

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 3 October 2017 at 10.00 am

Present: Cllr M Lewis (Vice-Chairman), Cllr A Wedderkopp, Cllr B Filmer, Cllr John Hunt and Cllr J Thorne and Cllr S Coles

Other Members present: Cllr C Aparicio Paul, Cllr H Davies, Cllr L Leyshon and Cllr L Redman

Apologies for absence: Cllr T Lock, Cllr P Ham, Cllr T Napper and Cllr G Noel

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

Cllr Simon Coles declared an interest as a Borough Councillor.

Cllr Bob Filmer declared an interest in Item 7 as a member of the Bridgwater Tidal Barrier Planning Committee.

32 **Minutes from the previous meeting held on 05 September 2017** - Agenda Item 3

The minutes of the meeting held on 05 September 2017 were accepted as being accurate by the Committee.

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

Sue Osborne asked a public question regarding Item 8. She expressed concern that the Cabinet Member for Resources and Economic Resources had disregarded the recommendation made by the Committee at the last meeting to suspend sales of county farms. She asked what reassurance could be given that the recommendations of the County Farms Task & Finish Group would also not be disregarded. She asked how outside bodies would be able to contribute to the review and questioned why the questionnaire sent to tenants did not ask for information on the type of tenant or for equalities information. She welcomed the inclusion of tenant views but sought assurance that the Cabinet Member would approach the findings of the review with an open-mind.

Mrs Osborne will receive a written response to her question.

Nigel Behan, Unite Branch Secretary, asked a public question regarding Item 9. We support the vision statement and we also support the assessment that the best option is retaining an in-house model for the future of the Library Service in Somerset.

Q1 When will "Appendix 1b – Appraisal of alternative delivery model options" be released into the public domain?

Q2 How will access and public transport be taken into account when considering the future of the 34 libraries in Somerset?

It was confirmed by the Vice-Chair that Appendix 1b is a confidential paper and it will not be released into the public domain. The Strategic Manager, Community & Traded Services responded to question 2. We will be carrying out a comprehensive needs assessment as part of the review and this will consider access to services. We want to ensure that Somerset residents have reasonable access to library services and public transport will be factored into this.

Anthony Butler submitted a public question regarding Item 9 which was read by the Governance Manager. I wish to emphasise the overwhelming sense of feeling in Shepton Mallet regarding the proposed move of the library from the Market Square to council offices in Mendip hub. Of the many people who have expressed a view, nobody outside Mendip District Council has expressed a preference for this move. A few have expressed that moving would be better than having no library at all but the majority have expressed a positive preference for the library to remain in the town centre. Objections to the move are largely focussed around two areas: the lack of access for library users and the economic impact on the town. The library is an important community resource and has a far wider role than just loaning books. It requires professional oversight and provides an essential service to those that do not have access to the web at home. Any business case relating to libraries such as Shepton Mallet must consider wider consequences including to the community and to those relating to training, education and discovery services. Residents and businesses consider that moving the library would have a damaging effect on an already neglected town centre. The library does not need to remain in its current expensive site but other far better locations are available in the town centre.

The Director, Economic and Community Infrastructure Commissioning responded to the question. The engagement process has only just begun and this will be followed by a long process of consultation before any decision is made on the future provision of library services. The consultation process is designed to be thorough, open and inclusive so that we can engage with communities on the future of individual libraries. If it is proven that a move is required then the library may move but the Leader of the Council has publicly stated that the intention is to keep libraries open and we will be looking to communities to support us with that.

Ciara Eastell, Chief Executive of Libraries Unlimited, asked a public question regarding Item 9. She expressed reservations over the conclusions drawn in the review of alternative delivery models. She questioned the robustness of evidence examined including advice from an independent consultant. She highlighted that she had not been asked by Somerset to take part in the consultation and that the financial information examined dated from 2015/16 when the service was still under Devon County Council management. She highlighted the successes achieved by Devon Libraries since it was externalised 18 months ago.

The Director, Economic and Community Infrastructure Commissioning responded to the question. Devon and Somerset services have previously worked well together and we would welcome the opportunity to continue this

relationship. We are confident about our facts and the conclusions drawn. We are quite open that it was a desk-top exercise using information available in the public domain. We have no wish to undermine the work of Libraries Unlimited but we are clear in our report that externalising is not the right solution for Somerset at this time. It may be right in the longer term and we plan to look at this again in 3 years time.

