

Scrutiny Committee

This report summarises the work of the Scrutiny Committee since the last report to Full Council. The Committee met on 3 April and 1 May 2018 to consider:

3 April 2018

Customer Access Strategy: Outline Approach and Key Principles

The Director for Strategy and Commissioning provided a presentation which informed members of the Customer Access Strategy currently under development. She explained that the strategy would give structure to the way in which SSDC would be engaging with its customers and communities in the future. It was recognised that the Council wanted as many services as possible available digitally, but it was also acknowledged that this may not always be appropriate to everyone. Work had been done to identify measurable outcomes, but there would be a need to be responsive, and continually develop, improve and change processes when required.

The presentation included information about:

- Why a Customer Access Strategy was needed.
- What was already known?
- What do we undertake to deliver? – Principles and Outcomes
- How will we know we've been successful?

During discussion, the Director and the Strategic Lead for Transformation responded to points of detail, including information about:

- Timeframes regarding preparation of the strategy.
- The suggestion for working with partners regarding training for customers would be investigated further.
- The offer to our customers would need to be right for SSDC and would be tailored to systems. The systems in use, or to be used, were well known known, tried and tested. A system was needed now but processes may change as we gain more customer insight as the authority continued through Transformation.
- Processes would be in put in place to follow up on abandoned, or incomplete transactions / service requests etc.
- Unlikely to be gaining any more data from customers than currently, but information more likely to be held digitally than on paper.

At the end of discussion, members were content to the note the presentation and report. The Chairman thanked the Director for the information and presentation.

Civil Penalties Update

The Benefits Team Leader presented the report which provided an update on Civil Penalties in Housing benefit which were introduced from April 2017. She updated members that the penalty for 77 cases had now been collected.

During a brief discussion the Benefits Team Leader responded to points of detail including:

- It was not possible for SSDC to apply a similar penalty to Universal Credit claims but it may be possible to apply a penalty scheme to Council Tax.

- Penalties could not be appealed in isolation but would be considered together with the Housing Benefit claim.
- Explanation of the process for informing the customer about applying penalties
- People in debt could be signposted to other agencies for help and advice such as Citizens Advice. People were encouraged to contact SSDC as soon as possible to notify of a change in circumstances in order to prevent getting into an overpayment situation.

Members were content to note the report and thanked the officer for attending the meeting to answer questions.

ACTION: That the report be noted.

Reports to be considered by District Executive on 5 April 2018

Members considered the reports within the District Executive agenda for 5 April 2018 and made comments including:

Transformation Project Progress Report (Agenda item 6)

- Some members felt that para 22 (page 8) needed to better reflect Locality working providing input into Council objectives within the Council Plan. Others also felt there should be reference to local democracy.
- Regarding staffing - Scrutiny asked if there were still any unfilled posts within Phase 1?
- In referring to their contact with local Town and Parish Councils – members were concerned that some councils had mentioned that Transformation seemed to be being used as an excuse for delays in responding to queries within some departments.
- Members sought reassurance that phases 2 and 3 were on track regarding timeframes
- Members also asked for reassurance that while staff were undertaking selection activities that workloads were being managed.
- Members were concerned if the number of staff vacancies throughout the council was having an impact on service delivery.

Asset Transfer Policy revised to: The Asset Disposal and Community Asset Transfer (Agenda item 7)

- Scrutiny asked if there were any Community Asset Transfers currently in progress that might get caught up in the change of policy.
- Members asked if the Disposal Assessment Group (DAG) would meet on a regular or ad-hoc basis.
- Members queried if Community Groups and Town/Parish Councils knew that a policy existed?
- Regarding particular assets purchased for investment – some members queried if an asset under-performed was there an option to withdraw?
- Scrutiny queried who would value or assess assets/properties from an independent perspective.

District Executive Forward Plan (Agenda item 8)

- Scrutiny made no comments.

Verbal update on Task and Finish reviews

Members noted the updates provided by the Chairman on each of the Task and Finish Groups currently in progress or commencing in the near future.

