

Somerset County Council

Corporate and Resources Scrutiny Committee

25 April 2024

Report of the Scrutiny Review at Somerset Council

Lead Members: Cllr Dimery, Cllr Filmer, Cllr Redman, Cllr Slocombe, Cllr Wren

Division and Local Member: N/A

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1. Summary

- 1.1 In February 2023 Somerset County Council considered and agreed a series of recommendations proposed by a cross-party, cross-scrutiny Task and Finish Group. The recommendations followed an intense piece of work in December 2022 and January 2023, following a tasking to work with the County Council's then 4 Scrutiny Committees to establish views, suggestions and ultimately formal recommendations on how the scrutiny function should operate at Somerset Council post Vesting Day.
- 1.2 One of the 7 recommendations set out that the 5 scrutiny chairs within the Somerset Council structure would conduct a review of the scrutiny function within 12 months of Vesting Day and report back to scrutiny and Full Council. This report documents the first stage of that process.
- 1.3 The 5 scrutiny chairs convened with the scrutiny manager on several occasions in February and March 2024 and have formulated 8 recommendations for the committee to consider before a further report is presented to Full Council in May 2024.

2. Recommendations

2.1 The Committee is asked to consider and comment on the following recommendations from the Scrutiny Chairs:-

- (1) The current structure of 5 scrutiny committees to remain in place, with a further scrutiny review to be conducted by the scrutiny chairs in late 2024/early 2025 following any potential service restructure.**
- (2) The scrutiny manager is tasked with preparing a revised and improved scrutiny report template, which enables clearer and more concise presentation of reports, a standard consistency of**

reports across all 5 scrutiny committees, a clearer link between committee recommendations onto the Executive/Executive Member(s) and ensuring service areas clearly demonstrate where scrutiny is able to add value.

- (3) That all 5 scrutiny committees adopt a consistent approach to dealing with information only items, in order that agendas are kept clear for items with specific recommendations and the opportunity for the committees to add value.**
- (4) To bolster the links between all 5 scrutiny committees and the Executive by ensuring clear communication between the parties and encourage increased opportunities for committee chairs to update the Executive on areas of focus and present any recommendations/proposals the committee have agreed. Also for the Democratic Services team to establish a central record of all formal scrutiny recommendations and the responses to them.**
- (5) The scrutiny manager to liaise with the 5 Group Leaders in advance of the AGM Council meeting (My 2024) in order to provide detailed attendance information on each of the Committee's membership, to ensure committee membership reflects maximum engagement and consistency.**
- (6) The scrutiny manager to liaise with the 5 Group Leaders to ensure a consistent, timely and wherever possible consistent approach to scrutiny substitutes.**
- (7) To continue with the monthly meetings of the 5 Scrutiny Chairs, Vice Chairs and scrutiny manager.**
- (8) To support the continuation of a dedicated scrutiny resource from the Democratic Services team as per para 3.5, to allow for more effective and efficient scrutiny and increase scrutiny opportunities, whilst ensuring resilience within the officer cohort.**

3. Background

3.1 Scrutiny Review

At the first meeting of the scrutiny review the Chairs agreed to work by consensus and not appoint an overall review chair. Following a detailed discussion it was also agreed that this was an appropriate time to conduct a light-touch review with the on-going uncertainty facing the Council and the medium term prospect of service re-alignment. The Chairs also agreed that they have found the regular meetings with the Vice Chairs and scrutiny manager of considerable benefit and wish for these to continue.

- 3.2 The first review meeting concluded that the cross-party, cross-scrutiny reaction and debate to the initial budget saving proposal of reducing the scrutiny committees from 5 to 3, demonstrated that the current scrutiny structure was appropriate and working well and should remain as is until the next review is conducted.
- 3.3 At the group's second meeting, there was discussion about committee engagement and several of the chairs reflected that there was at least 1 member on each of their committees whose attendance or engagement at the meetings was not sufficiently strong or consistent. The discussion also reflected that there has been an inconsistent and sometimes ad hoc approach to substitutes, which the Chairs were keen to address in discussions with the Group Leaders and for the scrutiny manager to explore the possible feasibility of named substitutes.
- 3.4 The group's third meeting provided them with the opportunity to reflect on agendas and reports. There was a consensus that with meetings having been on an 8-week cycle (likely to move to a 6-week cycle during 24/25) that formal committee time was too valuable to consider only the most critical information reports. An approach to dealing with information items was suggested by a scrutiny chair, which involves reports being circulated between formal meetings and then reflected on the next formal agenda for any specific member comments, was agreed as a best practice for all of the scrutiny committees to adopt.

This meeting also included a discussion about the perception that scrutiny can sometimes feel like a 'rubber stamping' exercise for officers and that the chairs and wider committee were keen for the purpose of all reports coming to scrutiny to be clearly identifiable and also to set exactly where they would like scrutiny to add value and engage in one of their core functions of policy development. It was agreed this could be better achieved by a revised report template that clearly highlighted this information and made the process easier for both the committee and presenters.

3.5 As part of the review discussions the scrutiny Chairs wished to have their appreciation noted of the democratic services support they receive. There was consensus that a consistent scrutiny staffing allocation was proving hugely beneficial, however the group requested that even with acknowledging the current financial climate a full complement of the scrutiny resource, agreed by Council in February 2023, would only improve the work of the committees further. The previously agreed dedicated scrutiny staffing resource was to consist of a minimum of 1 x Service Manager, 1 x Governance Specialist/Team Leader, 2 x Committee clerks and 2 x Scrutiny Researchers. This would allow for much more effective and efficient scrutiny and greatly increase scrutiny opportunities, whilst ensuring resilience within the officer cohort.

4. Implications

4.1 Legal & Risk:

This report complies with all legal requirements. The only risk to the Council would result from the Council failing to fulfil its legal obligations.

4.2 Financial, equalities, sustainability and community safety implications:

There are no direct equalities implications arising from any of the proposals in this report. There are also no anticipated direct sustainability or community safety implications associated with the proposals in this report.

Recommendation 8 has a financial implication when considered alongside the Council's current budgetary position and Democratic Services Team staffing levels.

5. Background Papers

5.1 Somerset Council's Constitution

Report of the Scrutiny at Somerset Council Task and Finish Group 20th Jan
2023

Local Government Acts 1972 and 2000