

Report from the Council's Five Scrutiny Committees

Chairs of Scrutiny Committees: Councillor Gill Slocombe, Councillor Gwil Wren, Councillor Martin Dimery, Councillor Leigh Redman, Councillor Bob Filmer

Lead Officer: Scott Wooldridge, Head of Governance and Democratic Services

Author: Jamie Jackson, Scrutiny Manager

Contact Details: Jamie.jackson@somerset.gov.uk

1. Summary

1.1. The Scrutiny Committees are required by the Constitution to provide Full Council with a summary progress report and outcomes of scrutiny. This report covers meetings since December 2023

1.2. Members of the Council are reminded that:

- all Members have been invited to attend meetings of the three Scrutiny Committees and to contribute freely on any agenda item;
- any Member could propose a topic for inclusion on the Scrutiny Work Programme.

any Member can be asked by the Committee to contribute information and evidence and to participate in specific scrutiny reviews.

2. Background

2.1. The 5 Scrutiny Committees met 8 times over the period of 3rd December 2023 to 3rd February 2024, plus an additional informal member's workshop on the MTFP.

2.2. Scrutiny – Adults and Health

Scrutiny – Adults and Health met once over the stated period.

Meeting 07 December 2023

Crime and Disorder Overview Report

The committee received a presentation which covered the approach to community safety, the public health approach to violence, and an overview of

statistics and activities around violent and serious crime. They discussed the details of the Safer Somerset Partnership and the wide-ranging organisations involved in work around this, as well as breaking down the statistics and how they compared to other areas in the country.

Adult Social Care Budget Monitoring Month 5

The committee received a presentation on the current budgetary position, a breakdown of spending, in-year mitigations and the Medium-Term Financial Plan. The committee questioned the service on whether the checks and balances for provision of care were creating an additional cost and burden, and whether the increased reliance on VCSE would create pressures elsewhere in the system. Committee members were invited to attend an Enhanced Peer Forum to better understand the process.

Adult Social Care Transformation Programme

The committee received a presentation on the methods of transformation, progress, savings so far, and the projected savings. A discussion followed on the work being done with hospital discharges and the impact of the financial emergency on the transformation programme. It was agreed that there would be a quarterly update on the progress of the transformation programme.

Stroke Service - Results of Consultation

The committee received a report on the stroke service proposal and consultation process. This was an area that had received public interest, with both PQTs on this day relating to this topic, and an impassioned debate was had on the details of the proposal, the consultation, and the decision-making process.

At the conclusion of this discussion, the committee resolved it was not the best proposal for the people of Somerset, and the committee should write to the Executive to inform them. Further correspondence with the ICB on this topic followed over December and January as they moved towards making a decision at the end of January.

This is a topic that received public engagement from a local community group and another resident at the meeting.

2.3. Scrutiny – Children and Families

Scrutiny – Children and Families met twice over the stated period.

Meeting 12 December 2023

Work Programme

It was agreed that a key area of focus of this Scrutiny Committee would be the

budget and the implications of the financial pressures in Children's Services.

2023/24 Children's Services - Budget Monitoring

The committee received a presentation on budget monitoring, which focused on Home to School transport (mainstream and SEN), the Dedicated Schools Grant, and in particular the High Needs forecast deficit position. A discussion followed around the trends in numbers of residential and unregistered placements, the difference between statutory and non-statutory spending for Home to School transport and concern about the Dedicated Schools Grant deficit and the statutory override function. There was also a discussion around the Delivering Better Value programme, but it is too early to see the difference made by this programme in the figures.

Education, Health and Care Assessment and Plan 2022-2023 - Progress update

The committee received a report and presentation on Education Health and Care Assessment and Plans. It detailed statistics on the number of assessments requested, carried out, and the number of plans issued and refused as a result of these assessments. It highlighted the pressure the service is facing alongside the difficulties meeting statutory timescales with regard to annual reviews, particularly as the number of EHCPs is increasing. It explained the changes and improvements in the service to address these pressures.

A discussion around SEND and EHCPs followed. The chair thanked officers for the report and noted the update and the range of activities underway to support improvements.

Connect Somerset

The committee received a presentation on Connect Somerset, an approach to working together across public, voluntary, faith and community sectors to improve the lives of families and residents and a way of delivering early help in the community, connecting / building on existing networks with the aim of more efficient public sector delivery model. A discussion followed around how the model was going to be spread across the county and the geographic boundaries, how to keep people informed and updated, and whether it would create additional pressures on schools. The model focuses on relationship building and working with what support is already available, so it would not create additional pressures on schools. The committee thanked officers for the presentation and noted the update.

