

Report of the Scrutiny Committee for Policies and Place

Cabinet Member: N/A

Division and Local Member: All

Lead Officer: Scott Wooldridge – Monitoring Officer, Democratic Services

Author: Jamie Jackson – Deputy Strategic Manager, Democratic Services

Contact Details: 01823 359040

1. Summary

- 1.1.** The Scrutiny Committee for Policies and Place is required by the Constitution to make an annual report to the Council and also to provide each other meeting of the Council with a summary progress report and outcomes of scrutiny. This regular report covers the work of our meetings held on 18 September, 9 October, 7 November and 11 December 2019.
- 1.2.** The Committee agreed their work programme would comprise items considered directly at meetings plus other items considered or “commissioned” using flexible arrangements outside of the formal committee structure.
- 1.3.** Members of the Council are reminded that:
 - all Members have been invited to attend meetings of the Scrutiny Committee and to contribute freely on any agenda item;
 - any Member could propose a topic for inclusion on the Committee’s Work Programme;
 - any Member could be asked by the Committee to contribute information and evidence, and to participate in specific scrutiny reviews.
- 1.4.** The Committee has 8 elected Members and we have meetings scheduled approximately for every month. Our next meeting will be held in the Committee Room, Taunton Library at 10.00am on 5 February 2020.

2. Background

2.1. Scrutiny Work Programme

At each meeting the Committee considers and updates its work programme, having regard to the Cabinet’s forward plan of proposed key decisions. The Committee also agreed to hold themed meetings and Members are looking forward to this approach, in particular the attendance of representatives and/or stakeholders from partner agencies.

2.2. 18 September 2019

Revenue Budget Monitoring Quarter 1 report

The report set out the Quarter 1 (month 3) forecast outturn position for 2019/20 for the net Revenue Budget of £327.967m. It highlighted variances to service budgets, as well as emerging issues, risks, areas of concern and proposed actions to resolve them.

The Council's Medium-Term Financial Plan (2019-22) set out proposals to further develop its financial resilience over the long-term whilst also supporting the delivery of the Council's key priorities.

The budget for 2019/20 included a savings target of £21.550m and the report confirmed delivery of £16.694m to date. Of the remainder, very close monthly tracking and change control mechanisms continued to be in place as they had been since September 2018, to ensure full delivery during the year. The Committee discussed: earmarked reserves £35million of which had been committed for specific purposes. It was questioned if the general reserves balance was enough at 5% of the net revenue budget. Setting reserve levels higher to protect against demand-led services was a future option. The positive news and change in budget reporting were welcome but the committee expressed concerns around the levels of reserves, encouraging further income generation opportunities to be explored. The Committee noted the report but requested a full list of Earmarked reserves.

Property Disposal at County Farms.

Since 2010, the Council has operated County Farm disposals under a Cabinet Member decision, following a review of County Farms, which identified those farm holdings which could be sold immediately and without further review (known as List A). The sales would take place as and when the opportunities arose or were deemed necessary. The remaining farms (known as List B) were categorised as being retained for the time being due to their strategic location and future development potential. The Committee discussed: Following changes recommended by the Task and Finish Group, land and property was now marketed to increase the land value and achieve the best possible price. Where possible, planning permission was also obtained to increase the value of the assets. It was acknowledged that achieving permitted Development rights incurred the time factors of obtaining planning permission. Reassurance was provided that the correct checks and balances were in place to ensure appropriate value was given and a fair price was attained for assets sold. The committee noted the report.

Council's proposed response to the Devon and Somerset Fire and Rescue Service (DSFRS) consultation

The report set out Somerset County Council's proposed response to the Devon and Somerset Fire and Rescue Service (DSFRS) consultation on its proposed new service delivery operating model. The DSFRS consultation included proposals for the closure of fire stations (Porlock), removal and relocation of fire engines (Bridgwater, Taunton, Yeovil, Martock) and changes to crewing arrangements (Chard, Frome, Wellington, Wells and Williton.)

The Committee discussed: Concerns were expressed over Fire Service cover with consideration of the increase in road traffic accidents across the County and protection of Somerset's Heritage buildings. The increasing population in the County along with the seasonal increases around areas such as Minehead would mean there was considerable risks around peak periods if there wasn't adequate cover.

Further concerns were expressed over the lack of openness and accessibility of the consultation along with it not being well publicised and complexity of the document. The committee requested that the consultation response letter state that it was supported by all Councillors and signed by the Cabinet member and Leader.

