

South Somerset District Council

Minutes of a meeting of the **District Executive** held at the **Council Chamber - Council Offices, Brympton Way, Yeovil on Thursday 10 January 2019.**

(2.00 pm - 3.20 pm)

Present:

Chairman: Jo Roundell Greene

Jason Baker
Henry Hobhouse

Sylvia Seal (from 3.08pm)
Angie Singleton



Also Present:

Sue Steele

Gina Seaton

Officers:

Alex Parmley
Martin Woods
Paul Fitzgerald
Angela Watson
Nicola Hix
Jo Gale
Jan Gamon
Jo Manley
Ian Potter
Helen Morris
Caron Starkey
Angela Cox

Chief Executive
Director (Service Delivery)
Section 151 Officer
Monitoring Officer
Lead Specialist (Finance)
Scrutiny Specialist
Lead Specialist (Strategic Planning)
Specialist (Strategic Planning)
Lead Specialist (Vulnerable Customers)
Revenues Team Leader
Strategic Lead for Transformation
Democratic Services Specialist

Note: All decisions were approved without dissent unless shown otherwise.

At the beginning of the meeting the Chairman asked everyone present to stand and observe a minute of silence, in memory of the late Lord Paddy Ashdown, past MP for the Yeovil Constituency, whose funeral had taken place that day.

89. Minutes of Previous Meeting (Agenda Item 1)

The minutes of the District Executive meetings held on 6th December 2018, copies of which had been circulated, were taken as read and, having been approved as a correct record, were signed by the Chairman.

90. Apologies for Absence (Agenda Item 2)

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Peter Gubbins, Val Keitch, Graham Middleton, Sylvia Seal, Peter Seib and Nick Weeks.

91. Declarations of Interest (Agenda Item 3)

There were no declarations of interest made by Members.

92. Chairman's Announcements (Agenda Item 5)

There were no announcements from the Chairman.

93. Public Question Time (Agenda Item 4)

A local resident spoke regarding Agenda item 14: Notification of an Urgent Executive Decision - Short term funding facility required to SSDC Opium Power Ltd to accommodate VAT cashflow during VAT reclaim period. He said that whilst he supported the project, he questioned the Council's reasons for choosing a shell company with no assets and no experience of operating a battery park to partner the project. He questioned what due diligence the Council had taken with regard to the payment of VAT and if a written opinion from HMRC had been sought.

The Portfolio Holder for Property, Climate Change and Income Generation and the Chief Executive advised that specialist advice had been sought from the importer and HMRC which had proved incorrect in terms of the treatment of VAT to release the containers from the port. Banks had been prepared to lend the money to the company but they had asked for a charge on the property and SSDC held the first charge and so this was unacceptable in commercial terms. In terms of the overall project, the sum was not significant and there would be some interest earned plus the capital sum would be reclaimed in March 2019.

94. Corporate Peer Challenge: Follow Up Visit (Agenda Item 6)

The Chief Executive advised that the report, which followed the visit in October had focused on a number of areas within the Council. He said the Council was in a strong position but there was still a lot of work to do and the recommendations would be useful in shaping the Council Plan and where work resources were directed in the coming months. He said although there was no specific action plan the recommendations were being taken forward in a number of ways.

The Chairman of the Scrutiny Committee thanked the Chief Executive for answering their questions at their meeting and, in response to a further question, he advised that although staff were stretched and some agency staff were employed temporarily to fill gaps in workloads and this was regularly monitored.

During a brief discussion, Members congratulated officers and managers for the positive report and high staff morale. At the conclusion of the debate, Members were content to note the findings of the Peer Challenge Follow up Team as detailed in the report.

RESOLVED: That the District Executive noted the findings of the Peer Challenge Follow up Team, as set out in their report at Appendix 1.

Reason: To note the report of the LGA Peer Challenge team, who assessed the Council's progress since their last visit in March 2017.

95. A303 Sparkford to Ilchester Dualling Scheme - Local Impact Report (Agenda Item 7)

The Portfolio Holder for Strategic Planning (Place Making) said the proposed work to dual the A303 between Sparkford and Ilchester had the potential to cause a great deal of disruption to the surrounding local communities and she thanked the Specialist – Strategic Planning for the work she done to help these communities.