Children's Services Transformation Priorities 2023 - 2026

Following a discussion of the priorities at the previous meeting, the chair invited volunteers to focus on each of the priorities in order to enable better understanding.

2.4. Meeting 10 January 2024

At this meeting there were changes to the makeup of the committee, with Cllr Pauline Ham and Cllr Marcus Kravis appointed to replace Cllr Caroline Ellis and Cllr Jenny Kenton. Co-opted Member Mrs Eileen Tipper also stood down from her role.

Sufficiency Strategy for Children Looked After and Care Leavers

The committee received a presentation on the Sufficiency Strategy, explaining that sufficiency means ensuring there are enough high-quality homes for children in care and care leavers. There were several key areas, including increasing in-house provision for the most complex needs, supporting children at risk of going into care to stay at home, increasing the number of homes for children, improving choice and matching homes to children, and reducing cost.

The committee discussed: the need to find the right quality home for children and young people; one of the key areas is around preventing children and young people from coming into care in first instance; foster care recruitment, which is a national as well as a Somerset challenge; highlighted the increase in the number of children with complex needs; housing issues and work with providers; fostering data to provided. The committee thanked the officers and noted the report.

2023/24 Children's Services - Budget Monitoring

The committee received a presentation on the Children's Services Month 7 Budget Monitoring Position.

The committee highlighted the High Needs Deficit and the concern around this debt currently being underwritten by the government, but that is planned to end in 2026. They discussed the national context and the current plans in place to reduce this deficit. The Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) Deficit Management Plan will be coming to this Scrutiny Committee in March.

Update on Short Break Provision (Respite)

The committee received a presentation which outlined short break provision, the statutory guidance around it, the resources, gaps, and opportunities, and the plans for the future. They explained the recent 'sprint' identifying issues in the service and that an action plan was being developed in January to redesign the process of accessing the provision. A discussion followed on the cost implications, the involvement of micro-providers, and the need to have a joined-up working. It was agreed that the action plan would be shared with the committee and an update provided in May.

Education Place Planning

The committee received a presentation on Education Place Planning, which provided an overview of statutory duties, the Somerset context, projection

modelling, education growth and challenges, local first approach, developer contributions, extended / expanded childcare offer and expansion of wrap around provision. A discussion followed around the data and projections, ensuring education gets the funding it needs, and the various challenges in providing wrap around care. The committee noted the update.

2.5. Scrutiny Committee – Climate and Place

Scrutiny Committee – Climate and Place met once over the stated period.

Meeting 17 January 2024

Work Programme

The committee received the Action Tracker, but due to a publishing error did not receive the Scrutiny Climate and Place Forward Plan report. Members reviewed the Action tracker and there was a brief discussion about the way in which outcomes are reported back to the committee. Members were advised that the Forward Plan report would be presented at the next meeting.

Economy, Employment, and Planning: Level 2 Devolution Deal Position Statement

The committee received an update report on the Level 2 Devolution Deal following the 2023 Autumn Statement Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities announcement on a change in the pace of devolution to accelerate the level 2 deals, which presents an opportunity for Somerset to start a national devolution journey. A brief discussion followed, and members noted the update.

Somerset Rivers Authority – Draft Strategy and Flood Action Plan 2024-2034

The committee received a presentation to accompany the draft Strategy and Flood Action Plan 24-34, the draft SRA Memorandum of Understanding and Constitution, and the draft of the SRA Funding Executive Key decision due to be considered by the Executive on 6th March 2024. Members asked about the role of the SRA, partnership working, specific schemes and project milestones, and questioned exactly how the SRA is funded. It was concluded that a summary of how the SRA is funded would be shared with the committee after the meeting, and the officer thanked the committee for the discussion and feedback.

Waste Services: Flex Collect Update

The committee received an update report on the Flexible plastics trial that was delivered to 3600 properties around Frome during May 2023. The trial included communications, engagement with residents and provided participants with a blue, transparent bags to present flexible plastics alongside the existing recycling

service. The trial yielded impressive results and The Council has in-principal agreement to extend the trial to 20,000 properties in the East of the County from spring/summer 2024. Members sought clarity on the types of materials included in the trial, and there was a request for further information regarding the ways in which those materials are processed and repurposed by the end user. Members noted the update.

