

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 30 January 2018 at 10.00 am

Present: Cllr T Lock (Chairman), Cllr M Lewis (Vice-Chair), Cllr P Ham, Cllr T Napper, Cllr A Wedderkopp, Cllr B Filmer, Cllr John Hunt, Cllr J Thorne and Cllr G Noel

Other Members present: Cllr C Aparicio Paul, Cllr S Coles, Cllr H Davies, Cllr D Hall, Cllr L Leyshon, Cllr T Munt, Cllr M Rigby, Cllr L Vijeh, Cllr R Williams and Cllr J Woodman

Apologies for absence:

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

There were no declarations of interest.

59 **Minutes from the previous meeting held on 05 December 2017** - Agenda Item 3

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

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

There were 14 Public Questions in relation to Item 5, 7 Public Questions in relation to Item 6 and 1 Public Question in relation to Item 7. All questions will receive a written response.

Details of all Public questions can be found in the appendix to these minutes.

61 **Taunton Transport Strategy Consultation** - Agenda Item 5

The Strategic Commissioning Manager, Highways and Transport began by thanking members of the public for their questions. He confirmed that all questions would receive a written response. He clarified that questions about specific development sites or planning applications should be directed to the appropriate body or authority as it is not the role of the Scrutiny Committee or Somerset County Council to comment on this. He also asked the public to respond formally to the consultation with any comments or concerns.

The Committee received a report from the Strategic Commissioning Manager, Highways and Transport on the draft Taunton Transport Strategy 'Connecting our Garden Town'. The document was commissioned by Taunton Dean Borough Council (TDBC) in partnership with Somerset County Council (SCC) and prepared by consultants WSP. The Committee was asked to consider and comment on the document prior to a period of public consultation and subsequent consideration by the Executive Portfolio Holders at TDBC and SCC.

The document outlined a series of proposals and policies grouped into six strategic topics as well as the key objectives and key outcomes. The Committee was informed that the document has been prepared using a wide range of existing evidence and data and that no new studies have been undertaken at this stage. A number of consultation exercises took place to inform the creation of the document. It is intended to undertake a web-based public consultation of the document in February 2018. In addition, a public exhibition will be held to enable face to face engagement.

The Chair stated that the Committee was pleased to hear that wider, face to face consultation will now take place in addition to on-line consultation. He urged all present to respond formally to the consultation with any concerns or comments. He also reminded the meeting that any questions regarding existing or planned development applications should be directed to the respective Planning Authority and not to SCC or this Committee.

The Strategic Manager clarified that any new connection from Junction 25 to create a link road to the south of the town would require substantial highways infrastructure. This is not currently planned or in any proposal at present. This is a matter for TDBC to consider in their planning.

With regard to a new spine road, traffic modelling has taken place and has concluded that there is little demand for this.

The Strategic Manager confirmed that, when describing travel destinations, simplified statistics were used to communicate with the public but reassured those present that a wide range of complex traffic modelling has been undertaken and considered. More technical work and modelling will be undertaken. He confirmed that traffic studies carried out were sound and have been audited.

It was confirmed that TDBC commissioned the plan but that TDBC and SCC will be adopting it as a joint strategy.

The Committee discussed the need for more engagement early in the process particularly with Parish Councils and questioned how Parish Council's would be engaged with. It was confirmed that face-to-face consultation would take place and Parish Council representatives would be invited. Parish Councils are also formally respond to the consultation. Members questioned whether alternative proposals around missing strategic links could be discussed. This was affirmed but any new strategic links would need to be tested.

Members raised challenges and a disconnect in the sequence between housing development and road planning. Whilst different authorities have different responsibilities, this must be addressed as there is a need for authorities to work in partnership when addressing their different yet linked responsibilities. Members also expressed that there is a need to make links between the Transport Strategy and the A358 consultation. Members raised that the planning process is flawed as local planning authorities must take account of comments by Highways, which is an SCC function. If Highways do not raise an objection then it is difficult for planning authorities to object from a

highways perspective. The Strategic Manager confirmed that SCC and TDBC work very well together as a joined up set of authorities.

Some Members criticised elements of the plan, for example, building in green areas and unrealistically planning that less people will be using cars in Taunton town centre in future.

Members raised that there are funding gaps and major issues with receiving Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) funds. No CIL funds have been received by SCC over the last four years. It was confirmed that a funding gap does exist. SCC has submitted a bid for the Housing Infrastructure Fund and is in on-going dialogue with TDBC about CIL funds.

The Committee agreed a recommendation to endorse the Strategy providing that face to face consultation took place with representatives of both TDBC and SCC present.

