

SCRUTINY FOR POLICIES AND PLACE COMMITTEE

Minutes of a Meeting of the Scrutiny for Policies and Place Committee held in the Luttrell Room - County Hall, Taunton, on Tuesday 5 September 2017 at 9.30 am

Present: Cllr T Lock (Chairman), Cllr M Lewis (Vice-Chairman), Cllr P Ham, Cllr T Napper, Cllr A Wedderkopp, Cllr B Filmer, Cllr John Hunt, Cllr J Thorne and Cllr L Vijeh

Other Members present: Cllr H Davies, Cllr D Fothergill, Cllr D Hall, Cllr J Lock, Cllr T Munt, Cllr F Purbrick, Cllr L Redman, Cllr J Woodman.

Apologies for absence: Cllr D Ruddle

21 **Declarations of Interest** - Agenda Item 2

Councillor Vijeh declared an interest in Item 5 as a number of the county farms are within her division.

22 **Minutes from the previous meeting held on 04 July 2017** - Agenda Item 3

The minutes of the meeting held on 04 July 2017 were accepted as being accurate by the Committee.

23 **Public Question Time** - Agenda Item 4

Mrs Sue Osborne asked a public question in relation to Item 5. Mrs Osborne declared that she was the wife of a county farm tenant. She welcomed the proposal of a county farms Task & Finish Group especially as it would be Member-led but she questioned how this would fit with the refreshed approach towards asset rationalisation. The forward programme indicates a county farm decision to be taken on 25 September 2017 but Mrs Osborne questioned whether key disposal decisions should be deferred until the review is completed. Mrs Osborne stated that one of the planned sales would result in the fragmentation of a farm. The refreshed approach appears to transfer power of disposal to a central core but how will this affect and influence the Task & finish Group outcomes?

Mrs Osborne questioned if cabinet members, officers and service users will have any say in disposals and how tenants' interests will be assessed. It is critical that every tenant is given the chance to have a say, in confidence if necessary.

Finally, Mrs Osborne asked what confidence can tenants and others have that the Task & Finish group will have full access to all documents, records and information that they need, on request?

The Director, Commercial and Business services responded to Mrs Osborne to say that the majority of her questions would be addressed during Item 5. If it is agreed to establish a Task & Finish Group today, they will look at tenants' interests when they set their terms of reference. Tenants' interests are

specifically included in the recommendations made in 2.2 of the report. The Task & Finish group will have full and unprecedented access to documents, as they are entitled to and will have cross party membership.

24 Asset Rationalisation: A Refreshed Approach and County Farms Task & Finish Group - Agenda Item 5

The Committee received a presentation from the Director, Commercial and Business Services and the Head of Corporate Property. The presentation detailed the background to asset disposal and explained the need for a new approach to asset rationalisation.

The Committee heard that the sale of assets had achieved in excess of £33m in capital receipts during the last five financial years. The bulk of this has been used to support the capital programme, although it can also be used to support transformation.

As part of the refreshed approach, all property assets would be reviewed to determine the business case for disposal, commercial use or strategic retention on a case by case basis through existing decision making structures.

The Head of Corporate Property outlined the principles and benefits of asset rationalisation and shared the short, medium and long-term strategy including a 30 month target of achieving £20m in capital receipts. The new approach would mean that the Council would be able to be more creative and proactive about which assets to sell, rather than waiting for assets to be declared surplus.

In addition, it is proposed to set up a Task & Finish Group to review the sale of county farms. The Committee heard that the previous policy on county farms from 2010 identified a number of holdings retained for future sale because of future development potential. It is the right time to consider this list alongside all other holdings when assessing the options for disposal or retention.

During the debate, it was confirmed that the £33m raised in capital receipts related solely to the sale of property and land.

A Member sought assurance that individual services will be involved with the review and that revenue will also be considered.

Concern was expressed over transparency as there seemed to be a lack of consistency in how the policy has been applied previously, for example, when advantageous rental rates have been granted. It was clarified that the new approach sought to improve accounting transparency by bringing all payments and receipts through a central point, improving visibility and cost control and that reference to transparency within the report did not relate to transparency in terms of freedom of information.