2.6. Scrutiny Committee – Communities

Scrutiny Committee – Communities met once over the stated period.

Meeting 13 December 2023

Community Services Budget Monitoring Update

The committee received a presentation on the current budget position, the overall council budget, and the particular challenges of bringing the previous councils into a unitary budget. A discussion followed including how to deal with budget anomalies, how to prepare for the following year's budget with the projected figures, the impact of the financial control boards and how that can be measured, concerns about the pressure on town and parish councils, and whether councillors could be informed of specific areas of savings in order to keep working with communities. The committee thanked the officers for the report and noted it.

Glastonbury Festival Scrutiny Report

The committee received a report that covered the statutory functions provided by the council for Glastonbury Festival: Licensing, Food Safety, Structural Safety, Nuisance Prevention. Public Health, Civil Contingencies, Highways and Environmental Health are also involved. The recommendations were for continuous improvement and there were two particular areas: developing further measures to address noise, and crowd distribution and communication for crowd flows. A discussion followed around the cost to the council, the fees and business rates recouped from the festival, noise pollution, and the issue of external campsites and their licensing. The chair requested further updates on the engagement with Glastonbury Festival.

This was an item that garnered public interest and had two public questions submitted around the impact to the local community of Glastonbury Festival.

2023 Rough Sleeping Initiative Overview

The committee received a presentation that provided statistics and context around rough sleeping and detailed the Prevention approach and how the new Housing and Rough Sleeping strategy was being developed. A discussion followed, including officers clarifying and detailing specific areas of the policy and approach to rough sleeping, and how the team was working now that it was

under a unitary authority.

2023-24 HRA Revenue and Capital Budget Monitoring Report - Month 6 (Qtr2)

The committee received a report and presentation detailing the forecast overspend and how it will be financed. A discussion followed on the impact of the pandemic, the increase in repairs, and the HRA funding being subject to the same spending board requirement as the rest of the council.

2.7. Scrutiny Committee – Corporate and Resources

The committee met 3 times over the stated period, as well as an additional informal workshop on the budget and MTFP that members of all Scrutiny Committees were invited to.

Meeting 5 December 2023

2023/24 Budget Monitoring Report - Month 6 - End of September 2023

The committee received a report and presentation which went into detail on the current position and the emergency actions put in place. A discussion followed where more details were requested on membership of the control board, breaking down the particular pressures in Adults and Childrens social care, how the control boards would impact services devolved to town and parish councils, the progress of the capitalisation programme with central government, funding from Connecting Devon and Somerset, additional council tax on second homes, and outstanding uncollected council tax debts.

2023/24 General Fund Capital Budget Monitoring Report - Month 6 - End of September 2023

The committee received the report and presentation. During the discussion, the impact on the construction industry and highways was considered, as well as the difficulty predicting capital spend and if there could be quarterly breakdowns of this spending, the deliverability of the Octagon Project and the options available to the Octagon board with the DCMS funding, the ongoing engagement with the government, which capital projects were going to be stopped or delayed, and the rules around changes to capital projects.

2023/24 Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Revenue and Capital Budget Monitoring as at Quarter 2 (30 September 2023)

The committee received a report and presentation. During the discussion, committee members identified the increase in cost pressures for void properties and responsive repairs, and discussed the details of the leaving well scheme, the impact of the pay award being larger than budget, the capital spend projections for future years, £5m awarded for the North Taunton Woolaway Project, a request

for fire safety works, reserves remaining high and how general reserves would be used to manage the current overspend, and the local rent policy of a rent cap at 7%.

2024/25 General Fund Revenue Budget and Capital Programme update

The committee received the report and presentation that detailed the approach to DLUHC and the legal requirements of engaging with the business sector. It was estimated that £36 million of earmarked reserves could be freed up, and an update would be provided at a later date, as well as news on the finance settlement from Government. Ongoing work around the budget gap for 24/25 had seen it reduce from £100m to £87m. The committee requested clarity over the previous reserves and which reserves were being reduced to balance the budget, and the risk analysis of this process was detailed. The development of budget options was ranked based on priority and deliverability, and there is a contingency of approximately 2% of budget. Savings and staffing cost profiles would continue into next year, incorporating existing staffing restructures. There remained a complex picture, and residents of Somerset would be consulted and increased engagement as the situation develops.

