

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 December 2017 at 10.00 am

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

Other Members present: Cllr C Aparicio Paul, Cllr S Coles, Cllr D Hall, Cllr L Leyshon, Cllr T Munt, Cllr L Vijeh and Cllr J Woodman

Apologies for absence: None

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

There were no declarations of interest.

51 **Minutes from the previous meeting held on 31 October 2017** - Agenda Item 3

The minutes of the meeting on 31 October 2017 were accepted as being accurate by the Committee.

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

Sue Osborne asked a question regarding Item 7.

I was shocked at how our call-in request was handled particularly the treatment of my elected County Councillor Linda Vijeh whose emails did not seem to be responded to by anyone. No-one to my knowledge explained why the call-in failed to meet the criteria or even what these were. The Task and Finish Group should also know that your Chairman, Cllr Philip Ham, invited me to attend the 1st November session only for me to be dis-invited by your Scrutiny Manager on 31st October.

I was even more distressed to see that Councillor Vijeh's written statement to Scrutiny on 31st October was not read out, let alone mentioned by anybody. Why was this? I find it appalling that an elected member is treated in this way. Frankly it is a disgrace. This does though beg the question as to how Member-led this Task & Finish report and its recommendations really are.

Turning to the report, I can only conclude that the recommendations amount to business as usual regarding the disposal of land, buildings and farmhouses. The rest is window dressing; there to be spun just to suit the mood in the moment and the political wish. Just like the previous policy was and we soon found out what a sham that was. By retaining very small blocks of bare land, how do you see people progressing on there too? Is the conveyor belt approach really going to grow a long-term business?

Farming in scale and nature has changed much since the 2002 review. More revolution than evolution. What are the holding plans for the four farms with leases ending in March 2018? Three of these fall in Cllr Vijeh's division. Has

she been consulted over these plans or even been told that there is such a plan. Where did you draw your evidence from that the farms are too big? What happened to progression? Why the support for Lifetime tenants? What about Farm Business tenants and their families? Why no support for them?

It was confirmed that Mrs Osborne will receive a written response to her questions.

53 Council Performance Monitoring Report Q2 2017_18 - Agenda Item 5

The Committee considered this report from the Strategic Managers for Performance and for Business Change. The report provided Members with an update on performance across the organisation.

The report summarised that overall performance is stable with two red segments (P3, C4). 50% of objectives are green, 33% are amber and 17% are red. The report was positive in that there were no downward arrows. The report was presented to Cabinet on 15 November 2017 and Members were informed that Cabinet had discussed the red segments at length and additional action was agreed with the section 161 officer with regard to addressing the revenue position.

The Committee discussed those segments which fell under the Committee's remit. Members commented that although segment C4 was red and finances were not in budget, it doesn't necessarily mean that the Council is not managing its business. It was suggested that the revenue budget be separated from the other elements of the managing our business segment (C4). The suggestion was endorsed by the Director of Finance and Officers agreed to consider this when producing revised reports following the approval of the new County Vision at the February 2018 Full Council meeting.

Members questioned the timetable for delivering improvements to segment C4. It was confirmed that each Director had been tasked to ensure that the finances were in the best position possible by the February Cabinet meeting and February Full Council meeting. Members then questioned the £3.1m of undeliverable in-year savings and the impact this was having on the overspend. It was confirmed that not delivering on the in-year position does contribute to the overspend. The work is taking place but the authority needs to decide what is achievable and what is slippage. We are significantly behind but how much we can catch up next year is a difficult question.

Members raised concerns over the dissatisfaction expressed by residents with the Connecting Devon & Somerset (CDS) Broadband programme in both rural and urban areas. It was agreed to raise this in the CDS workshop taking place after the Committee meeting.

The Committee noted the report.

54 **Revenue Budget Monitoring Report Q2 2017_18 - Agenda Item 6**

The Committee received this report from the Director of Finance which provided an update on the current Revenue Budget outturn position for the 2017/18 financial year based on the end of September (Month 6).

The Committee were reminded that figures within the report were a projection based on a prediction of the position at year end.

The Committee heard that the Authority's forecast shows a projected net overspend of £9.098m when compared to the Revenue Budget. This represents 2.92% of base budget and shows a slight decrease from the previous report. The majority of the overspend lies in the Children's Services budgets. Most other areas of the Council are within reasonable tolerance although some corporate and support budgets are under pressure. The implication of this forecast is that Cabinet and the Senior Leadership Team will need to continue to exercise more stringent control in all areas of council spend to ensure that the final outturn position is much lower than this.

