

Minutes of a Meeting of the Scrutiny Committee - Communities held in the Luttrell Room - County Hall, Taunton TA1 4DY, on Wednesday, 11 October 2023 at 10.00 am

Present:

Cllr Gwil Wren (Chair)

Cllr Dawn Johnson (Vice-Chair)

Cllr Simon Coles

Cllr Andy Dingwall

Cllr Edric Hobbs

Cllr Hazel Prior-Sankey

Cllr Richard Wilkins

Cllr Dawn Denton

Cllr Susannah Hart

Cllr Kathy Pearce

Cllr Wes Read

Members present remotely:

Cllr Marcus Kravis

Cllr Gill Slocombe

Cllr Sarah Wakefield

Cllr Ros Wyke

Cllr Heather Shearer

Cllr Fran Smith

Cllr Rosemary Woods

Cllr Lance Dudderidge

9 Apologies for Absence - Agenda Item 1

Apologies were received from Cllr Pauline Ham (Cllr Richard Wilkins as sub) and Cllr Andy Kendell.

10 Minutes from the Previous Meeting - Agenda Item 2

Resolved

The minutes from the previous meeting held on 9th August 2023 were confirmed as a correct record.

11 Declarations of Interest - Agenda Item 3

Cllr Hazel Prior-Sankey declared a personal interest in Item 5: CCTV Service update because of her husband's role as a street pastor in Taunton.

12 Public Question Time - Agenda Item 4

There were no members of public in attendance or registered to speak.

13 CCTV Service update - Agenda Item 5

The Chair welcomed Ryan Kelly, CCTV Manager for Somerset Council to give a presentation to the committee, which highlighted the following key points: -

The service is incredibly busy, with the team working 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

This is an income generating service.

The service is run from a control hub in Bridgwater House, all members of the committee are invited to visit the hub.

The CCTV Service has covered SSDC, SW&T and SDC areas for some time, and now includes the MDC area.

Following a review, the annual fee charged to the Avon and Somerset Police has been doubled to 20k for the year 23/24.

The Chair thanked the CCTV Manager for a very interesting and informative presentation and the following comments and questions were received and discussed with members: -

Regarding monitoring of crime hotspots, assuming these hotspots change over time, how easy is it to move equipment to continue to monitor the areas more likely to be affected by criminal activity?

Several members expressed an interest in a site visit to the CCTV control hub in Bridgwater House. The committee clerk would be in touch with members to organise

this.

What are the statutory duties of the CCTV service? The CCTV Manager advised that under the Criminal Justice Act 2003 the statutory duties of a local authority are to monitor the most vulnerable hotspot areas.

Is there any more than can be done to support retail businesses with shoplifting? The CCTV Manager advised that the team are building strong relationships with retail businesses, through Business Link, and the police to tackle shoplifting in Somerset. Most retail premises in Somerset are covered by the Somerset Council CCTV Network, and the service also works with businesses to mitigate shoplifting in other ways, such as advice around shop layouts and positioning of high value goods. He added that the CCTV Service is an integral link between retail businesses and the Police. Whilst Police response times can be frustrating, the footage obtained by Somerset Council CCTV network is a key piece of evidence.

How much does the CCTV Service cost Somerset Council per year? The CCTV Manager advised that the most recent annual cost for the service was 182k, and that this is usually financed by external contributions (from parish and town councils, police etc...) and other sources of income and funding. The 182k figure does not include payroll, and this detail can be provided to the committee on request.

How can members obtain a breakdown of the locations of all 233 cameras in operation in Somerset?

Why does Yeovil only have 29 cameras in operation currently? The CCTV Manager advised that the coverage in Yeovil is currently under review, and as well as equipment upgrades the service are working with Yeovil Town Council to increase the number of cameras in operation in Yeovil.

On the pie charts (slides 9,10 & 11) what does the section 'review' mean? These are incidents that are currently under investigation.

On the pie charts (slides 9, 10 & 11) what does the section 'others' mean? These are incidents that do not fall under any of the other types of crime on the pie charts sections.

Regarding CCTV coverage in Shepton Mallet and Frome, is the CCTV network going to be expanding in these areas? The CCTV Manager advised that it is a priority to upgrade the CCTV network in Shepton Mallet and Frome by late spring 2024.

Regarding the higher prevalence of alcohol related ASB incidents in Bridgwater at

night, what are the key issues and does the nighttime economy contribute towards the cost of the CCTV network? The CCTV Manager advised that this is currently a police priority, the CCTV Service is working with the police, and that some establishments do contribute towards the cost of the Somerset Council CCTV network in Bridgwater.

Regarding the footage obtained, who has access to it, and how long is it kept by Somerset Council? The CCTV Manager advised that the retention policy is 28 days, unless it is requested. If it is requested, it is then kept in a secure vault for 6 months.

Can farmers sign up to Business Link? The CCTV advised that some farms could sign up to Business Link, but this may be tricky for farms in the most remote rural areas.

Regarding the need for the team to maintain the 24/7/365-day monitoring demands, are there any staff pressures in the CCTV Service team currently? The CCTV Manager reassured members that there are currently no known issues with recruitment or retention of the staff in the CCTV service.

