

South Somerset District Council

Minutes of a meeting of the **Scrutiny Committee** held by video conference using Zoom meeting software on Tuesday 13 April 2021.

(10.30 am - 12.05 pm)

Present:

Members: Councillor Crispin Raikes (Chairman)

Robin Bastable	Sue Osborne
Nicola Clark	Oliver Patrick
Brian Hamilton	Jeny Snell
Charlie Hull	Gerard Tucker
Mike Lewis	Linda Vijeh
Paul Maxwell	



Also Present:

John Clark	Tony Lock
Sarah Dyke	Martin Wale
Val Keitch	

Officers

Kirsty Larkins	Director (Service Delivery)
Jan Gamon	Director (Place and Recovery)
Peter Paddon	Lead Specialist (Economy)
Lynda Pincombe	Specialist - Strategic Planning
Jill Byron	Monitoring Officer
Stephanie Gold	Specialist (Scrutiny & Member Development)
Becky Sanders	Case Officer (Strategy & Support Services)

259. Apologies for absence (Agenda Item 1)

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Louise Clarke and Robin Pailthorpe.

260. Declarations of Interest (Agenda Item 2)

There were no declarations of interest.

261. Public question time (Agenda Item 3)

There were no members of the public present at the meeting.

262. Chairman's Announcements (Agenda Item 4)

The Chairman advised that following the death of HRH Prince Phillip, Duke of Edinburgh, the previous week, a two minute silence would be observed to recognise his life, service and in memory and honour of the Duke.

A two minutes silence was observed by those present in the meeting.

263. Reports to be considered by District Executive (Special Meeting) on 15 April 2021 (Agenda Item 5)

Members considered the reports within the Special District Executive agenda for 15 April 2021 and raised comments as detailed below. Responses to most questions and comments were provided at Scrutiny Committee by the relevant officers or Portfolio Holder – except those marked by an asterisk:

Consultation on Local Government Reform – Response to One Somerset Proposal (Agenda item 6)

- One member noted that many people were querying why this is happening now given the situation we are in with the pandemic. It would be useful if there was wide communication to provide clarity about the position we are in.
- Some members felt there was subjective language within the report with use of 'maybe' and 'perhaps' and there also seemed to be an assumption that a primary base would be located in Taunton. Are we content that the content is as objective as it can be?
- One member expressed concern about the economic profiling and lack of reference regarding unauthorised encampments and homelessness.
- What dialogue has the Stronger Somerset and One Somerset teams had with the MHCLG regarding potential modifications or to whichever proposal is accepted.
- Mixed opinions were expressed about the document – some felt it was comprehensive but another felt it was a negative report.
- One member raised several specific queries including:
 - The PA consulting document does not appear to be responding the final version of the One Somerset proposal that was submitted to the Secretary of State.
 - SSDC report para 6.9 and A1c – Inaccurate assumption that One Somerset proposes a top-down, centralised authority based in Taunton, no reference to Local Area Networks.
 - SSDC report para 6.9 and A2 – Incorrect statement that One Somerset proposal overlooks local services in relation to housing and planning.
 - SSDC report para 6.11 – Local Area Networks and Children's services are already established in many areas across the county.
 - SSDC report para 6.14 and Q3 – Misleading statement regarding difficulties around Police & Fire dealing with one unitary council.
 - SSDC report para 6.16 - Inaccurate information regarding the position of the SCC reserves.
 - SSDC report section 6.20 - Unfair assumption that a unitary authority would not be successful in a large rural county like Somerset. If this were true how do other large rural counties succeed under a unitary authority i.e Durham, Northumberland, Herefordshire.

- Q6 A6b – Untrue statement Ipsos Mori survey used by the district councils was selective and leading. Evidence of this has been shared with the Secretary of State.
- SSDC report page 14 section 7.6 – Inaccurate statement regarding the One Somerset residents survey not being published. It has been published and is an appx in the One Somerset Proposal.

Local Referendum on the Future of Local Government in Somerset (Agenda item 7)

Cllr Vijeh had submitted multiple questions to the Portfolio Holder and report author in advance of the meeting (but not in capacity as a Scrutiny member) – a response had been provided to Cllr Vijeh and the Leader of Council went through each question/response as she felt it would be of interest to other members (the questions and responses are attached to the minutes of Scrutiny Committee as Appendix A)

- A member sought clarification about whether this would be a poll or referendum as they understood they are different things.
- *A member understood that all the Leaders of each Somerset district had recently received a letter from the Secretary of State about the matter. It was queried if the letter would be circulated to all councillors in advance of a decision being made at full Council.
- Are there any GDPR implications with sharing the electoral register with a third party?
- A member queried the costs detailed in the report and asked what was being done regarding any contingency? - as other authorities seemed to be asking for a contingency amount to be agreed at the same time as this report.
- A non-scrutiny member noted that at a previous meeting of Council he thought members had been advised that a poll would not be held. He queried how much notice of the poll would be taken into consideration as the outcome wouldn't be known until after the closing date of the consultation? What was the purpose of the poll at the current time and why had it been left so late? He felt it needed to be made clear to the public that the outcome of the poll would not be binding.
- Some members asked what level of response would be considered acceptable and representative, and what level were we anticipating?
- Some members expressed concern that the detail of local government reform was not easy to understand by the general public. If people had not looked into the issue before, were they likely to now and respond to a poll?
- Some members felt the poll was a positive thing and it was important to gather the opinion and views of residents.
- A member referred to a recent leaflet drop to residents giving people the option to respond to the MCHLG consultation – she queried the purpose of the leaflet and whether people would want to respond again via a poll?
- It was queried why there was no risk matrix for the report? Some members felt there could be reputational risks.

(Note – the item was deferred at the District Executive meeting and not considered.)

Appointed Leisure Facilities Provider (Agenda item 8)

- It was queried why members were seeing the report now as the amount under consideration was a large increase to that agreed in the budget?

- A member asked how the Freedom Leisure contract would impact community-led leisure facilities such as parish councils and local sports clubs. Would funding and support be included in this new contract?
- A member sought clarity about some aspects contained within the confidential appendix. In particular, there was reference on page 58 to a table at the end of a section within the report but then there was no table. Was this an error or omission? –should the text refer to the table in the previous section on page 56?
- *Table on page 56 (confidential) – a member noted the figures only went to 15 years but some costs seem to be for a 25 year period – was this to do with the contract and borrowing timeframes?
(it was noted that Finance would be asked to provide a written response and this is attached to the minutes of Scrutiny Committee as Appendix B.)

(Note – Scrutiny Committee did not go into confidential session.)

District Executive Forward Plan (Agenda item 9)

- No questions or comments.

264. Update on matters of interest (Agenda Item 6)

The Specialist (Scrutiny and Member Development) reminded members that a report about remote meetings after 7 May 2021 had been circulated for information which would be considered at Full Council on 15 May 2021. Members were asked if they wished to raise any questions about the report from a Scrutiny perspective.

During a brief discussion the Director (Service Delivery) and the Monitoring Officer responded to points of detail including:

- The court case regarding online / remote meetings was due to be heard on 21 April however a potential date of the outcome was currently unknown.
- It was for individual Town and Parish Councils to make their own decisions about meeting and decision making arrangements after the 7 May. Officers could notify the town and parish councils of how SSSDC were looking to overcome the issue regarding remote meetings as a suggested way forward in the short term.
- Since the report for the Council agenda had been published, MCHLG had confirmed their support to continue with virtual meetings.

No questions or comments were raised to be forwarded to Full Council.

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Chairman