62 **SCC Response to A358 Consultation - Agenda Item 6**

The Committee received a presentation from the Strategic Commissioning Manager, Highways and Transport regarding the 2nd non-statutory consultation by Highways England (HE) on the A358 Taunton to Southfields Dualling Scheme.

It was confirmed that Highways England are responsible for design, delivery and operation of the route as a new link in the national road network and that Somerset County Council (SCC) are only a consultee. A Non-Key Decision will be made by the Cabinet Member on 19th February to agree SCC's response to the HE consultation. All present at the meeting were asked to respond formally to the HE consultation to express any concerns or comments.

The presentation outlined: the background to the consultation; the possible timescales; the role of the SCC; a map of three proposed routes with an assessment of their strengths and weaknesses; environmental and social impacts and highlighted key issues and the SCC process going forward.

Those present were reminded that there will be a formal statutory consultation still to come in 2019.

It was clarified that SCC did not reject the orange route in the previous consultation. SCC gave a neutral response neither accepting nor rejecting and asked for further information to make an informed decision.

The Committee discussed concern about capacity at Junction 25. Concern was expressed that confusion over whether it was HE's role to resolve this at the HE launch event indicated a lack of joined up thinking and dialogue.

A Member questioned who is able to respond to the consultation and how this may affect the outcome. Concern was raised that Freedom of Information requests revealed that previous HE consultations had been skewed by responses from people living outside of the local area and the county. This

question would need to be directed to HE but it is SCC's understanding that this is an open consultation and that anyone is able to respond as this is a national scheme about a national road network. It was confirmed that HE have a Board to consider consultation responses.

Members raised the need for a southern relief road and that the lack of this would be a missed opportunity. This would need to be considered through the TDBC local planning process and SCC is not able to request this of HE.

Members raised the need for further consultation if a hybrid option is chosen. It was clarified that HE would test any hybrid options and then consult during the statutory consultation process.

Concern and disappointment was expressed at the lack of summer traffic modelling given the extensive summer traffic that comes to the south west through our area. It is standard practice to model neutral periods, however SCC agree it would be beneficial to understand how the schemes perform under seasonal traffic pressures. HE have confirmed they are preparing a summer weekend model to enable them to consider seasonal traffic pressures at the next stage.

Concern was raised that the decision will be non-key and taken by one Cabinet Member only instead of by Full Council. The Cabinet Member responded that he recognised that there was still work to do but that he was delighted that HE had agreed to a second consultation. He stated that he will take account of all of the views expressed today and over the next two weeks to inform the decision on 19th February regarding the preferred route.

The Committee agreed a recommendation that the Cabinet Member consider the views of the public and Committee Members regarding the consultation. There are still some queries regarding the detail but as a Committee we implore that everybody with a view feeds into the Highways England consultation.

63 **Draft Medium Term Financial Plan - Agenda Item 7**

The Committee received a report from the Director of Finance, Legal and Governance regarding the Medium Term Financial Plan, the 2018/19 Capital Investment Programme and an overview of the Provisional Local Government Finance Settlement. The final settlement announcement is scheduled for the 5th February 2018 and will therefore not be known before Cabinet papers are issued.

The Director highlighted three key announcements from the settlement:

- An "aim" to localise 75% of business rates from 2020-21 and implementation of the new needs assessment;
- Confirmation of the continuation of the Adult Social Care precept including the additional flexibility to raise the precept to 3% this year but by no more than 6% over the 17-18 to 19-20 period;

- Increased council tax referendum principle from 1.99% to 2.99% for 2018-19 and 2019-20.

The Committee were informed that SCC was not successful in its bid to be one of the pilots for 100% business rates retention. However, SCC will be part of a pool with the 5 Somerset District Councils and this should generate over half a million pounds towards our revenue gap.

The Committee were also informed about the current forecast position. The MTFP gap increases and decreases constantly as various factors affect our budgetary position. On the positive side, the increased levels of funding received via the Improved Better Care Fund along with a stabilisation of costs in Adult Social Care and Learning Disabilities have helped to reduce forecasted pressures in these services.

In terms of our funding, estimates have been received from District Councils for Taxbase numbers and collection fund surplus and these are sufficiently buoyant to include in our base as additional income, £0.550m regarding the taxbase and £1m in terms of the collection fund.

However, on the negative side, as part of the annual roll-over process of the MTFP, we have reviewed the existing and future delivery of savings agreed for the 2017/20 MTFP, and it is clear that some of those savings are no longer considered to be deliverable. In line with setting a robust budget we have taken these into account and had to re-adjust savings values required to balance the budget. In addition, the probable pay award pressure at 2% on average will add to SCC costs by approximately £2.2m and this has been included in our estimates at present. These factors have resulted in the overall gap in 2018/19 being £13m.