The Chair once again thanked the CCTV Manager for attending and taking questions from the committee. He asked that Democratic Services arrange a site visit to the CCTV Control Hub for all those members who had shown an interest in doing so.

Resolved

The Scrutiny Committee – Communities noted the CCTV Service update report.

14 Homefinder Somerset - verbal update and discussion - Agenda Item 6

The Chair welcomed Chris Brown, Service Director Housing at Somerset Council to give a briefing to members, following on from several questions that had been raised at the recent Homefinder member training sessions held on 28th September and 4th October 2023.

He highlighted the following key points to the Scrutiny Committee – Communities: -

There are currently 11,000 customers registered on Homefinder Somerset, of those 2,200 are housed.

Homefinder operates as a choice-based lettings system of social housing (not private) and the bidding process is easy for customers. There can be up to 170 bids for a property.

We need to focus on how we maximise supply.

Members are interested in lettings policy concerning local connection vs need.

Members would like to see more democratic representation on the Homefinder board.

The following comments and questions were received and discussed with members:

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Regarding property succession, is it mandatory to remove a tenant when the main tenant passes away or is there a degree of discretion here? The Service Manager advised that different landlords have their own policies on this. In some instances, the landlord will offer alternative accommodation to the remaining tenant to make best of housing stock.

One member asked about succession regarding a specific case of a mother and a vulnerable adult son, and the Service Manager advised that he provide a written response to the member directly.

Regarding rent arrears, is this an issue for social housing landlords currently? The Service Manager advised that the collection rate for Homefinder customers is currently 98.4% which is excellent. There are a team of specialist officers that provide money and debt advice and support to the small minority of Homefinder customers experiencing hardship.

How do we support customers who cannot use the bidding system themselves i.e. the elderly, vulnerable adults, or simply those customers with no internet access?

Are we as councillors able to do this on their behalf? The Service Manger advised that there is a team of five senior caseworkers that do this work.

A non-committee member online agreed with the points that had been raised at the Homefinder member training sessions regarding local connection vs need and the need for greater political representation on the Homefinder Board.

The Chair thanked Service Manager for the update and discussion, concluding that Homefinder policy will be under review as the new Somerset Council Local Plan develops over the coming years.

Resolved

The Scrutiny Committee – Communities noted the Homefinder update.

15 Budget monitoring update - Community Services - Agenda Item 7

The Chair welcomed Christian Evans, Strategic Manager Finance and Business Partnering and Kerry Prisco, Management Accounting and Reporting Lead to give the Scrutiny Committee – Communities an update on the Community Services budget position, at the request of the Executive committee.

The Strategic Manager Finance and Business Partnering talked members through the key findings for the general fund, concluding that the majority of overspend is in Adults and Childrens services, and that there are no major concerns regarding the Community Services budget position.

The Management Accounting and Reporting Lead then presented the Council's Housing Revenue Account (HRA) to members, with the following key points highlighted to the committee: -

This is about how the Council manages its own housing stock.

The HRA is a ring fenced, self-financing account since April 2012

One off Payment to the Govt of £132.5m (£85.2m TDBC and £47.3m SDC)

A 30-Year Business Plan is required

There are financial benefits because all of the rental income is retained.

The borrowing cap was removed in Oct 2018 giving more flexibility to borrow for new builds.

The Public Works Loan Board (PWLB) discount rate is now 0.6%, since 15 June 2023.

The Councils own housing stock is heavily regulated in terms of:

Compliance – providing a decent standard of homes

Rent Standard – restricting rent increases

Cross subsidy

She talked members through the key risks, future issues and opportunities of the Housing Revenue Account, and the following comments and questions were received and discussed with members: -

Regarding the PWLB interest rate 0.6%, is this for new or existing loans? The Management Accounting and Accounting Lead advised that this is for new borrowing.

Regarding the risks around homelessness and the rising costs of temporary housing, can more money be spent on self-catering multi occupancy units? The Service Manager Housing advised that there are ongoing discussions regarding options for this including looking at models such as the Rochester Road Modular Scheme and other bespoke homes models.

Regarding Right to Buy Receipts, how much of this is retained by the Council? - The Management Accounting and Accounting Lead advised that the breakdown of money from Right to Buy Receipts is as follows:

14% Treasury Contribution

2% Transaction fee

48% one for one

36% Un adjustable allowable debt

A member raised a specific case where residents were struggling with heavy fire doors that had been installed in a Somerset Council maintained communal housing premises, and the Service Manager Housing advised that work was being undertaken to electrify the fire doors in that particular premises.

A non-committee member online asked if the Council is working with Community Land Trusts regarding buying land for new homes and he was advised that it is.

Regarding Right to Buy Receipts, what happens if these are not spent? The Management Accounting and Reporting Lead advised that these become payable to The Treasury, but that this has not happened before.

A member asked that all presentations be shared with the committee in advance.

The Chair thanked all three of the officers for the update.

Resolved

The Scrutiny Committee – Communities noted the Community Services Budget Monitoring Update report.

16 Scrutiny Committee - Communities' work programme - Agenda Item 8

The Chair asked members to consider and comment on the Scrutiny Committee – Communities forward work programme 2023/2024. There were no comments or questions received from members.

(The meeting ended at 12.30 pm)

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CHAIR