

Minutes of a Meeting of the Scrutiny Committee - Communities held in the John Meikle Room, The Deane House, Belvedere Road, Taunton TA1 1HE, on Thursday, 13 June 2024 at 10.00 am

Present:

Cllr Gwil Wren (Chair)

Cllr Dawn Johnson (Vice-Chair)

Cllr Andy Dingwall

Cllr Pauline Ham

Cllr Andy Kendall

Cllr Wes Read

Cllr Sue Osborne

Cllr Lance Duddridge

Cllr Edric Hobbs

Cllr Kathy Pearce

Cllr Martin Lovell

Cllr Tony Robbins

In attendance:

Cllr Liz Leyshon

Other Members present remotely:

Cllr Theo Butt Philip

Cllr Marcus Kravis

Cllr Andy Soughton

Cllr Caroline Ellis

Cllr Frances Nicholson

Cllr David Woan

45 Apologies for Absence - Agenda Item 1

Apologies were received from Cllr Simon Coles, with Cllr Martin Lovell as substitute, Cllr Hazel Prior-Sankey with Cllr Tony Robbins as substitute, and Cllr Susannah Hart with Cllr Sue Osborne as substitute. Apologies were also received from Cllr Dawn Denton.

46 Minutes from the Previous Meeting - Agenda Item 2

Resolved that the minutes of the Scrutiny Committee – Communities held on 10

April 2024 be confirmed as a correct record.

47 Declarations of Interest - Agenda Item 3

There were no new declarations of interest.

48 Public Question Time - Agenda Item 4

No public questions were submitted.

49 Work Programme - Agenda Item 5

A query was raised regarding a leisure contract key decision (Executive Forward Plan item FP/24/04/08). The chair was satisfied that this would be a positive outcome and so decided the item wouldn't be added to the work programme.

An update was requested on the CCTV service operations and a visit to the office which had been scheduled but cancelled due to officer sickness. Councillors were informed that the position of the manager is currently vacant but a tour could be rearranged once the position is filled.

It was requested that CCTV funding be brought back to the committee prior to the budget setting cycle to review the current funding arrangements with Town and Parish Councils and how it has impacted the delivery of the service. It was added to the work programme for September.

The post Glastonbury wash-up report was highlighted in September.

The question of the 23/24 budget outturn and the month 2 emerging issues budget reports was raised. It was highlighted how difficult first year outturn reports are for unitary authorities and the challenges with the new financial system. The first reports may be coming to Corporate and Resources Scrutiny in the next week.

50 Verbal Update on Structural Changes - Agenda Item 6

Chris Hall, Executive Director for Community Services, gave a presentation on the Layers 2 and 3 restructure and how that would impact Community Services.

During the discussion, the following points were raised:-

- Who was responsible for making the decision about the new structure? *The CEO looked at options available to reduce the paybill. Senior management needs to reduce by the same proportion as the rest of the council – 25%.*
- Officers are already overworked – are they going to be even more stretched

and 'jump ship'? *That is a challenge the organisation as a whole is facing. But it is financially necessary. People leaving is a risk, we cannot predict what they will do when faced with redundancies.*

- *What advice and evidence did the Chief Executive take? That would be a question to ask him directly.*
- *Who has been consulted? Just those directly impacted are formally consulted. No specific questions, just asked to consider proposals and pass comment. Also consulted with the unions as legally required to do so. Not a formal consultation with the wider workforce. Closes 26th June.*
- *If people have been rejected for Voluntary Redundancy (VR) what is the risk they could get Compulsory Redundancy (CR)? What impact will that have? VR decisions were made on the basis of losing the post immediately. Following the restructure there will be further redundancies. The council will pay whichever is higher, out of VR or CR, depending on the contract, so people will not be disadvantaged by Compulsory Redundancy.*
- *How many vacant posts does Communities carry and have those posts been removed as part of the process? Don't have an exact number for vacant posts. There are some vacancies, some filled by agency staff where continuing the work is necessary. Some vacancies will be removed. Reduced workforce is part of the MTFP and new blueprint will be number of posts we can afford across the organisation.*
- *Do the numbers on the slide with regard to VR by gender reflect the proportion of the council as a whole? Members were informed after the meeting that the proportion of staff in the council are 70% female, 30% male, compared to the VR statistics of 36.14% male and 63.86% female.*
- *If layers 4, 5, and 6 restructure take place over the summer will it be impacted by holiday periods? Resourcing will be challenging but lots of HR and Finance resource will be up front, then the statutory 45 day period of consultation, so that should cover any amount of normal leave.*
- *Members would like to be kept more in the loop regarding changes as they occur.*
- *Given the changes to directorates, it does call into question the existence of relevant scrutiny committees. But potentially no change until the AGM in May 2025.*