Recommendations to Cabinet to close the gap and to ease the budgetary pressure will include increasing the basic council tax by 2.99% and increasing the Adult Social Care precept by 3%. This will help reduce the pressure to make sufficient savings and provide much needed funding to Adult Social Care to meet service demand and increasing Learning Disabilities costs.

In summary, therefore, the estimated £13m gap will be closed by raising an additional 1% than previously assumed on the general council tax (£2.1m), some corporate revisions to non-service budgets (£2m) and £8.8m of service savings as per Appendix C. This gives a total savings value of £10.866m.

The Committee received further information on the revenue budget approach to identify savings across themes. The Council's officers have developed savings proposals required to close the gap of £13m. The focus for delivering savings will be primarily through a comprehensive review of all existing and planned contracts reducing our third party spend. The second area of focus will involve trying to identify a number of smaller projects that will manage demand or find efficiencies within services. This will entail looking at our staffing and particularly management levels throughout the organisation to see if we can use technology better to try and see where any further efficiencies can be made.

The Committee also received an update on the Capital Investment Programme (CIP). The 2018/19 CIP includes a significant investment in schools. The funding of this investment is subject to further announcements by government either in our final settlement or separately as the DfE and other government departments announce their capital allocations. SCC have also submitted a bid to the Housing Infrastructure Fund in conjunction with Taunton Deane and Sedgemoor councils that would fund around £80m of infrastructure projects supported by the three councils. If this bid is successful, the resources to support the capital investment programme for SCC could be increased by £15m.

At present, SCC have been advised of our highways grant at around £24m and some other smaller educational grants which gives a total known funding through grant of £29m. If we can secure further grant via the DfE for basic need and some specific projects and we are successful in our Housing Infrastructure Fund bid, we may have as much as £50m towards our investment needs. The shortage of capital funds is a known issue for all county councils and representations have been made to DCLG through the consultations on the Fairer Funding Review last summer that government has to recognise the pressures on councils to meet the growing need.

The national push to increase the number of houses built is being addressed in Somerset but the consequence is a need to match this with highways and schools' infrastructure. Of course, there is a lag between the investment required by councils and the additional council tax that ensues from the new housing. The increase in the taxbase eventually may be as much as £2m if the scale of development goes ahead as planned.

The Council is committed to building new schools and improving capacity and will need to borrow funds from the Public Works Loans Board to do so. This may be up to £120m for the programme ahead but we will of course only borrow what is needed when it is needed.

The Committee questioned how much of business rates would be received by SCC. This is difficult to predict. Currently around 50% comes to Somerset but not all of this comes to SCC as some goes to TDBC and the Fire Authority. We are anticipating that SCC may receive around £30m extra per year.

Members queried the likelihood of in-year savings being met. SCC accepts that these were not met previously and this is in-line with other authorities. SCC has reviewed why savings proposals have not been delivered and these have been put back into our base budget.

It was confirmed that SCC has a contingency fund of £7m which is fresh money every year. We are confident that this is sufficient to manage overspend in children's services which is the single biggest financial challenge faced by SCC. Members questioned whether the cost implications of making further improvements to children's services had been considered. This has been considered; however, as the service improves costs should also come down.

A Member questioned whether consideration of a unitary solution had taken place. No unitary costing has taken place since 2007. SCC has regularly tried efficiency drives with District Councils but not in a systematic way.

It was clarified that any borrowing to build new schools would not transfer to an Academy. SCC would in effect own the school but lease it to the Academy Trust.

The Committee noted the report.

64 **Scrutiny for Policies and Place Committee Work Programme - Agenda Item 8**

The Committee considered and noted the Council's Forward Plan of proposed key decisions.

A suggestion was made to scrutinise recent changes to the Somerset Waste Partnership but this was rejected following clarification that this should be directed to the Joint Waste Scrutiny Panel.

It was raised that the timescale of the libraries consultation does not fit with the precepting and budget setting timescales of Parish and Town Councils and some concern was expressed about the format of the on-line consultation. It was agreed that this should be raised directly with the Strategic Manager, Community & Traded Services.

Members raised the outcome of the County Farms review and whether this would be included in an update on property disposal. It was agreed to check this with the appropriate officer and it was confirmed that a response had been received from the Cabinet Member.

Following debate, the Committee requested the following addition to the work programme:

- Connecting Devon & Somerset Broadband Programme update (April/May)

65 **Any other urgent items of business - Agenda Item 9**

There were no other items of business.

66 **Appendix to Minute 60 - Public Questions - Agenda Item**

(The meeting ended at 1.40 pm)

CHAIRMAN