Peter Murphy, Chairman of Friends of Somerset Libraries (FoSL), asked a public question regarding Item 9. In 2011 we raised over £10k from public donation to make a successful legal challenge against SCC which had decided to cease funding a third of static libraries. We retain most of these funds against the future threat to library services. Since 2011 SCC and FoSL have had constructive dialogue and this report describes FoSL as a valuable critical friend. There has been an evidence-led re-structure of the library network which was carefully considered and consulted on at local level. We are aware, however, that the council has stated it could operate fewer libraries in the future. FoSL would like to see a proper needs assessment carried out that is open to the possibility of opening new branch libraries where there is an identified need. We support the recommendation to defer and further consider the decision to outsource the service. We welcome the commitment to engage with all communities that have a static library to better understand the needs of each individual community. The provision of libraries is a statutory service which has to meet the test of the 1964 Public Libraries and Museums Act to provide “a comprehensive and efficient library service to all persons desiring to make use thereof”. In this report reference is made to a consultation to ‘re-determine the comprehensive and efficient library network and the funding provided beyond that network’. In the Equalities Impact Assessment this phrase occurs on several occasions: “any changes to service provision maintain *reasonable* access to library services for a *reasonable* majority of the population”. Two uses of the word reasonable, a word beloved by lawyers, in one sentence. FoSL look forward to a continued engagement with officers and councillors as the service develops.

The Director, Economic and Community Infrastructure Commissioning responded to the question. She thanked FoSL for its cooperation, support and insight as this has been invaluable. The library service does need to live within its means and, therefore, we do need to have a look at how far our pound stretches. However, our Leader has clearly said that our intent is to keep as many libraries open as possible.

John Irven, Treasurer of Watchet Library Friends (WLF), asked a public question regarding Item 9. He paid tribute to the way that SCC officers have worked collaboratively since 2011. WLF understand that by 2020 further cuts of around 15% will be required with potential reduction or removal of funding from some libraries including Watchet. The WLF will support working with SCC and Watchet Town council on buildings and facilities. We will not support local communities being faced with a ‘take it on or leave it to close’ approach or the transfer of libraries to voluntary trusts or volunteer operation as statutory library services require professional management and Watchet demographics mean volunteers would not be available, able or willing to run year-long services. We urge you to find acceptable budget solutions via continuing positive engagement.

The Director, Economic and Community Infrastructure Commissioning responded to the question. She thanked John for his comments and stated that SCC has already started to engage with Watchet as part of the engagement process. We welcome the support and healthy conversations that we are having and don't wish to pre-determine any decisions on any library.

34 Corporate Performance Monitoring Report Q1 (+1) 2017/18 - Agenda Item 5

The Committee considered this report from the Strategic Managers for Performance and for Business Change. The report provided Members with an update on performance across the organisation.

Members were reminded that this was the first performance report using the refreshed metrics and that quarter 1 plus 1 month data had been provided in order to give as up to date information as possible to the Committee. The report summarised that overall performance is stable with three red segments (P1, P3,C4), one segment with a declining performance (P2) and four segments with improving performance (P1, P3, P5, C1).

The Committee discussed those segments which fell under the Committee's remit. They agreed to discuss the projected overspend of £10.054m when it was covered in more detail under Item 6.

They queried the significant rise in housing development linked with the development of a garden town and asked what plans had been made for infrastructure and employment opportunities. It was confirmed that SCC is working closely with officers at Taunton Deane Borough Council (TDBC) to accommodate future transport demand. The Housing Infrastructure Fund (HIF) is designed to support the delivery of housing. SCC has made a bid to this fund and is proactively looking at every opportunity for investment in Taunton and housing growth. Members commented that the HIF is oversubscribed and that social housing will be squeezed out. It was clarified that the HIF relates to infrastructure only and aims to ensure that land can be unlocked for development. It is not the role of SCC to get involved with TDBC housing policy.

It was confirmed that proposals for the development of A Block at County Hall will be coming forward shortly. Both A and C Block are in need of modernisation with A Block needing significant investment to maintain, particularly for heating and lighting.

A Member queried how the Core Council programme feeds into the performance wheel and it was clarified that there are some things on the Core Council programme that don't directly relate to the performance wheel or they may only form part of a segment. The Core Council Programme stands alone.

The delay with the Customer Service Model for Shepton Mallet Library was queried and it was confirmed that this relates to a delay in terms of plans of delivery. No decision has yet been made regarding the library customer service model and this doesn't relate to a decision about the library itself.

The Committee noted the report.

35 2017/18 Revenue Budget Month 4 - Agenda Item 6

The Committee received this report from the Service Manager, Chief Accountant which provided an update on the current Revenue Budget outturn position for the 2017/18 financial year based on the end of July (Month 4).

