

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 the meetings held on 10 March 2021 and 14 April 2021.
- 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 at 10.00am on 6 July 2021.

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.

3. 10 March 2021

3.1 Registration Services Update

The first item considered was a Registration Services Update.

The Registration Services Manager, Sue Crawley presented the report using a PowerPoint presentation, including a summary of the background to the registration service of births, deaths and marriages and explained the impacts on relevant services following national restrictions related to the Covid-19 pandemic.

During the discussion of the report including birth and death registrations and marriages and Civil Partnerships were considered alongside the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. Changes to the service were noted including hybrid appointments and telephone death registrations to enable the service to continue operations during the pandemic.

The Scrutiny for Policies and Place Committee noted the report.

3.2 Capital Monitoring Report Q3 and Revenue Budget Monitoring Month 10

The second report considered was the Capital Monitoring Report Q3 and Revenue Budget Monitoring Report Month 10.

Revenue Budget Monitoring Report – Month 10

The Cabinet Member for Resources, Cllr Mandy Chilcott introduced the report noting: an underspend of £3.161m; the predicted adult services budget overspend due to pandemic related pressures; the significant carry forward requests as workstreams have been delayed across the Council due to Covid-19; and that Covid-19 funding received currently totals £31.9m, with £27.5m currently allocated. The Cabinet Member further noted that at present £4.4m of Covid funding is unallocated but will be utilised to cover related costs for the remainder of the financial year, and that any unspent amount at year end will be carried forward and added to the Covid-19 budget in 2021/22.

Capital Monitoring Report Q3

The Cabinet Member for Resources, Cllr Mandy Chilcott introduced the report noting: the projected underspend of £0.652m against the approvals within the current capital programme; and that the overall five-year programme is currently forecasting a favourable variance of £13.476m.

The Scrutiny for Policies and Place Committee discussed the report and the following points were raised: the unique overspend within the Adult Social Care budget and the ongoing budgetary pressure in this area; and reporting of precepts including: the Somerset Rivers Authority as an accountable body; and the Somerset Waste Service Partnership.

The Cabinet Member for Resources responded by acknowledging the future pressures within the Adult Social Care budget and advised that this had been reflected in the 2021/22 budget.

The Chair thanked the Finance team for the report.

The Scrutiny Committee for Policies and Place noted the projected capital outturn for 2020/21 and the forecasted position of the future programme.

3.3 One Somerset Business Case Update

The third item considered was the One Somerset Business Case Update.

The One Somerset Programme Director introduced the item and provided further information making reference to the six questions asked of all consultees by the Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) and the criteria by which the Secretary of State is to assess the unitary proposals. The Programme Director further informed the Committee that there is a duty to publicise the consultation, with this being actioned by promotions, engagement and communications, and signposting to the consultation, all of which fall within the boundaries of recommended practice. The Programme Director explained that to provide an open, transparent and informed report to the Secretary of State regarding the consultation, an evidence-based approach had been taken by Somerset County Council, with independent reports by nationally recognised experts forming part of the evidence.

The options appraisal, financial analysis, geography, partnership arrangements were set out as part of the presentation.

As part of the debate the following points were considered:

- Clarity of the independence of the analysis and the report, and similar studies elsewhere.
- Concerns were expressed regarding inequalities between the east and west of the County if a two-unitary model were adopted: a more affluent east but more demand in the west.
- Whether there was any impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the findings of the report regarding an imbalance between potential income and demands on services for those authorities as an east and west divide.
- Stronger Somerset representation and individual authority representation at the meeting.

The Scrutiny Committee for Policies and Place Committee noted:

- The work that had been undertaken on the programme between December 2020 and March 2021.
- Experts had acted independently in their analysis and report.

- The concerns expressed over inequalities between east and west in a two-unitary model: a more affluent east but more demand in the west.
- Difficulties in fully scrutinising the Stronger Somerset proposals regarding place and place-based services owing to lack of detail, e.g. highways.
- Challenges on how a two-unitary structure could be implemented and operate, a complex system.

4. 14 April 2021

4.1 2020/21 Revenue Budget Monitoring Report – Month 11

The first item considered was the 2020/21 Revenue Budget Monitoring report – Month 11.

The Finance Director, Jason Vaughan, presented the report which set out the report to Cabinet, detailed the background to the 2021/22 budget and highlighted the unique difficulty with producing the budget estimates against the backdrop of the Covid-19 pandemic and the significant uncertainty.

The report set out the forecast year-end position against the 2020/21 budget as at the end of February (month 11). It was highlighted that predicting the year-end position is very difficult given the significant financial impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on Council services. It was noted that many of the budget variations were to be expected given the current unprecedented times, and that additional spending has been necessary to support the Council's work in responding to the Covid-19 pandemic.

The summary of the forecast outturn was highlighted as a favourable variance of £6.642m, but to date services have identified £4.315m of proposed carry forward requests, and that if these were approved the favourable variance will reduce to £2.327m.

It was noted that overall there had been a favourable movement of £3.311m since month 10 and it was further highlighted that the Council had received various grants relating to Covid-19 totally £31.881m, with £4.368m currently unallocated. It was further noted that any unspent amount at year end will be carried forward and added to the £10.8m Covid-19 Emergency Fund in 2021/22.

During the debate, comments and questions were considered, points raised included: the carry forward figures from previous years; funding spent in relation to enforcement; and ongoing enforcement funding for this was welcomed.

The Scrutiny for Policies and Place Committee noted the projected revenue outturn for 2020/21.

4.2 Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA) Health Impacts of the Climate

Emergency

The item was introduced by Cllr Claire Paul, Cabinet Member for Public Health & Wellbeing and Climate Change. The Cabinet Member noted work to explore impacts on Public Health in the County; the role of the Health and Wellbeing Board; and work to explore the impact of transport emissions in the County.

The Strategic Manager – Climate and Flood Management, Jon Doyle introduced the report highlighting progress against the Climate Emergency Strategy actions, noting the wish for the County to become Carbon Neutral by 2030 and to reduce the impacts of climate change. The committee were provided with updates regarding: renewable energy potential within the County; the Local Authority Treescapes Fund; work to decarbonise the Council's estate; and the public sector decarbonation grant. The Public Health Specialist, Stuart Brock added further points, highlighting: the Public Health implications of Climate Change; the role of particulate pollution; housing standards; and multi modal travel.

The Committee were updated regarding the Council's Active Travel Strategy and work to update this document.

The Committee discussed the points raised, including: nuclear fusion; alternative fuels, transport methods and increased cycle provision through the active travel scheme; infrastructure including charging points; housing concerns and the potential to 'retrofit'; the cost of housing improvements; the £1m Climate Emergency fund recently approved by the Leader of the Council; highway design standards; and ensuring paths and cycleways are not overgrown.

The Scrutiny for Policies and Place Committee noted the evidence presented in considering the broad range of council activities upon which it bears.

5. Implications

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

6. Background papers

- 6.1.** 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.