

Report of the Scrutiny Committee for Policies and Place

Cabinet Member: N/A

Division and Local Member: All

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1. Summary

- 1.1.** The Scrutiny Committee for Policies and Place is required by the Constitution to make an annual report to the Council and also to provide each other meeting of the Council with a summary progress report and outcomes of scrutiny. This regular report covers the work of our meeting held on 11 March, 11 May, 10 June and 15 July.
- 1.2.** The Committee agreed their work programme would comprise items considered directly at meetings plus other items considered or “commissioned” using flexible arrangements outside of the formal committee structure.
- 1.3.** Members of the Council are reminded that:
 - all Members have been invited to attend meetings of the Scrutiny Committee and to contribute freely on any agenda item;
 - any Member could propose a topic for inclusion on the Committee’s Work Programme;
 - any Member could be asked by the Committee to contribute information and evidence, and to participate in specific scrutiny reviews.
- 1.4.** The Committee has 8 elected Members and we have meetings scheduled approximately for every month. Our next meeting will be held Virtually via Microsoft Teams at 10.00am on 16 September 2020.

2. Background

2.1. Scrutiny Work Programme

At each meeting the Committee considers and updates its work programme, having regard to the Cabinet’s forward plan of proposed key decisions. The Committee also agreed to hold themed meetings and Members are looking forward to this approach, in particular the attendance of representatives and/or stakeholders from partner agencies.

2.2. 11 March 2020

5G Technology Verbal Update

The Committee received a presentation from the Regional Director of BT Group in England. It was reported that there were 7 billion calls on the EE network and that coverage in Somerset is 93%.

The Committee received a further presentation from Somerset County Council Public Health during which some of the concerns raised by the public speakers were addressed:

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- Public Health England's (PHE) Centre for Radiation, Chemical and Environmental Hazards (CRCE) takes the lead on public health matters associated with radiofrequency electromagnetic fields or radio waves used in telecommunication, including appropriate standards of protection for the general population and any measure necessary to protect sensitive groups,
- PHE publishes comprehensive reviews of the scientific evidence relevant to radio wave exposures and health,
- The International Commission on Non-Ionising Radiation Protection (ICNIRP) concluded that 'the scientific literature published since the 1998 guidelines had provided no evidence of any adverse health effects below the basic restrictions and did not necessitate an immediate revision of its guidance on limiting exposure to radio frequency fields. ICNIRP guidelines apply up to 300 GHz, well beyond the maximum. 5G will be using GHz frequencies well under this.

During the discussion the discussion centred around the impact to nature and the environment, individuals that were electrosensitive and the use of satellites. There were no plans to use 5G in the implementation of 5G.

In conclusion the Committee agreed they needed a balanced view of the matter. They accepted that as Somerset County Council is a first tier County, they do not have responsibility for planning. However, the Committee was keen to be fully informed of all the facts and any potential harm to public health and so agreed that as a first step they would look at available evidence.

The Scrutiny Committee considered a series of presentations and agreed to look at the wider scrutiny evidence available in relation to 5G technology.

2019/20 Revenue Budget Monitoring – Month 9, Quarter 3 Report

The Committee discussed a presentation concerning the Revenue Budget Monitoring (Month 9 Quarter 3). The report set out the month 9, forecast outturn position for 2019/20 for the net Revenue Budget of £327.967m. It highlighted variances to service budgets, as well as emerging issues, risks, areas of concern and proposed actions to resolve them. The report shows an overall projected small favourable variance of £0.062m for the Council,

The Committee:-

- Noted the forecast balanced budget which includes a small favourable variance of £0.062m for the Council for the end of 2019/20.
- Requested that consideration be given to information on revenues/income streams,
- That opportunity is given to the Committee to allow for scrutiny of decisions.

2019/20 Capital Budget Monitoring – Quarter 3 Report

The Committee discussed a report on the Capital Budget monitoring report for quarter 3. This report provided the Quarter 3 indication regarding the potential Capital Budget outturn position for the 2019/20 financial year. It highlighted variances to the Medium-Term Financial Plan (MTFP) assumptions, as well as emerging issues, risks, areas of concern and proposed actions to resolve them. The report is a summary and shows a projected underspend for the authority against the approvals within the current capital programme.

The Committee welcomed the clarity around the Capital Elements of the budgets and the clarity around the 'whole scheme' costs.