The Committee heard that the Authority's forecast shows a projected net overspend of £10.054m when compared to the Revenue Budget. This represents 3.22% of base budget. The majority of the overspend lies in the Children's Services budgets. Most other areas of the Council are within reasonable tolerance although some corporate and support budgets are under pressure

Last year, 2016/17, there was a year-end overspend of £7.049m, with the main areas of overspend in Adults and Children's services. The demands upon these services have not reduced in the early part of this financial year and are not likely to over the course of the year. The transformational work under way to improve demand management and simultaneously improve outcomes for vulnerable children and adults is well under way. The additional funding from government for Adult Services, alongside the management action in adults, is keeping this budget under control. There has been no additional funding for children services and management action is struggling to change patterns of expenditure.

SCC is therefore in a similar position to last year in trying to find mitigating actions across the whole Council as well as in those core care services to offset the overspend while transformation takes place in line with our MTFP themes. The implication of this early forecast is that Cabinet and the Senior Leadership Team will need to take some immediate actions to address the overspend projections. Given last year's position, there are already 5 high priority projects under way (all but one of which are affecting children's services budgets) to identify ways of reducing spending and managing demand. These are having some success in reducing overspend and delivering MTFP savings but are projects that in some cases span last year, this year and next before coming to fruition.

The Committee then considered the forecast overspend in individual budget areas particularly children's services and aged debt analysis. They also considered the progress of the 2017/18 MTFP savings proposals. The Committee heard that 63% of savings will be delivered as predicted, 7% of savings have been classified as an amber risk meaning delivery is unsure and 30% are no longer deliverable in 2017/18.

Concern was expressed at the overspend in children's services. It was highlighted that the figures around the increase in demand for children's services could be confusing. It was clarified that the service is supporting more children overall but that less children were coming into care. Therefore, the service could be said to be making improvements even though overall numbers had risen. It was agreed that this would be made clearer in future reports.

Members also heard that the Children and Young People Plan had recently been updated and that the Children's Scrutiny Committee would be looking at the progress of this plan in detail to ensure progress.

Members questioned what is driving the hike in demand for children's services. The Chief Accountant agreed to contact the Director of Children's Services for a response on this and send this to the Committee.

Concern was expressed that aged debt was almost double the target and that the majority seemed to be owed from health partners. The Committee heard that SCC has seen an increase in aged debt pressures and that these are reported to the Audit Committee on a quarterly basis. The debt is mostly 3rd party but is often complicated and some resolutions take a long time to achieve.

Concern was expressed over the 30% of savings that are not achievable and the limited reserves available and whether this would result in an illegal budget being set. It was confirmed that SCC will not set an illegal budget and that plans are in place to deliver a balanced budget. It is difficult to deliver saving after saving. As far as we are aware the 30% of savings are still achievable but there has been slippage meaning they cannot be delivered in this budget year.

The Committee noted the report.

36 **Flood & Water Management including the Bridgwater Tidal barrier -** Agenda Item 7

The Committee received a presentation from the Strategic Commissioning Manager (Community Infrastructure) and the Service Manager, Flood Risk Management. The presentation provided an update on the Lead Local Flood Risk Management Service (LFRMS), the Bridgwater Tidal barrier and the future of the service.

The Committee heard that the LFRMS has restructured all non-highway elements of flood risk management into one team and now has direct control and delivery of strategic objectives and schemes on the ground. The service will now prepare its programme and submit its Somerset Rivers Authority (SRA) grant application for 2018/19. It's anticipated that this will be a smaller work programme which will allow the service to focus on the actions in the LFRMS and carry out studies focused on local flooding, its mechanisms and consequences. The committee were also updated on a planned Sustainable Drainage Systems (SuDS) review and SuDS inspector service and the SPONGE2020 project. SPONGE2020 is an EU funded project aimed at encouraging urban areas to soak up more water. Following an innovative mapping approach to identify flood risk areas, this is initially being focused on Taunton but could be taken to other areas in Somerset.

The Committee were then updated on the proposed site for the Bridgwater Tidal Barrier and the proposed vertical lift gate. The estimated cost of the barrier has risen to £60-70m and it is hoped that construction will be completed by 2024. Full design, economic, cost and impact assessments will need to be prepared. It was confirmed that the Internal Drainage Board is a key partner.

In addition, the Committee heard that the service plans to carry out a review to deliver improvements to the service in future. The service aims to be less reactive and more strategic in its approach using a 3 year plan. This will include: working with other councils to make the most of SuDS on developments; ensuring a high profile in flood management through its partnerships; pioneering SuDS techniques and developing a high quality developer guide on SuDS for all planning authorities in Somerset to adopt and working with local communities and Members to further build knowledge of local flood issues.

