

Scrutiny Committee

This report summarises the work of the Scrutiny Committee since 23rd October 2015.

The committee have met twice, 3rd November and 1st December 2015.

3rd November 2015

The Chairman updated Members on the visit to the Tri Authority area of West Dorset, North Dorset and Weymouth and Portland authorities. Councillors John Clark, Val Keitch, Jason Baker and Sue Osborne attended accompanied by the Scrutiny Managers and Jo Roundell Greene, Ric Pallister and Dave Bulmer in their capacity as members of the Joint Leaders Advisory Group. All members who attended commented how valuable and informative they found the visit – and supported the suggestion that a similar opportunity should be offered to all members as part of the ongoing ‘Journey of Exploration’.

Scheme of Delegation

Following a motion to Full Council, Council agreed that a review of the Scheme of Delegation in relation to planning applications would commence in 2015 and a report detailing the work and outcomes be considered by Scrutiny Committee.

Martin Woods, Assistant Director (Economy) and Dave Norris, Development Manager, introduced the report which outlined a number of issues which had been discussed collectively with the Area Chairs (in their roles as Chair of the Council’s Development Control Committees).

After considerable discussion and questioning the Scrutiny Committee endorsed the recommendation contained in the report that there are no significant changes to the Scheme of Delegation required. It was noted that further guidance will be produced and additional training will be provided for members in relation to their role and responsibilities in the determination of planning applications.

It was also agreed that the Development Manager would provide the committee with data which shows the number (and nature) of decisions agreed under delegated powers and those referred to Committee on an area by area basis.

Reports to be considered by District Executive on 5th November 2015

Adoption of the South Somerset District Council Statement of Community Involvement

Members were content to note the report and noted that the 6 week consultation period is a standard period and allows adequate time for respondents.

Adoption of the Private Sector Housing Strategy

Members sought clarification of the statement made on page 71 (bullet point 2) "Homelessness continues to be a major cause for concern in the district..." Members of the Scrutiny Committee felt that levels of homelessness are currently improving and are not a cause for concern?

On page 75 it mentions that we see the need to focus on the factors that make it commercially attractive for landlords to work with us yet we cannot see this in an aim? The aim at the bottom of the page is to continue working with Housing Options Team and the NLA to organise 2 landlord forums each year?

Members noted the complexity of the report and commented that based on the successful involvement of Scrutiny in developing such policies in the past, Scrutiny involvement in this case may have been beneficial as the document seemed to be a bit muddled between a strategy and a policy.

What are the monitoring arrangements with regard to the Action Plan? Scrutiny would like to have a further report on progress against the action plan if this is not being reported elsewhere.

Disposal of the Former Carrington Way Public Conveniences

Members were content to note the report and were pleased to note that the asset had been disposed of for more than the valuation figure.

Revenue Budget Monitoring Report

Members asked about the savings for staff costs at the Innovation Centre? Donna Parham - Assistant Director (Finance and Corporate Services) explained that SSDC are now recouping costs.

Members were content to note the report.

Capital Budget Monitoring Report

Members noted the report and had no comments to make on the Capital projects approved prior to 2010 but not yet completed.

Update on Yeovil Crematorium

Members of the Committee thanked the Portfolio Holder for attending and answering their questions. Members were pleased to note the improvements that have been made at the Crematorium over the past 12 months and noted the ongoing work.

District Executive Forward Plan

Members again sought clarification that the Motion agreed at Council to investigate 2 hours free parking would be reported to members via the Budget setting process, and that there would be explicit reference made to this.

Confidential Item – Notification of an Urgent Executive Decision: The installation of an additional Photovoltaic Array

Members noted the report.

Area Grants Application Process

This report had been requested by a member of the Scrutiny Committee to allow members to consider the extent to which the Area Grant application process is applied consistently across the district.

The Assistant Director reiterated that members are the decision makers when grant applications are made to Area Committees and if they feel they do have adequate information, they should ask for the necessary additional information and defer the decision.

Members requested that guidance is produced for all members relating to grant applications received from Academies as they represent a unique funding position. The Assistant Director agreed to provide this guidance and confirmed that Schools and Churches can apply under the grant scheme where the outcome would be for the benefit of the wider community.

Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014

A report was presented to the Scrutiny Committee in October 2014 which outlined the new provisions of the Anti-Social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014. A number of new tools were made available to lead agencies through this legislation and at that time, members were concerned there would be resource implications for SSDC officers and requested a follow up report.

This follow up report stated that all the requirements of the new legislation were being met from within existing resources and that discussion will continue with other agencies, in particular the police about the ongoing implementation of the legislation.

1st December 2015

Severe Weather – Preparation and planning

Scrutiny Committee requested a report on the annual planning and preparation for severe weather, the Civil Contingencies Manager introduced the report and gave an overview of the events covered by SSDC teams, she detailed:

- Day to day operations
- Priorities
- Responsibilities
- Training
- Risks and mitigation measures including driving in flooded areas at night.