Homefinder Somerset Plain English Policy – No updates since the last meeting.

Council Tax Support Scheme 2019 – No updates since the last meeting.

Customer Accessibility - This group has yet to meet, it has been delayed pending the presentation of the Customer Access strategy, which was discussed earlier on the agenda.

Scrutiny Work Programme

Members were asked if the committee felt a verbal overview or short report regarding Business Rates Retention would be helpful. During discussion members felt a report on the take up of Business Rates Relief Schemes would be of interest. Some members also queried if there was anything that could be done to support smaller businesses who were struggling to pay their rates.

1 May 2018

Reports to be considered by District Executive on 3 May 2018

Members considered the reports within the District Executive agenda for 3 May 2018 and made comments as detailed below. Responses to all comments and questions were provided at the Scrutiny Committee meeting by the relevant Officer or Portfolio Holder.

The South Petherton Neighbourhood Plan Referendum (Agenda item 6)

- The report states that the South Petherton village Conservation Area boundary was due to be reviewed by the District Council in 2017/18. Has this been completed and if not would it influence the Neighbourhood Plan?
- Para 17 – Members queried at what stage the increased levy was applicable was it when planning permission is granted or when the development commences?
- A concern was raised whether SSDC was trying to over influence some of the wishes of the community.

Strategic Development and Regeneration in South Somerset District Council (Agenda item 7)

- Members felt that there may be issues regarding public perception within the smaller rural market towns due to the proposal to discontinue the four Area Regeneration Boards.
- Members sought clarification about how smaller scale proposals within other market towns would be brought forward.
- Members sought reassurance on the reporting arrangements, risk management and progress report in order to keep all members informed.

- Scrutiny were generally supportive of the changes proposed to the boards and the governance arrangements however they thought more attention should be given to a risk Management and suggested an additional bullet point to paragraph 6.9 to require production of a risk strategy.
- An additional bullet point under 6.2 was suggested to indicate that the Strategic Development Board should be responsible for managing cumulative impact and risk.
- Some concerns were raised about business continuity for management of large project should membership of a board change.

Somerset Homelessness Strategy 2017-19 (Agenda item 8)

- Members acknowledged the information by the Portfolio Holder
- Members sought the timescale for when the suggested supplementary strategy specific to SSDC would be brought forward?

Community Right to Bid Half Year Report – October 2017 to March 2018 (Agenda item 9)

- Scrutiny made no comments.

Draft Responses to Consultations (Agenda item 10)

- Some members raised specific queries to which the Acting Principal Spatial Planner noted and agreed to look into further and liaise with the members concerned.

District Executive Forward Plan (Agenda item 11)

- It was noted that Transformation Project Progress Reports were scheduled for October 2018 and March 2019 however previously it had been understood that reporting would be quarterly.

CONFIDENTIAL – Exclusion of the Press and Public (Agenda item 13)

In accordance with Section 100A(4) of the Local Government Act 1972 (as amended), the Committee resolved that the press and public be excluded from the following items in view of the likely disclosure of exempt information as described in Paragraph 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A to the Act, i.e. "Information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information).

Budget for Chard Regeneration Programme and Yeovil Regeneration Programme (Confidential) (Agenda item 14)

- Members made several comments in confidential session.

Verbal update on Task and Finish reviews

Members noted the updates provided by the Chairman on each of the Task and Finish Groups currently in progress or commencing in the near future.

Homefinder Somerset Plain English Policy – No updates since last meeting.

Council Tax Support Scheme 2019 – No updates since the last meeting, but the group would be meeting shortly.

Customer Accessibility – This group has yet to meet, but a meeting would be scheduled shortly.

Scrutiny Work Programme

There was a short discussion during which it was noted that a Task and Finish Group had done a lot of work last year regarding the Local Discretionary (Business Rates) Relief Scheme, and it was noted that one year on a follow-up report would be welcome.

Councillor Sue Steele
Chairman of Scrutiny Committee