The Committee then considered the forecast overspend in individual budget areas particularly children's services and aged debt analysis. They also considered the progress of the 2017/18 MTFP savings proposals. The Committee heard that 61% of savings will be delivered as predicted, 7% of savings have been classified as an amber risk meaning delivery is unsure and 32% are no longer deliverable in 2017/18.

The Committee heard that it will take time to address the overspend but that steps are being taken. The most significant overspend is in Children's Services, particularly with regard to placements. The service is taking steps to manage the market differently with regard to placements and the aim is to increase the number of Somerset placements when they become available. By the February full council the authority will have a better idea of how much of the £9.1m overspend can be reduced by.

The Committee discussed the aged debt and questioned how it is shown in the accounts. SCC is very good at collecting debt eventually with around 99.8% collection but any debt that is written off will affect the accounts. There is concern that bad debt is worsening and this largely sits with NHS colleagues.

Members asked if reassurance could be given over the 32% of savings that are no longer considered to be deliverable. As this hasn't been achieved by month 6 it would be very difficult to give this assurance. There has been a slow start but some progress should now be seen. We are taking action to achieve this and are confident that it will still be achieved but not in the timeline predicted.

Members questioned how the SCC financial position compares with other authorities. SCC does compare and this is a mixed picture. Some authorities have bigger budget gaps and in terms of overspend we are about average. We are above in some aspect and below in others.

Members questioned why only 25% of children's placements were made in Somerset with 75% being placed out of the county. The Committee heard that

the capacity in Somerset is far greater than is being used. An update on the demography of placements could be provided in future. It was clarified that Somerset placements might not necessarily be cheaper but they may be better quality. A Member highlighted to the Committee that a child may be placed out of county for complex reasons – including safeguarding reasons.

The committee noted the report.

55 **Report from the County Farms Task & Finish Group - Agenda Item 7**

The Committee received this report which was presented by Cllr Philip Ham, Chair of the Task & Finish Group.

Cllr Ham began by thanking all Members and officers that had contributed to the Task & Finish Group.

He introduced the report and gave a brief background to the history of county farms and some of the changes experienced since their introduction.

He shared the recommendations made by the Task & Finish Group and urged the Committee to support them. The recommendations were:

1. To continue to maintain a County Farms estate, based on land ownership rather than buildings. Existing farmhouses to be sold or let at market valuations as and when they become available, unless there is a strategic business need to retain them. Farm outbuildings and land, if suitable, to be marketed with planning permissions wherever possible, thus maximising financial returns. As part of this the Committee recommends the completion of a comprehensive review of the Council's lettings policy.
2. To ensure there is a sufficient provision of small blocks of bare land (roughly 5 to 20 acres, with a maximum length tenancy possibly 10 years), to provide farming opportunities for genuinely new entrants to agriculture and encourage rural diversification.
3. To champion a strong agricultural focus within Taunton and Bridgwater College and the University of Somerset, ensuring sufficient land opportunities are retained to help provide a strong agricultural focus in the county and to facilitate learning, whilst encouraging the development of an innovation centre for agriculture.

The Committee debated the recommendations in depth. A Member commented that there was no explanation in the report as to why county farms should be kept. One Member expressed disappointment with the outcome of review whilst other Members expressed support. One Member commented that it was possible to support farming in Somerset but not necessarily county farms owned by the Council. Committee Members suggested that Members should be involved with any review of the Lettings Policy and agreed that the recommendations were a starting point but that the next steps required experienced and knowledgeable advice.

The Chairman of the Scrutiny Committee proposed that the Committee should accept all of the recommendations. Following a vote this was carried.

It was clarified that the recommendations would be submitted to the Cabinet Member Resources and Economic Development for their response. Additionally, it was agreed to offer the support of Members of the Committee should there be a review of the Lettings Policy.

The Committee noted the report.

56 Scrutiny for Policies and Place Committee Work Programme - Agenda Item 8

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

A suggestion was made to scrutinise recent changes to the Park & Ride Bus Service but this was rejected following clarification that the decision to withdraw this funding had already been taken.

It was clarified that any Member can suggest an item for the agenda. If made outside of a Scrutiny meeting, any suggestion would be referred to the Chairman in the first instance.

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

- Highways England acceptance of the A303 Option 1 Sparkford & Podimore Junction and its impact on local communities (ECI Operations Director to consult Highways England and advise).

The Committee also requested that the response from the Cabinet Member regarding the Task & Finish Group report & recommendations be shared with the Committee.

57 Any other urgent items of business - Agenda Item 9

There were no other items of business.

(The meeting ended at 11.30 am)

CHAIRMAN