1. The Committee endorsed the comments in the draft response to the consultation.
2. Additional considerations identified in the debate should inform the consultation

response from the perspective of local communities.

The Connection Devon and Somerset Broadband Programme Update

To date more than 300,000 homes and businesses across Devon and Somerset could access superfast broadband, with a further 38,000 having access to improved broadband. Every month hundreds more homes and businesses were being connected due to the Connecting Devon and Somerset programme (CDS).

CDS continued to work with stakeholders including BDUK and the LEP to develop a Digital Strategy for the Heart of the South West which included connectivity and infrastructure as well as considering digital skills and innovation. This would help to guide the approach for extending coverage and investing further funding.

The committee discussed:- Further information was requested to inform residents of the areas still to be completed and the timescales for rollout. A new position of procurement would need to commence, the bidding from the old contracts and market has moved on substantially. Opportunity for future delivery would be identified through the new procurement exercise. The Committee noted the update on the progress of the CDS Programme

9 October 2019

Month 4 forecast outturn position for 2019/20

The report highlighted the forecast outturn position for 2019/20 net Revenue Budget of £327.967m. It highlighted variances to service budgets, as well as emerging issues, risks, areas of concern and proposed actions to resolve them. The variances were reported in the detail of the report set out in Appendix A and a proportion of the Corporate Contingency 'notionally' allocated to off-set the variances.

The committee discussed:-welcoming the Council's improving financial position, acknowledging that there were still a number of factors that could change forecasts, including winter costs. The Committee noted the report.

2019/20 Capital Budget Monitoring - Quarter 1 Report

The report was the first capital monitoring report for the year. It showed that there was a projected underspend of £1.355m against existing approvals of £788.885m. An overview of the capital programme indicated that it was being managed proactively by services within their resources. The Committee discussed and welcomed the relatively small level of underspend in the Capital Programme which reflected good overall control, and the highway improvements being undertaken, while asking for clarification on the position regarding developers' contributions in the event of underspends on infrastructure schemes etc. The committee noted the report.

External Audit Value for Money (VFM) Report

The report drew attention to the outcome of additional assurance work requested by the County Council's external auditors in reaching their improved Value for Money conclusion for 2018/19 reported to the Council's Audit Committee on 19 September 2019. The experts' report was produced in collaboration with relevant senior leaders from the Council and was being used to inform the Medium Term Financial Plan 2020/23 as well as by the auditors to inform their overall VFM conclusion.

During discussion The Committee welcomed the positive report and assurances about the level of funding for Adults and Children's Social Care Services, noting that provision had been made for the recent pay award and that any problems could be identified at an early stage - while being conscious of the volatile nature of demand especially in children' and its impact on resources. The Committee noted the report.

Climate Emergency Framework Update

The report drew attention to the emergence of a Framework for developing the county-wide Climate Emergency Strategy (which was appended) and sought comments to further shape the Strategy before it was submitted to the County Council's Cabinet. There were nine workstreams: built environment; Natural Environment; Energy; Farming and Food; Industry, Business and Supply Chain; Transport; Waste and Resource Management; Flood Water and Adaptation; and Communications and Engagement.

Further to the recommendations in Paragraph 2 of the covering report, the Committee:

- noted and endorsed the timeline for the delivery of the Climate Emergency Strategy and the proposed consultation activities, and the intention to share the opportunity to contribute with residents and community groups
- recognised the significant funding pressures of the development and delivery of the resultant Climate Emergency Strategy and Action Plans
- confirmed their support for the four additional actions, as set out immediately above.

7 November 2019

2019/20 Revenue Budget Monitoring Report - Month 5

This report set out the Month 5 forecast outturn position for 2019/20 for the net Revenue Budget of £327.967m. It highlighted variances to service budgets, as well as emerging issues, risks, areas of concern and proposed actions to resolve them. The budget for 2019/20 included a savings target of £21.547m and the report confirmed current forecast delivery of £21.365m. Other headlines included

The Month 5 forecast position indicated a small reduction of £0.370m to £2.425m against the original planned amount and was in-line with the month 4 report.

The Councils Summary forecast set out a projected balanced position when compared to the net revenue budget of £327.967m.

The committee discussed: Concerns around Schools changing to academy status, resulting in a budget deficit to the authority. It was recognised that this was not a new financial risk and acknowledged that there were pressures on Schools funding. Work continued to monitor the operating costs and the effects to ensure mitigation steps can be made. The Committee noted the report.