In response to member questions the Civil Contingencies Manager explained:

- There is no dedicated budget to deal with heavy snowfall; however this does not prevent the necessary action being taken. As in previous years if an overspend is created and if it exceeds £32,000 SSDC can apply, under certain circumstances, to the Government's Bellwin Scheme to have excess costs reimbursed. Somerset County Council have a responsibility to keep the highway free from hazards and to do that in severe weather (Ice & Snow) they prioritise the Highways into Primary & Secondary routes, the routes are available on the County Council website. SSDC has agreed to support Highways by salting agreed high risk pavements and other areas where it is considered dangerous or poses a risk when it is predicted that the incident may last for 3 days or longer.

Reports to be considered by District Executive on 3 December 2015

Members considered the reports outlined in the District Executive Agenda for 3 December 2015. It was agreed that the following comments would be taken forward to District Executive for Consideration:

Funding for Citizens Advice South Somerset

- Members asked what % of the overall operating budget of the CAB the SSDC contribution represents?
- Does SSDC charge the CAB rent for office space at Petter's Way?
- Members queried if there was potential duplication between the role of SSDC Welfare Benefits Advisors and the advice given by CAB – were we in effect paying twice for the same service?
- Members noted that the report refers to a new service specification being drawn up and asked that Scrutiny be involved in this process prior to their implementation?

Quarterly Performance Report

- Members noted that PI029 shows a significant increase in the numbers of anti-social behaviour reports – whilst noting the impact the reduced value of scrap metal is having on the number of abandoned cars, members sought clarification as to what steps are being taken to address this increase?
- Regarding PI031 – the Committee received a detailed report on this issue in August and noted that performance data is still not available. It was noted that a detailed update report will be presented to Scrutiny in January but the ongoing reputational risk to the council was emphasised.
- The Interim CEO indicated that a business case would be coming to District Executive in the New Year, outlining proposals for transforming customer handling within SSDC – this business transformation process would address some of the issues concerning call handling, members were informed that this transformation would require capital investment. Scrutiny Members sought clarification that

resources were not being committed to the current fix in Customer services, only to be replaced by the business transformation programme?

Yeovil Innovation Centre

- Is the satisfaction target not set a little low – should we not be aspiring for greater tenant satisfaction?
- Members sought clarification as to the role and function of the Innovation Centre – when the project was initiated, it was stated that at some point, it would become self-financing – is this still the aim and when is this projected to happen?
- How long are businesses expected to be based at the Innovation Centre before moving on to more permanent bases? Members were aware that in some areas of the district there is a waiting list for such ‘incubation’ units and the Innovation centre needs to meet this specific brief.
- When are the rent reviews intended to be carried out?

District Executive Forward Plan

- Members queried what progress had been made with the review of the Car Park Strategy/fees since the motion was passed at Full Council, there is no mention of this on the forward plan.
- The corporate plan is out of date, what is the process for revising this, again there is no mention of this on the forward plan.

Task and Finish work

Final Report from the Monitoring SSDC Council Tax Support Scheme Task and Finish Group.

Cllr Sue Steele – the review chair highlighted the recommendations of the Task and Finish group, and detailed the proposed amendments to the current scheme. She thanked the members of the Task and Finish group for their dedication and the officer group for their support.

In response to questions the Scrutiny Manager explained the variance in Local Authority schemes across the country and the challenge going forward for SSDC - balancing a fair scheme, administration costs and the cost of collection and enforcement.

The committee endorsed the report and recommendations to District Executive

Review of Licensing Fees and Charges – Report of the Scrutiny Task and Finish Group

Councillor Martin Wale the review chair – gave an overview of the work the task and finish group had undertaken and explained the recommendations within the report.

Nigel Marston – Licensing Manager, explained the process of total cost recovery and gave some examples.

Members sought clarification over the increase in the private hire charges, officers confirmed the new charge is for a five year period.

Councillor Peter Gubbins – Portfolio Holder for Licensing thanked the Members of the Task and Finish group for their detailed work.

The Task and Finish report is presented in full in this agenda.

On-going Task and Finish work

Scrutiny Committee have formed a Journey of Exploration Task and Finish group to consider the process to inform the business cases for sharing a Management team with Sedgemoor and Staying Alone. The group is made up of 14 members in political balance – the group includes District Executive members as they will be working in a ‘critical friend’ capacity for the Project Board not District Executive. The group have agreed their ambition for the review as:

Through our work, members of this Task and Finish Group will aim to ensure that:

- All elected members of SSDC have a sound and evidence based understanding of all the issues and options for future management arrangements prior to taking a final decision
- Members’ thoughts, suggestions and concerns are sought, collated and communicated to the Project Group in a timely manner and can therefore inform the preparation of the two business cases;
- Members’ views on the risks and mitigation measures are sought and represented in the process;
- This group will act as a ‘sounding board’ for the ideas and proposals emerging from the JLAG;
- Equal merit will be given to the business cases for staying alone and sharing a management team with Sedgemoor;
- Any ‘deal breakers’ identified by members will be addressed at the earliest possible opportunity;
- Good working relationships are developed with members at Sedgemoor District Council so that the trust element that has been identified as so crucial is established.

Councillor Sue Steele
Chairman of Scrutiny Committee