

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 6 March 2018 at 10.00 am

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

Other Members present: Cllr C Aparicio Paul, Cllr S Coles, Cllr H Davies, Cllr D Hall, Cllr L Leyshon, Cllr T Munt, Cllr L Redman and Cllr R Williams

Apologies for absence: Cllr P Ham

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

There were no declarations of interest.

68 **Minutes from the previous meeting held on 30 January** - Agenda Item 3

The minutes of the meeting on 30 January 2017 were accepted as being accurate by the Committee.

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

There were two public questions in relation to item 5.

Peter Murphy – Chair, Friends of Somerset Libraries (FOSL)

In the approach to the current Library Service Review, FOSL were heartened by a statement from the Leader of the Council that the Council was working to keep all libraries open. When the consultation was launched, the language which we had worked to keep as positive as possible was changed. The change was in effect saying that if a community supported solution to keeping some libraries open cannot be found, those libraries will close. The FOSL approach, which we believed SCC had agreed with, was to deliver statutory library services through existing library buildings with community support. This would, we believe have encouraged communities to approach the consultation in an open minded way but the change means they are being pressurised into reaching an agreement or losing their library. It began to feel like a rerun of the 2010 - 11 review.

FOSL has presented a preliminary analysis to officers which suggests that SCC could offer funding to all community library partnerships within the budget options available. If communities are to be encouraged to enter into such partnerships, they must feel that they are not taking on a higher financial commitment than their communities can afford. This Review is intended to reset the library network for the next five years at least. It would be a missed opportunity if the Council failed to invest sufficient funds to make the community partnership solutions work.

FOSL continues to encourage communities to engage with the library service to find creative ways to keep current libraries open. An entirely volunteer run solution is not one we support since we believe that in most communities, it is not sustainable. FOSL does not understand what outreach services as proposed might look like in a particular situation and have doubts that such an approach would fulfill the statutory duty laid on the Council to provide a “comprehensive and efficient library service” under s7 of the Public Libraries and Museums Act. A community now served by a library would be worse served through outreach or a mobile stop. The Council would need to be confident that it could demonstrate that such a reduced service fulfilled the Council’s statutory duty.

FOSL is concerned that negotiating a successful Community Library Partnership with a community will take longer than the timescale laid out in the present proposals. We urge that SCC exercise the maximum flexibility possible to secure good agreements that keep all current libraries open.

Pauline Homeshaw – Friends of Wiveliscombe Library

Our current comments on the Proposal itself for Wiveliscombe (Area 2) are as follows:

- Transport – the map shows that Wiveliscombe and its wider rural catchment area, are out on their own to the west of Area 2. Public transport to Taunton is expensive, infrequent and journey times are long. The bus service was cut further at the beginning of February. There is no bus service to Wellington.
- Library Usage - 10.7% of the population are active borrowers (the rest in this area range from 8.1% to 4.2%); and the population makes 3.2 visits per head annually (the others range from 2.5 to 0.7).
- Partnership with local community option – Whilst noting that it is proposed to make possible contribution of about £ 5,000, this is nowhere near the sum of £21,000 it currently takes to run the library. There are many arguments against a community-run library, all of which we endorse – for a start, huge logistical problems, training, safeguarding and management issues.
- Mobile library stop option – The library has a footfall of 23,000 plus per year. We are not sure how often the mobile library would visit, nor for how long, but doubt it could accommodate that number of visits. Furthermore, the library is well used for other events, such a Storytime, Poppy Ops, coffee mornings, Meet the Author and so on which a mobile library could not possibly accommodate.

We’ve also read through the background information on the consultation website and would highlight the following:

1 Vision, Strategic Direction and Outcomes Framework 2017-2021
We totally agree with the overall vision statement. However we note that the document states, ‘The vision and outcomes framework sets out a high level of ambition for the Library Service ... in particular the likely need to reduce the cost of the service in order to make savings’. We question why the libraries, which are the heart of the system, have been identified as an area for savings.

The Vision also notes that children and young peoples' educational attainment has improved but Somerset's GCSE pass rates remain below average. There is no university and there is a net flow of 18-24 year olds out of the county.

Surely a vital aspect of library provision is to support initiatives to improve literacy and opportunities for children and young people - it is difficult to be, or remain, motivated if there is no accessible local library.

We feel that if the proposed changes were to go ahead, it would be difficult to say that the outcomes set out in the Vision would be fulfilled.