The Review of the Scrutiny Function Report.

The review considered best practice from other councils and the latest Government statutory guidance in May 2019. The review had also involved working with the Centre for Public Scrutiny (CfPS). The majority of the recommendations in the report combined both the short term improvements that could be taken forward from the CfPS report along with recognising that necessary cultural improvements were required to develop and embed better scrutiny form part of a longer term programme of work commencing before the end of 2019 through until March 2021.

The Committee discussed: Encouraging site visits were encouraged to provide greater knowledge of projects and areas around the county.

Training and support through flexible sessions such as masterclasses, seminars and task and finish groups in specific areas were supported to increase member awareness and considered a positive way forward. The Committee were reassured that there was dedicated Scrutiny resource allocated in the new Democratic Services Structure due to be implemented from the start of 2020. We endorsed the recommendations.

The West Somerset Opportunity Area

The Opportunity Area Programme is a key part of the Education Secretary's priority of tackling social mobility, and improving opportunities for young people across the country. Twelve areas with both poor social mobility and schools that face challenges, were to receive a share of £72 million to boost opportunities for young people in these communities.

The committee discussed capacity issues in small schools and making the programme offer work for them, Improved joint working between community services for adults and those for young people and access to opportunities locally, transport and data and support for business Legacy planning. The committee requested an update of how residents in the West Somerset area had benefited. The report author would be consulted and an update would be provided to the committee before the next meeting. The Committee noted the report.

11 December 2019

2019/20 Revenue Budget Monitoring Report - Quarter 2 (Month 6)

The report set out the Month 5 forecast outturn position for 2019/20 for the net Revenue Budget of £327.967m. It highlighted variances to service budgets, as well as emerging issues, risks, areas of concern and proposed actions to resolve them. The Council's Medium-Term Financial Plan (2019-22) set out proposals to further develop its financial resilience over the long-term whilst supporting the delivery of the Council's key priorities. The budget for 2019/20 included a savings target of £21.547m and the report confirmed current forecast delivery of £21.365m.

The Committee: Thanked the team, acknowledged that measures were in place to maintain and managed monitoring of the budgets. Welcomed the positive impact the change of direction and hope this will lead to more investment. Look forward to the allocation of funds for addressing Climate Change when to Somerset priorities are known.

Capital Budget 2019/2020 Monitoring report for Quarter 2

This report was a summary and recorded a projected underspend for the authority against the approvals within the current capital programme. Services have provided their forecasts for the capital programme. The first quarter's forecast will provide the benchmark for the rest of the year and final outturn position. Services will need to explain any significant variances to this. Forecasting expenditure can be challenging as there are many factors which can impact on delivery of a capital programme including external factors such as a reliance on contractor activity, the weather, and capacity within the Council's providers to design and support the programme. The committee discussed The need to include Development Contributions when they are known and to note that forecasts may alter as the year progressed The arrangements for 'internal' borrowing and 'external' borrowing were considered along with the complexity surrounding it. Any external borrowing has to go through the Treasury Team. Internal borrowing is cheaper and can be made if allocations are for future years. The committee welcomed the report and the County should be congratulated for being in a much better financial position than that of a year ago.

The Library Re-design verbal update

The Committee were given a verbal update on the redesign of the Library Services in Somerset. The first part consisted of a video that set out in a clear visual format the range of activities, the number of service users and the reach beyond the physical location of Library Building. The redesign resulted in 13 Community Libraries being established, extended Outreach services, two libraries being closed and three Community supported models. The changes have included a restructuring of the workforce – the frontline alterations have been completed and the restructure for management will conclude in January. There has been some additional investment in Technology and Community Libraries. The Committee:

Thanked all those involved in this challenging project. They wanted to record a special mention for Ollie Woodhams for his diplomacy, determination and dedication to delivering such a transformation. They wanted to wish him well in his new challenge.

Requested an invitation to the formal handover ceremony for the facility in Watchet.

3. Consultations undertaken

- 3.1.** The Committee invites all County Councillors to attend and contribute to every one of its meetings.

4. Implications

- 4.1.** The Committee considers carefully, and often asks for further information about the implications as outlined in, the reports considered at its meetings.
- 4.2.** For further details of the reports considered by the Committee please contact the author of this report.

5. Background papers

- 5.1.** Further information about the Committee including dates of future meetings, and agendas & reports from previous meetings are available via the Council's website. www.somerset.gov.uk/agendasandpapers

Note: For sight of individual background papers please contact the report author.