A Member stated that farming is a core industry in this county and needed to be a key consideration of the Council. Concern was raised over selling assets too cheaply in a rush to achieve capital receipt targets. Members were reassured that if it is in the financial interests of the Council to hold assets it will do so.

The Committee debated at length whether the sale of any county farms should be deferred whilst the Task & Finish Group carried out its review. One Member stated that in some cases it would be in the interests of the county to proceed with planned sales. It was confirmed that the council would continue to follow the existing policy using the usual decision-making process until such time as a new policy was agreed.

Following confirmation that the recommendations contained in 2.1 of the report did not relate to county farm land, the Committee agreed to all four recommendations.

The Committee agreed to the recommendations contained in 2.2 of the report with the addition to 2.2.1 that the Task & finish Group should include a review of the rationale and purpose of retaining county farms.

A Member proposed a recommendation that 'all further discussions and sales of county farm lands are suspended until the Task & Finish Group have made their recommendations except by exception and after either the Task & Finish Group or the Scrutiny Committee have been consulted'. The proposal was seconded and carried following a vote.

The following Members volunteered to form the county farm Task & Finish Group: Cllr Ham, Cllr Napper, Cllr Filmer, Cllr John Hunt and Cllr Wedderkopp. The Chairman stated that the Task & Finish Group review would need to be a short, sharp, in-depth process carried out in a timely manner to prevent unnecessary delay.

The Committee noted the report and asked for a verbal update from the Task & Finish Group at the next committee meeting.

25 **Strategic Roads Update** - Agenda Item 6

The Committee received this report from the Strategic Commissioning Manager, Highways and Transport which updated Members on strategic roads investment in the county.

Members were informed that funding for strategic roads improvements comes from a number of sources and a number of new funds have emerged since the last update. The sources were identified as follows:

- Department for Transport Roads Investment Strategy (RIS)
- Highways England Designated Funds.
- Department for Transport 'Pre-Growth Deal' Major Scheme funding.
- Local Enterprise Partnership Local Growth Fund and Growth Deal Process
- Department for Transport Large Local Major Schemes.
- (New) Department for Transport National Productivity Investment Fund
- (New) Housing Infrastructure Fund
- (New) Emerging policy on a new Major Road Network (MRN) for England.
- Developer Funds.

The report highlighted that following a consultation on the A303 Sparkford to Ilchester, the preferred route is expected to be announced later this year. There will also be a further supplementary consultation on a section of the A303 following representations made to Highways England including by Somerset County Council.

The Strategic Manager highlighted the Department for Transport proposals for a Major Road Network and explained that this would be good news for the county. A further update will be provided when more detail is available.

The Committee heard that the Council received £3.859m from the National Productivity Investment Fund (NPIF) following the application of a funding formula. The indicative funding allocations for this fund were outlined in the report. A further tranche of NPIF funding has been announced for 2018/19 and 2019/20 to be allocated by competitive funding bids.

A member questioned whether there was any further update on the A358 scheme as the local community are very keen to receive an announcement. It was confirmed that more detail should be available following a meeting with Highways England next week.

A Member questioned whether cheaper land value in Wales would pose a problem. Land value is a huge issue for the Council and can be challenging.

It was clarified that improvement schemes have to be linked to the criteria for funding which in turn dictates the major schemes funding.

A Member queried whether there was any indication of which funds would be oversubscribed and it was confirmed that The Housing Infrastructure Fund is likely to be very competitive and marginal funding bids may well be more successful.

The Committee noted the report.

26 **Parking Services Update** - Agenda Item 7

The Committee received a report from the Parking Services Manager which included progress made within parking services and introduced the revised policy for the introduction of resident parking.

Members were made aware that since June 2012, the County Council has been responsible for on street parking enforcement across the entire county (apart from the M5, the A303 and private roads). The County Council also works in partnership with Mendip District Council, Sedgemoor District Council, Taunton Deane Borough Council and West Somerset District Council.

South Somerset District Council has remained outside of the partnership and they undertake their own enforcement and related services. Discussions have recently taken place with South Somerset District Council about joining the partnership. It is not anticipated there will be any change for the time being whilst South Somerset District Council complete their current transformation programme.

