are being taken to address this and how they could contribute suggestions or questions?

Members also queried where responsibility now lies for maintaining Commonwealth War Graves in the district?

Medium Term Financial Strategy and Plan – Flexible Use of Capital Receipts

Members supported the recommendations in the report.

Medium Term Financial Strategy and Plan – Four Year Settlement

Members considered the report and an additional paper supplied by the Portfolio Holder. Scrutiny members acknowledged the differing points of view expressed by the Section 151 Officer and the Portfolio Holder, noting that the authority is in a very difficult position, with neither option being particularly favourable. The Committee discussed the potential impact of accepting the 4 year settlement and not accepting it and noted the S151 Officer's confirmation that DCLG had reiterated that no authority would be better off if they did not accept the deal. Consideration was also given to the reputational risks of informing the public that the council had willingly accepting a negative RSG position versus informing them we had not accepted three years of certainty in defence of a principle.

Further discussion was about whether it would be possible to follow the example of Wokingham (and example provided by the Portfolio Holder) whereby the period of certainty offered within the deal is accepted but the negative RSG is not. Members concluded that this 'cherry picking' approach would not be appropriate and instead noted that in making our application to DCLG, SSDC should strongly reiterate our opposition to the principle of negative RSG.

Members did not indicate a preferred option at this stage, but did feel that members had sufficient information upon which to base a decision at Council on 13th October.

Infrastructure Projects and Funding for Feasibility Studies

Members accepted the need to ensure that internal decision making processes effectively balance timeliness and the principles of transparent and accountable decision making. They sought clarification that any Executive Decisions were being delegated to the Portfolio Holder in consultation with the Strategic Regeneration Board (rather than to the Regeneration Board itself) and that any decisions would be published and subject to Scrutiny in line with existing procedures.

Devolution presentation.

In addition to the District Executive reports, members received a presentation from the Scrutiny Committee Vice Chair, Cllr John Clark, on the subject of Devolution. Cllr Clark informed members that at the invitation of the Leader he had attended a Leaders and CEO's meeting about Devolution and subsequently felt that a presentation to Scrutiny would aid the work of the Task and Finish Group established to look at this subject.

Members thanked Cllr Clark for his very detailed presentation which outlined the context of Devolution and the potential risks and benefits to South Somerset. Members noted that Devolution is currently paused awaiting any announcements in the Autumn statement and that the issue would be revisited by the Task and Finish Group following the statement.

Task and Finish Work

The following Task and Finish Groups are currently in progress:

- **Consent for Disposal of properties** – This group is now re-focusing on the impact of the disposal of properties by Housing Providers on SSDC's Rural Letting's Policy. Following evidence gathered by the Task and Finish Group it is clear that Yarlinton Homes in particular are committed to continue to dispose of rural properties and that SSDC must now seek to mitigate the impact of this as far as it possible.
- **Discretionary Housing Payments** – This group has collected a significant amount of evidence from key agencies and will be meeting on 4th November to review the data and comment on a draft policy.
- **Rural Services Network – Rural access to health project** – The Somerset CCG have provided a written response to the questions set which will be incorporated into a report for submission to the RSN national project.
- **Street Trading** - This group have now had their first meeting and have agreed the review Terms of Reference. Further meetings are scheduled for 4th and 29th November with the aim on producing a draft policy that will be sent to all interested parties for a 12 week consultation period at the end of November 2016.

- **Devolution** – As referenced above, this review is held in abatement pending any announcements made in the Autumn Statement.
 - **Council Tax Support** – This group has met on several occasions reviewing extensive evidence. At the last meeting members took the decision to extend the consultation period regarding the options to amend the scheme going forward to try to encourage a better response and in particular for representatives of vulnerable and minority groups to participate.
 - **National Non Domestic Rates Discretionary Relief** – the group last met on the 12th September with Revenue Officers to discuss the effectiveness of the current scheme and considered if and how the scheme may need to be amended for the forthcoming year. The changes around Small Business Rate relief are key and the impact of this will be discussed at the next meeting on 31st October.
 - **Right to Buy Clawback** - Following the request from Garry Orr, CEO of Yarlington Homes, that members reconsider the approach taken with the monies obtained through the Right to Buy Clawback Agreement, an invitation has been sent to all members to participate in a Task and finish group to consider:
 - o The impact on the Capital Programme in terms of the other significant projects that this Council wants or needs to deliver on behalf of the community.
 - o How best to allocate the clawback monies to best meet those in housing need on the Housing Register.
 - o Other housing priorities and areas of spending such as Disabled Facility Grants and grants to Houses of Multiple Occupation.
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Sue Steele
Chairman of Scrutiny Committee