2 Overarching Equalities Impact Assessment and Equalities Assessment for Wiveliscombe

We understand this to say that for certain protected groups of people (eg, older people and children, disabled people), the proposed changes would have a significant residual impact after taking mitigations into account. Wiveliscombe has a higher than average proportion of some of these protected groups. One of the proposed mitigations, alternative building-based library services, would not be effective because of poor transport links.

The way we see this document, it repeatedly raises a lot of concerns about the impact of the proposed changes but then seems to dismiss them by proposing the Council's desired mitigations and outcomes. However it seems to us that those mitigations and outcomes do not currently adequately address those concerns.

3 Rationale

The two paragraphs of the rationale seem to be contradictory. We also note that it is acknowledged that, '....the changes proposed for Wiveliscombe are likely to have a higher impact than changes proposed for other communities'.

As we're sure you're all too aware, this documentation is extremely lengthy and detailed, so the above is our best effort as lay-people simply to highlight briefly the main points that have come to our attention.

We appreciate that we are not the only library you have to consider and would not wish to be instrumental in depriving anyone of their library resources. However, our library in Wiveliscombe is much-loved and well-used, as is evidenced by the turnout of over 100 people for the drop-in events on the 21st February.

We feel that neither of the options currently offered in the proposal would be sufficient to comply with the Council's legal duties, in particular, the Public Sector Equality Duty. We would also question as to whether closing well-established libraries would comply with the Best Value Duty, especially bearing in mind that the population is to increase due to additional housing plans particularly for young families.

Our preference is that the library should continue to be run by the council, as at present. We urge you to bear this in mind in your deliberations.

We have invited Councillor Hall to let us have dates as to when he could join us for a public meeting sometime during late March/early April so that we can enlarge on and put our views forward in more detail and hold further discussions. We also, in January, requested up-to-date information on a number of issues - active users, actual operating costs and so on - which has not yet been supplied and is in fact now overdue.

We plan to submit our detailed response to the Consultation after the public meeting and receipt of the requested information and therefore trust that we have responses to our requests regarding these as soon as possible.

The Strategic Manager, Community & Traded Services, thanked both members of the public for their questions and looked forward to discussing them at meetings with both parties next week. All public questions will receive a written response.

70 **Library Service Consultation - Agenda Item 5**

The Committee considered a report presented by the Strategic Manager, Community & Traded Services which outlined the consultation exercises currently underway regarding proposals on the delivery of the Libraries Service in Somerset.

The public consultation will run for 12 weeks to the 22nd April 2018 and the staff consultation will run until the end of March 2018.

The Committee heard that the current library service is performing well with many strengths but that in order to reduce costs further and continue to deliver a thriving, modernised service, effectively targeted to meet the needs of the population, it is necessary to review and re-design how library services are delivered. The proposals under consultation have been developed following consideration of a wide range of information and data. The proposals show that SCC aim to keep as many library buildings open as possible but that for a number of libraries community support may be required to do this.

The Committee also received a presentation which outlined where further information on the proposals and the evidence, data and impact assessments that support them, can be found online. This information is also available in paper form in libraries. The presentation showed the level of response so far to the consultation across different age ranges.

Council Members were asked for their support in encouraging community engagement and participation in the public consultation and were provided with officer contact details.

A Member commented that libraries shouldn't be closed if this can be avoided but recognised that some libraries are underused. There is a need to find ways to attract the need to attract more people to use libraries, particularly the young. It was clarified that the data presented referred to consultation responses and not to library usage. There are fluctuating trends with usage as people tend to use libraries most in childhood and later years.

It was suggested that libraries could look to develop more innovative solutions to become more commercial and self-financing. The service is looking at different ways of financing and there are some interesting ideas coming out from the consultation.

Some Members expressed concern about Parish Councils having sufficient time to raise finance through precepting. The Committee was reassured that these views are being considered and will be balanced with the need to reduce Council funding. Timescales are fluid and the Council will take the time to get this right. Following the consultation process, Parish Councils will be asked to submit an expression of interest. This is the first stage before a contractual agreement can be put in place.

Members raised the key role that libraries play in addressing social isolation and loneliness. It was confirmed that social isolation is central to the needs assessment. Outreach services can be taken into communities and it is hoped that they will be effective in addressing these issues.

It was raised that reliance on volunteer support is challenging as this can be difficult to predict or test. Some communities may not feel that volunteer support is viable.

A Member raised the effects of population and housing growth. The Committee heard that housing needs assessment and population growth has been considered and that the re-design is underpinned by a strategy that looks to the future.

It was clarified that SCC is not considering any formal outsourcing of services at this time and this does not form part of the consultation.

It was confirmed that information gathered during the consultation will be analysed and the results will be presented to the Committee at either the 19 June or 10 July 2018 meeting.