11 May 2020

Covid-19 SCC Management Response and Dashboard

The Covid-19 (coronavirus) outbreak has been designated a global pandemic by the World Health Organisation. As a Local Authority Somerset County Council has a duty under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004 to plan and prepare for emergencies alongside other agencies. Whilst Covid-19 is a health led incident, local authorities have a planning, response and recovery role working alongside other organisations to deliver and coordinate a system wide response. The Authority has a duty under the Act to plan for and maintain the business continuity of its critical services.

The paper set out SCC's emergency response management and monitoring arrangements for Covid-19 and details SCC's responsibilities and contribution to different elements of the response and how the Council would manage these.

The areas of discussion centred around concerns around local risk and the loss of volunteers, the Local Resilience Forum (LRF) and its Strategic Response

The Committee thanked Officers for all their ongoing work and noted the update

Economic and Community Infrastructure Services Update from the Lead Commissioner (March and April)

The Committee were presented with the update by the Director for Economic and

Community Infrastructure.

ECI staff were working hard to maintain essential services, to support the Covid19 response and are volunteering for redeployment to support key service areas that required additional resilience. Updates were provided from the following areas:

- Registration Services,
- Libraries
- Somerset Waste Partnership
- Street Works Parking
- Public Transport
- Health and Social Care
- Transport Property Services
- Economic Development
- Hinkley Point
- Major Infrastructure Services

The committee considered impacts on local services following the announcement of a global pandemic, the areas discussed were, Schools, Bus and Library provision alongside impacts on recycling centres and car parking charges.

The Committee noted the update

Finance Update

The Committee were presented with a verbal Finance update from the Director for Finance setting out the current outturn and current estimations and impact from Covid-19 on the Councils Medium Term Financial Plan.

Following the update the discussion centred around the impact of Council Tax and Business Rate collection. The Grants received in tackling Covid-19 and the impact the pandemic would have on the Medium Term Financial Plan.

The Committee noted the update.

10 June 2020

One Somerset Business Case

The purpose of the Project Initiation Document (PID) was to define the project, to form the basis for its management, the process and the engagement involved in developing a detailed business case and implementation plan for delivering a new council for Somerset in April 2022. The Councils within Somerset had been assessing the potential opportunities for a revised approach to future Local Government in Somerset.

For two years there had been regular discussions between the Chief Executives and the Leaders of all five Somerset authorities, culminating in the commission and subsequent publication of an independent options appraisal.

Subsequently, a request was made to the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government requesting an invitation to submit a detailed Business Case for a single unitary authority. The One Somerset programme would:

- Evaluate the options presented in the FoLGis options appraisal and take forward the option for a single unitary authority in Somerset.
- Produce a detailed business case that considered and explored the opportunities and benefits for the county to move to a single unitary council.

The business case would:

- Be complete by the summer of 2020.
- Be balanced and aligned with the statutory responsibilities of local government.
- Present the options and recommended way forward in such a way that the public, businesses, other public sector partners and the Secretary of State could assess and feedback on the proposed case.

During the discussion members of the committee raised questions around the areas of Member of Parliament, District and Parish Council involvement in shaping the business case, numbers of Councillors in a Unitary Council and residents per division. The plans around public engagement and the involvement of external experts in previous Unitary Council implementations at Cornwall, Devon and Dorset.

The Scrutiny for Policies and Place Committee:-

Noted the creation of detailed business case and implementation plan for delivering a new Unitary council for Somerset by April 2022

Economic and Community Infrastructure Covid-19 Operational Response

ECI staff were working hard to maintain essential services and to support the COVID-19 response. Plans for moving into the recovery phase were emerging

Updates were provided from, Registration Services, Library's, Somerset Waste Partnership, Parking Services, Public Transport, Highways, Further Education Colleges and public transport.

During the consideration of the update, the committee discussed the Library reopening timetable, transport assistance for those in further education, continued support for bus companies and a full updated list of Major projects impacted due to Covid-19.

The Committee noted the work that was still ongoing across ECI in response to COVID-19, to address service impacts and to support the delivery of essential services as far as reasonably practical. The Committee is also asked to note that some work and schemes have been delayed as a result.

2019/20 Revenue Outturn Report

The report recognised the achievement by the budget holders, councillors and staff of Somerset County Council in delivering an underspend of £6.423m for the year ending

31st March 2020 against the net Revenue Budget of £327.967m.

This had been achieved by the continued tight financial grip on financial management and budgetary control through robust budget setting and monthly budget monitoring. The report highlighted the reasons for variances to budget across services and sets out the stronger reserves position to help deal with the future financial challenges.

The reports set out the proposals for the underspending including the service carry forwards requests of £1.532m. All of this has been underpinned by the delivery of £21.483m of savings, 99.7% of the target set.