The Committee were updated about the changes to service delivery since June 2012 and heard that the service has been able to benefit from increased efficiency and greater accountability.

The Committee heard that the service is now using the customer contact centre and print to post facility successfully. Back office and permit processing has been brought back in-house. The service has increased the number of officers based in County Hall carrying out back office processing and providing operational and strategic guidance to the contractor. These changes to back office processing have been generally well-received by residents. The service has also increased its on-line services. Parking permits can now be managed on-line bringing it in-line with the DVLA and ensuring that permits are immediately up to date.

The Committee then heard that the new residents parking policy is due to be considered by Cabinet in October. The revised policy aims to streamline the process and ensure residents who may be affected by any scheme are fully aware of the features and benefits of a resident parking scheme. It will help to identify and prioritise schemes requested by residents to ensure they are supported and viable.

The initial request for a resident parking scheme must demonstrate that 60% of the residents support the change. A Member queried whether it was in fact 60% of residents that respond which could result in a scheme going ahead with as little as around 30% of residents in favour. It was clarified that if a resident makes no response to a proposal it is seen as consenting as long as the proposal has been sufficiently advertised. It was also clarified that the 60% relates to households with one vote per house. A Member commented that some communities are put off by the 60% rate and are reluctant to canvass residents to gain support. Whilst this is understood by the service, it is important that there is some level of consensus achieved to avoid community disputes.

Members commented that more enforcement is needed out of hours, particularly in the evenings and that the mobility of enforcement officers needed to be addressed. It was explained that enforcement officers do have access to vehicles and that where necessary enforcement will take place in the evening.

It was confirmed that currently there is no residential parking in Frome and there were no Blue Badge matters to report from that area.

It was confirmed that Area Traffic Engineers should be contacted to discuss making changes to parking time limits.

Members questioned whether the service is cost neutral. It was confirmed that the service currently has a surplus which is used towards other traffic management services. Members questioned how the use of surplus is scrutinised and were informed that any surplus is ring-fenced within operational services. An update on the use of surplus could be provided at a future meeting.

It was confirmed that when the on-line reporting process is used this is passed to the relevant traffic manager or to the enforcement team depending on the nature of the report.

The Committee noted the report and asked for an update in six months time to include data on the use of surplus.

27 **Highways Terms Maintenance Contract - Agenda Item 8**

The Committee received a presentation from the Interim Director, Economic & Community Infrastructure Operations and was joined by the Business Director, Skanska regarding the new Highways Terms Maintenance Contract.

The Committee heard that the letting of the new contract is due to be considered by Cabinet on 18th October. The presentation updated members as to the reasons for letting a new contract and the financial and non-financial benefits of doing so. The total cost of the new contract is estimated to be lower than extending the previous contract and re-procuring in 2020. The contract will provide for increased integration and collaborative working.

The new contract includes 23 key Performance Indicators and 28 Quality Undertakings which aim to ensure good performance, added value and reduced costs and these are all contractually binding. The development of a Community Engagement & Social Value Plan is embedded within the contract. This has been submitted by the contractor and is currently being considered by the Council.

The integration of the Asset Design Team and the surface dressing programme were highlighted as particular successes of the Highways Maintenance contract.

The Committee heard that in 2011/12 the Council developed its Small Improvement Schemes (SIS) process to try to address highway issues which are a priority for local communities, with County Councillors acting on behalf of their respective communities and submitting scheme requests. Five SIS schemes have been issued to Skanska so far this year amounting to nearly £100,000. An annual budget in the region of £2m is allocated for the delivery of the SIS programme (although projects tend to span financial years).

Members questioned whether revisits are made to inspect surfaces that have been disturbed by utility companies. It was confirmed that the Council inspects both the contractor and utilities work and if the standard or notices about work are not up to standard then action is taken. Members were encouraged to report any incidences if they were made aware of them.

Members commented that more work could be done to work with Parish Councils and volunteers. The difficulty in applying for speed indicators and finger posts was raised as an example of this. Concerns were also raised about signs becoming covered by overgrowth. It was clarified that the Council is working with the contractor to use their expertise to improve these issues. After an initial challenge, the finger posts are working well. The contract contains a commitment to work with local communities and improve this.