The Specialist – Strategic Planning advised that the proposal was still at the examination stage which would conclude on 12 June. The Local Impact Report dealt with issues such as air quality, vehicle emissions, vibrations, biodiversity and ecology; enabling species to cross the dual carriageway and the socio-economic effects to local businesses. She said that she was due to meet with local Parish Councils the following day to discuss the mitigation measures offered by Highways England. She read a letter from the Clerk to West Camel Parish Council expressing their concern at the significant adverse effect of an additional 600 vehicles through the village and that the details of the mitigation scheme from SCC had yet to be shared with the parish.

It was noted that there may also be traffic disruption to residents on the B3153. There was no debate and Members were content to confirm the recommendations of the report.

RESOLVED: That District Executive agreed:-

- a. to note the report and its contents;
- b. to approve delegation of the Local Impact Report (LiR) to the Lead Specialist, Strategic Planning, Strategic Planning Portfolio Holder and Property, Climate Change and Income Generation Portfolio Holder; and
- c. that the Council submit a Written Representation to the Examining Authority and give delegation of the contents of that Written Representation to the Leader of the Council, Strategic Planning Portfolio Holder and Property, Climate Change and Income Generation Portfolio Holder and the Ward Members for Camelot and Ilchester.

Reason: To update District Executive on the A303 Sparkford to Ilchester Dualling Scheme and set out the Examination timetable for the Development Consent Order (DCO). Also to note the emerging issues to be covered in the Local Impact Report and to agree that the Council submit a Written Representation to the Examining Authority.

96. Assessing Needs and Opportunities for Indoor and Outdoor Sports Facilities in South Somerset (Agenda Item 8)

The Lead Specialist, Strategic Planning advised that Knight Kavanagh & Page Ltd had been commissioned to undertake a needs assessment of the built leisure facilities in South Somerset to form the basis of a new policy. They were asked to include swimming pools, sports halls, community halls, health and fitness facilities, indoor courts and outdoor sports facilities. She said there was no suggestion that SSDC could meet the required provisions or fill all the gaps in need. A Members Workshop was due to be held on 24th January to help prioritise the gaps in provision.

During discussion, it was noted that the 1610 sites at Castle Cary, Stanchester and Wadham schools had all notified local clubs that they would no longer be open to the public from March 2019. Members felt that some clarification ought to be sought regarding any lottery fund which may have been part of the facilities which required they were open for community use.

The Lead Specialist, Strategic Planning said that where possible, usage agreements would be negotiated.

The Chairman of the Scrutiny Committee said it would be helpful to re-issue the invitation to the workshop to remind Members of its importance and encourage them to attend.

At the conclusion of the debate, Members were content to confirm the recommendations of the report.

RESOLVED: That District Executive agreed:-

- a. to note and comment on the emerging issues from the draft Needs Assessment.
- b. to encourage Members to attend the upcoming workshop on 24th January 2019 at 5.00pm to share their reactions and to participate in a prioritisation exercise.

Reason: To update Members on the Needs Assessment for Indoor/Outdoor Sports Facilities in South Somerset before the development and adoption of a new strategy for sports facilities.

97. 2019/20 Draft Budget and Medium Term Financial Plan Update (Agenda Item 9)

The Section 151 Officer introduced the report and drew Members attention to various points in the report. He said that although this was a holding report before the annual budget report in February, overall, it was a positive position. SSDC, along with other Councils had successfully bid to be a pilot for 75% retention of business rates funding. Although this was not entirely risk free, it was an opportunity to keep funding locally.

In response to questions from Members, the Chief Executive and the Section 151 Officer confirmed that:-

- District Executive had agreed in March 2018 to apply an increase in car parking charges from July 2019 based on the CPI inflation rate for the previous 4 years.
- A review of all parking, starting in Yeovil and widening out was under way, taking account of the well-being and economy of the district.
- The reference to funding for the economic development strategy was to note that funding would need to be allocated in future years to aid its implementation.

At the conclusion of the debate, Members were content to approve the recommendations of the report.

RESOLVED: That District Executive agreed:-

- a. to note the current estimates and next steps in respect of the draft Medium Term Financial Plan and Capital Programme.
- b. to approve in principle the changes to budget estimates in respect of pressures and savings included within the report (para 14).