During the discussion the Committee voiced concerns in relation to the impact of Covid-19 on young carers. The Committee thanked officers for their hard work in providing the report.

The Committee noted the report

Somerset Covid-19 Weekly Workstream Update

Somerset County Council was working tirelessly with community organisations, charities, volunteers and its partners to support communities during the current Coronavirus pandemic. A number of multi-agency workstreams were in place to support this vital work. The presentation advised the committee of these workstreams, their key actions during the last week, what's planned going forward. We plan to issue this workstream update every Friday.

The Somerset Public Health Covid-19 Dashboard set out the details of the demand and cases across the County. Further updates were provided from the Transport Logistics Cell, Community Resilience Cell, Active Travel Cell, Somerset Waste Partnership, Economic Response and Recovery, Health and Social Care and Schools.

The Committee then discussed the report and the following points arose:
The Committee commended the ongoing hard work in tackling the impact of Covid-19 on the residents of Somerset.

The Committee noted the update

Covid-19 Recovery

As part of the Covid-19 recovery, Somerset County Council is a member of the Local Resilience Forum for Somerset and west of England. Paula Hewitt is the county council's representative on the (LRF) recovery group, which is chaired by Mandy Bishop, Director of environment at Bath & North East Somerset Council. The group has not yet finalised its terms of reference however the business change team and civil contingencies unit will support the group and ensure that Somerset had a strong voice in its work. Somerset multi-agency coordination group this group will drive a county-wide holistic approach to recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic. It would support and coordinate the work of the multi-agency tactical response cells as they begin to look at immediate and short-term recovery and begin to plan for the longer term. It has reporting lines to:

- Somerset multi-agency tactical group.

- the Somerset local Authorities chief executive group.
- local resilience forum: recovery in response cell

As part of this work a comprehensive suite of risk assessments and safe systems of work on 'COVID-secure' working will be developed, based on the government guidance launched on 13 May. The whole council will need to support this work. Next steps were to fully mobilise the new groups and ensure governance and links to the wider system (eg health) are robust and remain fit for purpose, and develop strong comms and engagement with all stakeholders, especially Members. In all cases, SCC is participating fully in recovery work, whilst continuing to play its part in the ongoing and changing response to Covid-19 that is expected to be required for many months to come.

Discussion took place around additional cycle schemes and pedestrian space to address social distancing concerns. The Council were embracing idea of doing things differently and testing the theories and new ways of working methodologies. Scrutiny would be involved to shape the design and delivery and work with partners to embrace new opportunities as a result of the Covid-19 impact. Lessons would be Learnt as a result of the change to Services to adapt in the future with

The Committee noted the update

15 July 2020

One Somerset Business Case

The business case proposed the creation of a new council for Somerset that will replace both the County Council and the four District Councils. It would be a new council with councillors elected by Somerset's electorate. This new council, known as a single-tier unitary council, would be responsible for all of the functions and the delivery of the services which are currently provided by the County Council and four District Councils.

The business case explored the options for local government reorganisation considering how they will improve outcomes for the people and businesses of Somerset and support the sustainability of public services in the county.

The Leader of the Council has had ongoing dialogue with the Government about improving local government in Somerset, which appears to align with government's Devolution White Paper, which is due to be released in Autumn 2020.

Somerset needed to be working to influence the Government's Devolution agenda and the anticipated Local Government Review, rather than reacting after the event.

This report attached the One Somerset Business Case, set out in Appendix A, to be read side by side and not in isolation from each other.

Following the presentation of the item further discussion took place on Community, Parish and District Council engagement alongside detailed discussion of the creation of Taunton Town Council and Local Community Networks.

That the Committee:

1. Considers and comments on the case for change set out in this report;
2. Considers and comments on the business case in advance of the Cabinet meeting on 20th July 2020 and Full Council on the 29th July 2020;
3. Support the Leader of the Council continuing to seek consensus with the district and other local councils across Somerset, towards the creation of a new single-tier unitary council for Somerset.

Review of Emergency Democratic Arrangements

The current Covid-19 (coronavirus) outbreak has been designated a global pandemic by the World Health Organisation. As a Local Authority Somerset County Council has a duty under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004 to plan and prepare for emergencies alongside other agencies. Whilst Covid-19 is a health led incident, local authorities have a planning, response and recovery role working alongside other organisations to deliver and coordinate a system wide response. The Authority has a duty under the Act to plan for and maintain the business continuity of its critical services.