Framework for Asset and/or Service Devolution

The committee received a report on the framework for devolution. During the discussion, comments were raised around priority levels and effective communication with Town and Parish Councils, and there was a request for more information on rationale, priority, and timescales for each asset. Regular engagement with town and parish councils is a key part of the process, but concerns were raised that there wouldn't be enough provision for towns and parishes who couldn't take services on, and the importance of equity of provision was highlighted as an area that needed to be monitored. Particular issues around highways and flooding were raised, with a detailed response to come following the meeting. Members also highlighted the risks around devolution with Parish and Town councils potentially being unprepared and unsupported, and whether assets could be returned if they were no longer viable. There is ongoing work with SALC to support the sector in taking on assets and services and advice given to parishes on setting their precept. Better communication was requested, and members were assured they would still be consulted on with regard to asset and devolution deals.

2.8. Meeting 4 January 2024

Financial Budget Update Month 7

The committee received a report which highlighted the still outstanding overspend for Children and Adult Services and the areas where the spend was reducing, leading to a reduction in the overall budget gap. It detailed the actions taken so far to address the budget position. During the discussion, the members

made comments on better communication with the public on the overspend and the measures being taken, as well as a request to better investigate and track income streams, comments on the effectiveness of panels in scrutinising costs within Adults and Childrens placements, the ownership of any homes service users were placed in, inflation affecting care home placement costs and the large impact that was having on the overspend, a request for more reporting on Housing and Homelessness, and a concern about a lack of explanation around removal of Reserves lines.

The committee requested further training on budget areas and clarification in relation to fees and charges, and noted the recommendations going forward to the Executive Committee.

Somerset Council Reserves Amalgamation

The committee received a breakdown of the Reserves, with detail on reserves transferred from districts and County on vesting day, what the earmarked funds were and the breakdowns of those funds. The committee was assured there would be more clarity on these funds in the future, and requested an in depth analysis on reserves, particularly those ring-fenced for certain projects, and more information provided on deleted lines of reserves and the services to be transferred to Town and Parish councils and the resulting impacts on any precepts set by those councils.

Business System for Finance Implementation Review

The committee received an update on the implementation of MS Dynamics and plans for future development. Thus far the implementation has been delivered on time and under budget. The members requested future updates to include tracking liabilities such as S106 monies or CIL payments, and integration and innovation benefits including Power BI, Copilot, and automation. It was noted that the second phase (HR and Payroll) was on hold due to the financial emergency.

Property Maintenance and Compliance Report

The committee received a presentation on Building Maintenance and Compliance, and how they were currently managed by the legacy Facilities Management/Property Teams responsible for the respective areas, who are working together to align processes and transfer systems to ensure consistent compliance and reporting. Members requested reporting on EV, DDA accessibility, and energy efficiency/performance of building owned by Somerset Council. The committee noted that certain teams worked with other partners and contractors, and that there would be changes to structures and resources and some of these would be managed in-house once a maintenance programme had been carried out to collate the necessary data. This process would be gradual and there are vacancies within teams. The committee looked forward to an update on these plans.

Surplus Assets Review

The committee received a report on the progress of surplus assets, confirming the approval of the Policy for Disposal of Assets. The proposed disposals were subject to further consultation with councillors and parish/town councils. The estimated values of capital receipts potentially deliverable before 31 March 2025 was noted, with the target for disposals of £15-20m, feeding into the MTFP. There is an Asset Management Group undertaking the review of other land and property assets. The committee noted that there are a number of issues to take into account, including planning/phosphates, use of buildings and land parcels. It also noted the needed resources and vacant posts.

Commercial Asset and Realisation Task and Finish Group Report

The committee received a report on the work of the Task and Finish Group, which included both Councillors and Officers, and scrutinised the asset portfolio, the factors driving disposal value, and the work being undertaken to prepare for sale.

The committee recommended to the Executive Committee that they support the acquisition of specialised external advisors to progress sales, and recommended a comprehensive Disposal Strategy to clarify the specific aims and leeway for deferring certain proposals.

2.9. Informal Members Workshop – MTFP – 31 January 2024

Members of all Scrutiny Committees and Executive Lead Members were invited to attend this informal workshop.