The Committee noted the report.

71 **Revenue Budget Monitoring Report Q3 2017_18** - Agenda Item 6

The Committee received a report from the Director of Finance, Legal & Governance and the Director of Children's Services which updated Members on the current Revenue Budget forecast outturn position for the 2017/18 year based on the end of November as well as detailing how the Council's resources are forecast to be used to support the delivery of budget decisions.

The Authority's forecast shows a projected net overspend of £7.741m (see Appendix A, Annex A) when compared to the Revenue Budget. This represents 2.48% of base budget. The majority of the overspend lies in the Children's Services budgets and the Committee received a report from the Director of

Children's Services on care placement sufficiency. 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 the final outturn position is much lower than this.

The predicted General Reserve position at the end of March 2018 is £7.270m and for the end of March 2019 is £11.270m.

A Member questioned when Children's Services would be able to balance its budget. In response, the Committee heard that this is a national issue caused by rising need. Every authority that is performing well in Children's Services is overspending. SCC is taking steps to address the issues but national government has continued to increase the responsibilities of local authorities without increasing funding. A challenge for Somerset is that the percentage of residential placements is much higher than for other areas. An insufficient number of foster carers means that we have to use more external residential placements, which are more costly. The cost of a foster carer placement is around a third of the cost of a residential placement. It was confirmed that both the Children & Families Scrutiny Committee and the Corporate Parenting Board are aware of this issue and that SCC is working to develop relationships with Somerset providers to try to increase the number of Somerset placements available.

The Committee heard that there has been some improvement with the recovery of aged debt. Debts are now starting to be paid and the outstanding figure is reducing.

A Member questioned the effects of the recent weather incident on the highways maintenance budget. The Committee was reassured that although the weather incident created a peak of work the budget is expected to balance out as other services, such as recycling and gardening, would not have been used so much.

The Committee noted the report.

72 **Council Performance Monitoring Report Q3 2017_18 - Agenda Item 7**

The Committee considered this report presented by the Director of Customers & Communities. The report provided Members with an update on performance across the organisation.

The report summarised that there are two red but stable segments (P3, C4) and one segment with a declining performance. However, in a verbal update the Committee were informed that a positive Ofsted inspection judgement had been received since the production of the report which meant that P3 was no

longer red. In addition, the issues causing the declining performance in P7 have now been addressed; therefore P7 is no longer declining.

50% of objectives are green, 36% are amber and 16% are red. The report was presented to Cabinet on 12 February 2018.

The Committee discussed those segments which fell under the Committee's remit. Following a question regarding the A303 between Sparkford and Ilchester, it was confirmed that SCC will be formally engaging with the Highways England consultation.

The Committee noted the report.

73 SCC Business Plan - Agenda Item 8

The Committee considered a presentation from the Executive Assistant, Policy and Research which informed Members of the SCC Business Plan.

The Business Plan will outline the priorities in achieving the Council's Vision by creating a set of strategic outcomes, as well as demonstrating partnership working. The Business Plan will be central to service and financial planning and will drive improvements across the organisation.

The Business Plan is currently being drafted and will be considered during this months' Peer Review. It is anticipated that the Business Plan will be in place around June or July and it will be refreshed annually.

Members questioned why the draft Plan was not ready in good time before the Peer Review and whether there would be sufficient time for consultation before implementation. It was confirmed that the Plan would be circulated to Members taking part in the Peer Review as soon as possible.

Members felt that the Plan should include methods of raising income. This will be included under the financial aspect of the Plan. They questioned how Members can influence the Business Plan and they highlighted the importance of the Vision. The Plan needs to translate the Vision into strategic outcomes.

The Committee noted the report.

74 Exclusion of the Press and Public - Agenda Item 9

This Item was not considered as item 10 was deferred to 24 April 2018.

75 Temporary Labour Contract Review - Item deferred until 24 April 2018 - Agenda Item 10

This Item was not considered as item 10 was deferred to 24 April 2018.

76 Scrutiny for Policies and Place Committee Work Programme - Agenda Item 11

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

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

- Draft Business Plan (24 April)
- Temporary Labour Contract Review (24 April)

It was confirmed that the Taunton Transport Strategy would be brought to the Committee upon completion of the consultation.

The Committee discussed considering income generation at a future meeting.

The Committee requested to be updated on the recommendations made regarding County Farms.

77 Any other urgent items of business - Agenda Item 12

The Committee discussed how best to enable effective and challenging Scrutiny and making changes to the room layout to enable adequate participation of non-committee Members.

(The meeting ended at 12.25 pm)

CHAIRMAN