Members were asked to report any verge cutting issues and informed that it can be possible for local communities to either purchase additional services or to take on services themselves. Members commented that it is important to keep Parish Councils informed and a Member suggested that it would be useful to provide a report to Parish council to suggest things that they could consider and signpost them to the relevant contact. It was confirmed that a Community and Member briefing sheet was currently being written and would be sent shortly.

It was clarified that more collaboration with Devon County Council could be possible as both authorities are using the same contractor. Collaboration will increase as the contract is embedded and a possible area to look at in the future may be the Winter Salting Programme.

It was clarified that the Council is statutory bound to present diversion routes which are suitable for all vehicles. This may result in routes which are longer. Multiple diversions are sometimes required when significant works are taking place in one area but this is planned for as best as possible.

Members were encouraged to report if roadwork signage is not removed or if road lines need to be re-painted and were reassured that the choice of asphalt recipe is well considered to ensure both cost effectiveness and cohesion with neighbouring counties.

The Committee noted the report and asked for an update in March or April after the winter period.

28 **Somerset Road Safety Strategy** - Agenda Item 9

The Committee received a report and presentation from the Service Manager, Transport Data & Road Safety which detailed the new approach to the Somerset Road Safety Strategy.

The Committee heard that the current Road Safety Strategy was launched in 2013 and it is now appropriate to review it and develop a new approach. Previous road safety work has been successful in reducing the numbers of people killed and injured on the roads of Somerset, however nationally and locally there is evidence that the impact of current road safety initiatives on road casualties is starting to plateau and the pace of reduction is slowing down.

In April 2013, under the Health and Social Care Act 2012, statutory duties for public health were conferred on local authorities; they were made responsible for improving the health of their local population and for public health services. The Public Health Outcomes Framework has several indicators relevant to road safety.

At a stakeholder strategy review meeting in March it was agreed that it was an appropriate time for Somerset to develop a new road safety strategy that adopts a wider-agency approach while continuing to promote evidence based approaches to road safety, health and wellbeing.

The Road Safety, Highways and Transport Commissioning and Public Health Teams are working together with other parts of the County Council, and appropriate external bodies, to explore how this vision could be applied and achieved in Somerset through the development of a cross-directorate road safety strategy.

The strategy is being developed in consultation with internal and external stakeholders. A Somerset County Council strategy steering group was formed with area specific sub-groups to develop the detail of the strategy action plan, and delivery through an Action/Delivery Plan and a Transition document. The strategy embraces work with many partners such as Avon and Somerset Constabulary, Devon & Somerset Fire and Rescue Service, South-west Ambulance Service Trust, Advanced Motoring Groups, and Highways England in seeking to have a maximum impact on reducing the numbers of people killed and seriously injured on Somerset's road network.

It is anticipated that the draft Strategy will be finalised and consulted on in November 2017.

Members were informed that the service runs a number of exhibitions to raise awareness of road safety. It is planned to showcase these to Members in the future and Members are encouraged to contact the service if they aware of a local event that the service could attend.

The Committee commented that it is clear that this is a strategy which cannot be delivered in isolation. It noted the report and asked to be kept updated as the Strategy develops.

29 **Scrutiny for Policies and Place Committee Work Programme - Agenda Item 10**

The Committee considered and noted the Council's Forward Plan of proposed key decisions.

Following debate, the Committee requested the following additions to the work programme:

- A verbal update from the county farms Task & Finish Group (03 Oct)
- An update on the County Plan (31 Oct)
- An update on Parking Services – to include data on the use of surplus (March/April 2018)
- An update on the Highways Terms Maintenance Contract (March/April 2018)

30 **Any other urgent items of business - Agenda Item 11**

There was a brief discussion about a proposal from Devon County Council to form a Joint Task & Finish Group to monitor and scrutinise the Connecting Devon and Somerset Broadband programme.

Cllr Thorne expressed an interest and the proposal will be considered in more detail at the next Committee meeting on 03 October 2017.

(The meeting ended at 1.10 pm)

CHAIRMAN