51 Devolution Verbal Update - Agenda Item 7

Jonathan Stevens, Head of Operations, Regulatory & Operational Services, and Liz Dawson, Service Director - Culture, gave a presentation on the devolution of services within Communities. They discussed the services being devolved, the process and

progression of devolution.

During the discussion, the following points were made:-

- Bridgwater Town Council made an error in budgeting and are dipping into reserves. Are there robust scrutiny arrangements for Town Council budgets to ensure they can bear the extra costs? *This will be a joint process and it will be continued. Checking over audit is in place. Due diligence goes on with our accountants and legal teams before and after devolution.*
- What is the messaging to parishes? If parishes don't take on devolved services like hedge trimming, will that not be done at all? *We are currently doing work to determine what service levels will be next year. Hoping to have those decisions and then can plan with parishes on devolution. Our service standards remain the same at the moment.*
- How do we ensure smaller parishes are not left behind in the conversations about devolution where priority is being given to large town and parish councils? *As resource becomes available in the team we are starting to get to smaller parishes. We are looking things geographically. Not everything falls within Regulatory and Operations.*
- Some parishes are looking at working together, but that is a long-term constitutional consideration.
- Some parishes are frustrated with the devolution conversation and feeling left in the dark.
- Everyone is moving at their own pace. What is the timescale? *Ideally everything done by the end of this financial year. Services can be done very quickly but assets and legal have to go much slower so it has to make sure it is a pace that works for everyone. Got to be in lockstep with the Town Council's democratic processes as well. Can take a long time due to legal issues, and if there are HR implications and redundancies involved as well.*
- Does this include roundabouts? *No.*
- Minehead Town Council are interested in other assets such as cafes. *Yes, this is possible.*

Liz Dawson then gave a presentation on the Yeovil Town Council (YTC) Devolution project.

During the discussion, the following points were raised:

- What are the risks that legal review will block transfer of assets like county park? Have provisions been made to cover additional legal fees or continued running of the park? *We are moving towards service and staff devolution on the 1st of August as an interim provision while the legal complexities of the*

title (which is complex with many different covenants) are resolved.

- Are there arrangements for the 31 staff to be TUPE'd over? Do they need physical space like offices? *Majority of staff work from the asset delivering services so their workplace won't change, the remainder will work from home. Working through the detail of that with HR and YTC.*
- Do we have enough resources in Somerset Council to answer town, city, and parish councils in a timely manner? *We do meet on a weekly basis, identify any blockers to process. We also have a data sharing teams channel, we are putting all the resources available into this.*
- Clerks are stating they don't get financial information? *There are challenges within teams, especially finance, and in the midst of restructuring. We are prioritising resources to give the information on the current financial arrangements. We are transparent as possible.*
- For Westlands, YTC didn't get complete IT system. Things like WiFi are being removed beforehand. *ICT is based around Somerset systems and security arrangements so they need to be removed and reused elsewhere. There is a partnership approach, with a dedicated ICT workstream liaising with YTC IT about that handover.*
- Is there likely to be a void at Westlands when The Octagon work is complete? *We have done some work to help Westlands establish itself ahead of Octagon relaunch so they will not be competitors.*
- What due diligence is being done to ensure YTC won't run into financial difficulties as a result of overstressing themselves? *We have worked collaboratively to share budget information to enable financial stability for YTC for the services they want to take on.*
- Projects can run away as seen in South Somerset. There may be a need to put own systems in when things are devolved, like IT. Has this cost been factored in? Will it effect other town councils? *There has been foresight and contingency built in.*

52 Gypsy and Traveller Review Update - Agenda Item 9

Christopher Brown, Service Director - Housing, gave a presentation detailing the legal responsibilities and the service areas involved in work with the Gypsy, Romani, and Traveller (GRT) community.