This workshop examined the budget proposals by each directorate in detail, in order to develop key lines of enquiry ahead of the Corporate and Resources Scrutiny on 2nd February 2024. Areas that were highlighted in this workshop were:

- The underlying assumptions of the budget while awaiting for DLUHC approval
- The impact of devolution on parish and town councils and what support they may need
- For Communities, the impact of cessation of CCTV on local community safety and whether asset devolution would impact the capitalisation programme
- For Adult Services, the impact of proposed cuts on service users and additional pressure on the voluntary sector and whether cuts would create additional costs in other areas
- For Children, Families and Education, the impact on service users of the proposed savings and whether they would be deliverable, and the increasing pressures in SEND
- For Climate and Place, the impact of proposed closures of recycling

centres on local communities and the environment, the impact of proposed savings in highway maintenance, and safety concerns around the remove of school crossing guard funding, and whether proposed cuts to a policy post would lead to reduced funding in future

- For Resources and Corporate Services, clarification was sought on the detail of several pressures and what mitigations are in place
- For Strategy, Workforce and Localities, the importance of the current democratic structure (in particular, Scrutiny Committees) for democracy, the cost of LCNs and whether that could be reduced, and whether there should be changes to SRAs
- For Capitalisation Investment Programme, clarification was sought on funding sources for decarbonisation projects

2.10. Meeting 2 February 2024

Following the workshop, this meeting was an opportunity for councillors to scrutinise and give feedback on the budget proposals for 2024/25 in a public meeting. It followed the same format as the workshop.

During the meeting, many of the points raised in the workshop were reiterated and expanded upon. In addition to this, points were raised around:

- The adequacy of general reserves and earmarked reserves in 2024/25 and beyond
- The process for increasing council tax once a Section 114 is issued
- How integral the transformation programme is to the setting of the budget for 2024/25
- For Communities, updates on the progress and timeline of devolution for assets in Yeovil, as well as progression on the work around locking of public parks and public toilets, and savings proposals relating to Bridgwater Carnival
- For Adult Services, detail was requested on ongoing work with microproviders and the community sector, the impact of proposed savings on mental health services, and possible alternatives to learning disabilities employment work currently commissioned with Discovery. Councillors also looked at the My Life, My Future Programme and the various funding sources for Adult Social Care
- For Children's, Families, and Education, concerns were raised around capacity on the team with ongoing high demand for SEND support and EHCPs, the combined impact of cuts within the service, the need for alternative funding, and whether the recent "Good" OFSTED rating would be put at risk. Detail was also requested on the proposals relating to children looked after and the level of confidence in recruiting more foster carers to support that work.
- For Climate and Place, the issue of recycling centres was a key issue, as

well as highway maintenance and school crossing guards, and more detail was requested on the cost pressures and the impact of proposals around increasing planning fees and the risk of digital exclusion for proposal around garden waste communications. Concerns were also raised around the poor quality of bus services and the impact this would have on funding.

- No comments were raised around Corporate and Resources proposals
- For Strategy, Workforce, and Localities, proposed reductions in scrutiny committees and the combining of Audit with Constitution and Governance were a concern, as well as why there were no savings proposals relating to support costs for Local Community Networks. Concerns were also raised around the removal of funding for the Pathway to Employment scheme
- For the HRA proposals, members requested more detail on the pressures in the HRA budget
- For the Capital Budget, members questioned funding specific to Section 106, Community Infrastructure Levies, as well as funding for Rights of Way, and requested further monitoring of these

Following the debate, a number of recommendations were resolved to go to Executive. Full detail on this can be found in the Scrutiny report to the Executive meeting on 7 February:

- For the overall budget, 3 recommendations were made
- For Communities services, 4 recommendations were made
- For Adults Services, 1 recommendation was made regarding 6 budget proposals
- For Children's Services, 3 recommendations were made
- For Climate and Place, 5 recommendations were made
- For Strategy, Workforce, and Localities, 6 recommendations were made

3. Consultations undertaken

- 3.1.** The Committees invite and welcome all councillors, the press and public to attend and contribute to its meetings.

4. Implications

- 4.1.** The Committees consider carefully and often ask for further information about the implications as outlined in the reports considered at its meetings.

For further details of the reports considered by the Committees, please contact the author of this report.

5. Background papers

- 5.1.** Further information about the five Scrutiny Committees including dates of meetings and agendas and reports from previous meetings, are available via the Council's website.

Note For sight of individual background papers please contact the report author