On 27 and 28 March 2020, to ensure that decisions could be made and services continue to operate during the 'lockdown' period, the Leader of Council and the Chief Executive set out and agreed their proposed democratic and decision making arrangements for the emergency. These were presented to the Committee in May 2020. A commitment was given that these arrangements would be reviewed after three months, to establish if they are still required, require amendment and or/require an extension of time. The attached report sets out the review of these arrangements and details the recommendations which will be considered by Cabinet and Full Council later in July.

The Committee encouraged hybrid meetings and live webcasting to ensue transparency to members of the public,

That the Committee:

- a) Commended the Council's achievements during the emergency response delivered with the benefit of the emergency democratic and decision making arrangements
- b) Agreed that all of its committees and public meetings where it is the Administering Authority continue to meet virtually in accordance with regulations.
- c) Noted that a further review of the emergency powers and operation of delegated decision making arrangements set out in this report to the Chief Executive and his authorised officers will be reviewed by the Council at its meeting in November 2020.

Month 2 Budget Monitoring Report

The usual budget monitoring process had been made more complicated with the significant financial impact that Covid-19 is having upon council services. There has been significant additional expenditure and an adverse impact upon income in both the current and future years. The government has recognised this and to date has provided £25.6m of grant funding to cover additional costs but has not provided any funding to cover loss of income. The Council has completed 3 monthly returns to MHCLG outlining its additional costs and is waiting to hear if further grant funding will be received.

The latest forecast set out the financial impact to be £47.7m with a shortfall in funding of £15.4m after taking into the Covid-19 grant and other reimbursements such as from the

CCG. The shortfall is split with £2.3m of this being capital and £13.1m revenue. The revenue costs are across 3 financial years with the split being £0.3m in 2019/20, £3m in the current year and £9.8m in 2021/22.

Out of the £25.6m grant, £19.1m has been already been allocated against increased services costs in the previous and current year and the remaining £6.5m will be allocated shortly.

The forecast as at the end of May is a net spend of £347.7m against a budget of £337.7m giving an overspend of £10m for the year. By taking into account the remaining contingency budget and unallocated Covid-19 Grant, the overspend reduces to £3.3m as set out in Table 1 of the Cabinet report. As part of the MTFP process a Budget Equalisation reserve was set up to cover any overspending and to smooth out budget gaps in future years. The balance of the Reserve is currently £9.4m.

The committee requested further details of how members of the community had been adversely affected due to a lack of support. Further details would be provided to Councillors in due course.

The Committee noted the update

Capital Outturn Report

The Cabinet report set out in (Annex A) was the second capital monitoring report for the year. It shows that there is a projected underspend of £1.272m against existing approvals of £805.822m.

The Cabinet report along with its appendices, provided further detail on the budget monitoring for comment by Scrutiny Members.

An overview of the Capital Programme indicates that the programme is being managed proactively by services within the resources that they have available. Commitments are not being entered into without an available budget and generic approvals are being managed as costs become more certain and the programme of work adjusted accordingly. However, there remains a need to fully scrutinise the forecasts received in order to be certain of their accuracy as we head towards the end of the financial year.

The committee were informed that the figures reported included internal borrowing with the MRP (Minimum Revenue Provision in Place)

The Committee noted the update

Covid-19 Recovery Update

The recovery update set out a partnership update from the Local Resilience Forum Recovery Group and Somerset Multi-Agency Recovery Coordination Group. The Recovery and Growth Plan centred around £34.5 million to HotSW LEP to accelerate construction projects that can be completed by January 2022. The Government working with LEP to agree final list of scheme. The transition to the next stage set out the outbreak management plan and recovery.

The Committee considered the risks around a second spike of cases in the autumn. The sectors being targeted as part of the recovery growth plan and the local management outbreak management plan and recent spikes such as that in Leicester. Consideration was also given to the shift in ways of working and the positive impacts of working from home such as the reduction of pollution from a decrease in travelling.

The committee discussed the shift in the working practices of the workforce and how this could inform future thinking. Tourism and agriculture had been identified as sectors being focuses on as part of the recovery plan. There was a significant risk of a second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic alongside a reduced amount of migrant workforce. Councillors broadly supported a continued reduction in travel going forward which not only reduced travel costs and pollution but saved time.

The Committee noted the update.

3. Consultations undertaken

- 3.1.** The Committee invites all County Councillors to attend and contribute to every one of its meetings.

4. Implications

- 4.1.** The Committee considers carefully, and often asks for further information about the implications as outlined in, the reports considered at its meetings.
- 4.2.** For further details of the reports considered by the Committee please contact the author of this report.

5. Background papers

- 5.1.** Further information about the Committee including dates of future meetings, and agendas & reports from previous meetings are available via the Council's website. www.somerset.gov.uk/agendasandpapers

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