During the discussion, the following points were raised:-

- Who is responsible for the cost of clear up after an unauthorised encampment? *The landowner. They predominantly occur on council land,*

- so we have to take enforcement action and deal with waste left behind.*
- The lack of traveller sites is leading to a cycle where we have to clean up from unauthorised sites. Permanent sites on the edge of villages would work better, such as the private one in Milverton.
 - Do we have a GRT Liaison Officer? Is that ringfenced? *It is a joint role, liaison and education, funded partly by education and partly by equality budget. It sits within education.*
 - Do we need to put more emphasis on finding sites for that role? Is it the joint funding with education that prevents that? *They aren't responsible for finding sites. The work around sites is mostly focused on target hardening which creates ongoing costs, whereas providing sites would prevent this and for an initial high cost would reduce ongoing costs.*
 - What does GRT Liaison do? *They have a relationship between the council and the GRT community, linking them with services we provide. Prior to that post there was no relationship.*
 - There is a strategy due to come in 2024 – is it going to come to this committee before it goes to Executive? *We can have a conversation about that.*
 - The target hardening work on Silk Mills Park and Ride is welcomed. There is a need to find a site – the costs are not have one are great, financially and socially, for residents and travellers.
 - While there is a cost to the council, when we don't provide sites and make our owned sites harder, they turn to private land and landowners may not be able to cover the costs. Small landowners wouldn't know where to start with an encampment. We need to make sure there is support for private landowners.
 - Would like the Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation Assessment (GTAA) comes to this committee first so they can do a deep dive. *As this is part of the Local Plan exercise, it will go to the Climate and Place Scrutiny Committee.*
 - There is a need for an understanding of how this work will fit within the local process.

53 Somerset Cultural Strategy - Agenda Item 10

Cllr Leyshon introduced the report on a sustainable cultural future for Somerset. Liz Dawson, Service Director – Culture, and Dan Webb, Strategic Culture, gave a presentation on the purpose, development process, priorities and delivery of the strategy, and the next steps.

During the discussion, the following points were raised:-

- Welcome the focus on facilitation given the financial context.
- What role or contribution are LCNs making to the evolution of the strategy?
We need a model for how we talk to people in our communities – LCNs may be a part of that. We have attended other cultural forums. It's important for there to be a focus on creative outcomes and opportunities rather than talking about potholes etc. This needs to be explored in the implementation plan.
- For the Taunton LCN, the young people working group has drawn in people doing creative work with young people in Taunton, so this could be drawn in.
- The strategy is very well written.
- It would be good to look at more than the existing cultural hubs and connecting organisations, especially in the west of the county where organisations may feel cut off.
- There needs to be investment, a small grants budget used strategically could make a big difference.
- How do town and parish councils come together in Somerset Council? E.g. Taunton Town Council has its own strategy and working groups, how does it connect in? *It's a 10 year strategy. We will be facilitators of the interconnected working across all areas of Somerset, though there is a possibility for that to change in the future. Implementation plan is open to develop and there is an opportunity to work with LCNs etc. to shape that. Leadership model is going to be really key.*
- For Minehead Town Council a cultural strategy would be a long way off but something to aim for.
- How do we link it to a visitor economy? *We are having meetings with Visit Somerset and discussing with colleagues in Planning and Economic Development. There is no funding at the moment but we are working with partners.*

The committee noted the report.

54 Equality Due Regard Requirement for Scrutiny - Agenda Item 11

The chair and officers agreed to defer this item.

(The meeting ended at 1.03 pm)

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CHAIR