The Committee discussed the need to take a holistic, whole-county approach to flood management and that it was also important to consider across county borders. They also stressed the importance of the upper catchments. It was confirmed that work is on-going with regards to slowing the flow of water.

It was confirmed that SuDS inspections would focus on what is being constructed and would not look at what already exists. This may be something to address in future years. The inspection service does not have any powers but will refer any non-compliance to the local authority.

It was confirmed that the Riparian Rights Enforcement Officer does have enforcement powers with regard to maintaining the flow of water courses but that the aim is always to work with the landowner. The Committee noted the report.

37 **County Farms Task & Finish Group** - Agenda Item 8

The Governance Manager provided an update on behalf of the Chair of the Task & Finish Group.

The Committee heard that the Group had met for the first time last week and that Cllr Philip Ham had been appointed as Chair. Further meeting dates had been set and the Group planned to submit its report to the Committee at its 05 December meeting. Outside stakeholders have been invited by the Group to attend the next meeting and there will be a further verbal update from the Group at the 31 October meeting.

The Committee noted the update.

38 **Library Service Update and Proposed Strategy** - Agenda Item 9

The Committee received a report and presentation from the Director for Economic & Community Infrastructure Commissioning and the Strategic Manager, Community & Traded Services.

The Committee were updated on the progress and performance of the library service, the proposed strategic direction for the service over the next three

years and a community engagement exercise that was recently commenced by the service.

The library service is currently performing well and has delivered a number of successful, innovative projects and initiatives which have gained national recognition. Responses from a customer satisfaction survey carried out in June/July 2017 indicate that customers value the service and are overwhelmingly positive about their experience. It has delivered over £1m of savings to date.

In order to put the service on a sustainable financial footing a long term strategy is required. It was outlined that the intention is to keep libraries open wherever possible. As part of looking at the future of the service over the next 3 years an investigation into alternative delivery models has been carried out. Only 4 library services in the country have externalised so there is a limited breadth of evidence to refer to. The service has concluded that it cannot recommend externalising at this time. It would be more appropriate to revisit this in 3 years time when more evidence will be available.

The Committee heard that the proposed future strategy for the service will have 4 main strands: continuing to deliver a thriving, modern service across a broad spectrum of outcomes; review the libraries network, review the frontline workforce and invest in technology. An informal community engagement process to review the library network has recently begun. This will be supported by a comprehensive needs assessment and an equalities impact assessment before a formal consultation takes place on specific proposals in December 2017 or January 2018. It is planned to bring a further update on this consultation to the Committee in February/March 2018 before a final decision is taken in March/April 2018.

The Committee commented that this was a positive report and commended the service on its performance. It commended the early engagement with the commitment with regard to the network review.

The Committee asked if staff morale had been affected. The service had concerns over morale last year as a result of a staff survey. It has been working hard to engage with staff and understands that the workforce strand of the strategy will be key to its future success.

A Member highlighted the importance of partnership working and the role libraries play in communities. It was felt that digital support services could be better promoted and that the library could do more to widen its appeal to men and advertise more. It was agreed that the library has a great role to play in supporting the community particularly disadvantaged families and socially isolated and disenfranchised residents. The service is working with public health colleagues to join up and better promote the services available.

A proposal was made to set up a Task & Finish Group but it was felt that this would not be appropriate at this stage as the service is currently in the early stages of engagement and gathering information.

A proposal was made to support the conclusion not to pursue an alternative delivery model at this time. Instead we should give our support to the library service to use the 3 year period to develop its service whilst continuing to look at alternative models with a view to the future. This was seconded and carried unanimously following a vote.

The Committee noted the report.

39 Scrutiny for Policies and Place Committee Work Programme - Agenda Item 10

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:

- Update on Library Service Consultation (Feb/Mar 2018)

Following a suggestion from a Member, it was agreed that consideration would be given to scrutinising the Revenue Budget in a different way. As the report contains a lot of financial information it was suggested that this could be scrutinised in smaller sections or in a separate meeting with just that item.

40 Any other urgent items of business - Agenda Item 11

With regard to the proposal from Devon County Council to form a Joint Task & Finish Group to monitor the Connecting Devon & Somerset Broadband Programme, the Governance Manager confirmed that officers are waiting for some further information from Devon colleagues before they were able to provide an update to the Committee.

(The meeting ended at 12.50pm)

CHAIRMAN