Reason: To update Members on the latest estimates for 2019/20 draft budget and Medium Term Financial Plan estimates for the period 2019/20 to 2023/24, together with an update on the Capital Programme.

98. Council Tax Support Scheme 2019/20 (Agenda Item 10)

The Lead Specialist (Vulnerable Customers) introduced the report and advised that there were two proposed changes to the 2019/20 scheme: to introduce a minimum weekly award of £0.50, and to introduce a £5.00 per week income change tolerance. He said the number of customers on Universal Credit was increasing and they tended to have regular changes in income and so potentially had a new Council Tax bill every month.

In response to a question, the Lead Specialist (Vulnerable Customers) advised that electronic billing would shortly be introduced, but, there would still be the same number of benefit changes for some customers.

The Chairman of the Scrutiny Committee said the report suggested that all of South Somerset was fully in Universal Credit but this had been clarified at their meeting.

At the conclusion of the debate, Members were content to recommend the proposed amendments 2019/20 Council Tax Support Scheme to Council for adoption.

RESOLVED: That District Executive recommended that Full Council agree:-

- a. the introduction of a minimum award value of £0.50 a week in line with Housing Benefit;
- b. the introduction of a £5 a week tolerance on income increases and decreases before it affects a Council Tax Support award;
- c. that personal allowances and premiums are uprated in line with those for Housing Benefit;

- d. that non-dependent deductions are uprated in line with the annual percentage increase in Council Tax;
- e. that the non-dependent income bands are increased by the same percentage as those applied to the national Council Tax Support scheme for pensioners;
- f. that the hardship scheme budget be set at £30,000 for the 2019/20 financial year;
- g. to note the recommendations of the Scrutiny Task and Finish Group attached at Appendix 1;
- h. to note the scheme has been amended to reflect changes to the Prescribed Requirements;
- i. that the 2019/20 Council Tax Support Scheme at Appendix 2 (to follow) is adopted;
- j. to note that the proposed Council Tax Support Scheme has been reflected within the overall Council Tax Base.

Reason: To request that the District Executive recommend the proposed amendments to the Council Tax Support scheme for the 2019/20 financial year to Full Council for approval.

99. Council Tax Discount Review (Agenda Item 11)

The Revenues Team Leader introduced the report and advised that consultation had taken place with Somerset County Council and the Children's Society on the proposed Care Leavers Discount. She noted the Empty Homes Premium was proposed in accordance with the Government's Rating (property in Common Occupation) and Council Tax (Empty Dwellings) Act 2018.

In response to questions from Members, the Revenues Team Leader and the Lead Specialist (Vulnerable Customers) advised that:-

- once a property had been empty for two years the Empty Home Premium would apply. There were no exemptions proposed for new owners although they could apply to the District Valuer to have it removed from the list if the property was uninhabitable.
- The Empty Homes Premium did not apply to commercial properties.

During discussion, Members expressed concern that the Empty Home Premium could discourage developers from purchasing long-term empty properties. It was also mentioned that the Care Leavers Discount could be extended to ex-prisoners who also needed help with their Council Tax payments. Officers stated that there was already a range of support in place for prisoners and ex-prisoners and agreed to provide details to members.

It was proposed and seconded to defer the decision on the Empty Home Premium to a future meeting of the Executive to allow officers to investigate the possibility of amending

the scheme for the purchasers of long-term empty properties. This amended proposal was put to the vote and unanimously agreed by Members.

RESOLVED: That the District Executive:-

- a. approved the use of the Councils local discretionary powers to implement a Care Leavers Discount from April 2019.
- b. approved that the additional amount to fund the Care Leavers discount is added to the budget which currently funds Council Tax Discretionary reductions.
- c. agreed to defer the decision to increase in the Empty Home Premium on empty properties to the maximum percentage, as detailed in the Rating (Property in Common Occupation) and Council Tax (Empty Dwellings) Act 2018, to a future meeting of the District Executive

Reason: To request the use of the Council's local discretionary powers to implement a Care Leavers discount from 1 April 2019, in accordance with the provisions contained in section 13A Local Government Finance Act 1992. Also to reconsider an increase to the Empty Home Premium charged on properties that have been empty for 2 years or more, in accordance with the Rating (property in Common Occupation) and Council Tax (Empty Dwellings) Act 2018.

100. Business Rates Relief (Agenda Item 12)

The Revenues Team Leader advised that the proposals were announced by the Chancellor in the Autumn 2018 Budget. They included Retail Rate Relief for High Street businesses, extending the existing Business Rate Relief Scheme for Local Newspapers and continuation of doubling the Rural Rate Relief for 2019/20 and future financial years until the primary legislation had been changed.

There was no debate and Members unanimously agreed the recommendations as proposed.

RESOLVED: That the District Executive agreed to:-

- a. approve the use of the Councils local discretionary powers to implement Retail Rate Relief from April 2019 for two years;
- b. approve the use of the Councils local discretionary powers to extend the Business Rate Relief Scheme for Local Newspapers for the 2019/20 financial year;
- c. approve the use of the Councils local discretionary powers to extend the doubling of the Rural Rate Relief for the 2019/20 financial year and future financial years until the primary legislation has been changed.

Reason: To approve the use of the Council's local discount powers to implement three Rate Relief schemes in relation to local businesses from 1 April 2019.

101. SSDC Transformation Programme - Progress Report (Agenda Item 13)

The Portfolio Holder for Environment, Economic Development & Transformation noted that many staff had left the Council in December as part of the Transformation Programme. She advised that the Programme was on track and on-budget and there had been some movement between the capital and revenue budgets. The risk matrix related to the Transformation Programme and not the report.

The Strategic Lead for Transformation confirmed that the financial benefits of the programme had been realised. She noted that performance throughout the organisation had been affected, as predicted, but work had continued to happen in the areas as highlighted in the maps in the report.

There was no debate and the Portfolio Holder and Chairman of Scrutiny Committee thanked the Strategic Lead for Transformation for her work on the programme and wished her well in her new job.

Members were content to note the progress report of the SSDC Transformation Programme.

RESOLVED: That the District Executive noted the Transformation Programme progress report.

Reason: To note the progress report has been prepared in accordance with the Transformation Programme Governance arrangements agreed by Full Council in April 2017 where it was agreed that the District Executive would receive quarterly updates on the progress of the council's Transformation Programme.

102. Notification of an Urgent Executive Decision - Short term funding facility required to SSDC Opium Power Ltd to accommodate VAT cashflow during VAT reclaim period (Agenda Item 14)

With the agreement of the Committee, this item was discussed at the beginning of the meeting to allow a member of the public to speak (see comments made under Public Question Time).

There was no debate on the report by Members and the urgent decision taken was noted.

RESOLVED: That the District Executive noted urgent executive decision made by the Chief Executive in consultation with the Council Leader and Portfolio Holder for Property, Climate Change and Income Generation to use short term funding facility required to SSDC Opium Power Ltd to accommodate VAT cashflow during VAT reclaim period. This decision was taken under Part 3, Section 6 (4) of the Council's constitution.

Reason: To note the urgent executive decision made by the Chief Executive in consultation with the Council Leader and Portfolio Holder for Property, Climate Change and Income Generation under Part 3, Section 6 (4) of the Council's constitution.

103. District Executive Forward Plan (Agenda Item 15)

The following amendments to the Forward Plan were noted:

- Policy for Awarding Private Sector Housing Grants/Loans and other Financial Assistance – February 2019
- Somerset Housing Strategy – February 2019
- Empty Home Premium on empty properties – February 2019

RESOLVED: That the District Executive:-

1. approved the updated Executive Forward Plan for publication as attached at Appendix A, with the following additions:
 - Policy for Awarding Private Sector Housing Grants/Loans and other Financial Assistance – February 2019
 - Somerset Housing Strategy – February 2019
 - Empty Home Premium on empty properties – February 2019
2. noted the contents of the Consultation Database as shown at Appendix B.

Reason: The Forward Plan is a statutory document.

104. Date of Next Meeting (Agenda Item 16)

Members noted that the next scheduled meeting of the District Executive would take place on Thursday 7th February 2019 in the Council Chamber, Council Offices, Brympton Way, Yeovil commencing at 9.30 a.m.

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Chairman

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Date