

Report of the Scrutiny Committee for Policies and Place

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 meetings held on 7 September, 12 October and 2 November, in addition to a Call-in meeting held on 30th September 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 in the Luttrell Meeting Room, County Hall at 10.00am on 7 December 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.

2.2. 7 September 2021

Corporate Property Asset Management Plan and Strategy

The first item the Committee considered the report of the Corporate Property Asset Management Plan and Strategy.

The Chair welcomed the Cabinet Member for Resources, Councillor Mandy Chilcott and the Council's Head of Property, Oliver Woodhams, to the meeting for this agenda item.

Mr Woodhams gave a PowerPoint presentation on the Corporate Property Asset Management Plan & Asset Strategy and provided background information about the Council's property estate and about the disposal of assets; outlined proposed principles and objectives for the County Council's Corporate Property Asset Management Plan; the proposed approach to asset strategy and policy review during the transition to new Unitary arrangements.

The Committee asked detailed questions and commented on the following – (a) the proposed objectives and principles for the Corporate Property Asset Management Plan refresh which will be brought to the November 2021 Council meeting for adoption and will cover the period 2021 – 2023 for SCC; (b) the proposed pausing of further County Council policy updates; (c) what future property items the Committee would like to see brought forward.

The Committee noted the update on the refresh of the Corporate Property Asset Management Plan and Asset Strategy.

2021/22 Budget Monitoring Report – Month 3 – End of June

The second item considered was the 2021/22 Budget Monitoring Report – Month 3.

The Chair invited the Cabinet Member for Resources, Councillor Mandy Chilcott and the Council's Strategic Manager, Finance, Christian Evans to introduce and present the report. The report provided an overview of the Council's financial position from the Director of Finance as the Council's S151 Officer with detail from each service and commentary from the responsible Director set out in the body of the report.

The forecast outturn for service expenditure as at the end of June 2021 (month 3) was £354m against a budget of £349.7m which represented an overspend of £4.4m for the year if no further actions were taken. The significant variances were set out with further detail and actions being taken by the responsible Director outlined in the report

The Scrutiny for Policies and Place Committee then discussed the report and a number of points and questions were raised covering – Cabinet would consider the month four position at its next meeting; the funding of the pay award; the Park and Ride service in Taunton and clarification would be provided on 'paid seats'; the monitoring of savings and risks.

The Scrutiny Committee for Policy and Place Committee noted:-

- a) The forecast underspend of £3.8m. Made up of service overspends of £4.4m, offset by £6m of unallocated Corporate Contingency and £2m of unallocated Covid-19 Emergency Fund (section 12).
- b) The current estimated position and funding of the Capital Programme (section 27)
- c) The allocation of £0.2m of the Covid-19 Emergency Fund to support free travel from the Park and Ride sites for the remainder of 2021/22, the remaining costs will come from ECI budgets and reserves (section 24).
- d) The allocation of £0.08m from the Workforce Reserve to support the implementation of hybrid home/office working (section 17).
- e) The estimated reserves position, key risks, future issues and opportunities detailed in the report, which will be closely monitored throughout the year with forecasts updated as appropriate.

30 September 2021

Review of Cabinet Decision regarding disposal of Land in Ash

An extraordinary meeting was convened to consider Call-in submissions following the Call-in of a Cabinet Member Decision. Statements were presented to the Committee by Councillor Bloomfield and Councillors Munt and Rigby who also provided 37 questions for response by the Cabinet Member and Head of Property.

During the discussion the committee discussed, the criteria and terms of asset transfer for land owned by the Council and how land is valued. The option of progressing planning applications in advance of an asset disposal to increase the opportunities of the sale of a site. The details and background of the land disposal at Ash were given full consideration by the committee along with alternative options for the site and proposals discussed.

The Scrutiny for Polices and Place Committee unanimously agreed, proposed by Cllr Groskop and seconded by Cllr Filmer that in future reports, information is drafted in a more open and clear manner in the future to include information relating to policy, law, risks and opportunity. A further request was made that Councillors elected to the New Authority receive extensive training in how land and property is purchased and sold by the Council.

12 October 2021

Somerset's Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP)

The first item considered was the Somerset Bus Service Improvement Plan. The Chair welcomed the Cabinet Member for Public Transport and Highways, Councillor John Woodman and the Council's Strategic Manager for Highways and

Transport, Mike O'Dowd-Jones to the meeting.

In March 2021, the government launched the new National Bus Strategy – 'Bus Back Better' with the overall aim of transforming local bus services and increasing bus patronage. Under this new strategy the expectation was that Local Transport Authority's (LTA's) would enter Enhanced Partnership (EP) Agreements with local bus operators across the LTA to develop and deliver improvements across local bus services and enhance the experience for passengers.

LTAs had to publish a statutory Notice of Intent by the end of June 2021, committing to forming an EP with local bus operators. The EP will come into effect from April 2022. The BSIP would be instrumental in informing the government's future allocation of the £3 billion transformation fund for public transport.

The Committee then discussed, the opportunity for free bus passes for the over 60 age group and encouraging a pass for the under 25 age group, increased real time information at bus stops, the success of the free park and ride service in reducing traffic in Taunton and the potential for a similar service in Glastonbury, rural bus routes and maximising use in rural areas. Reliability of services and issues encountered with the shortage of drivers and the impact of the pandemic. Provision of electric buses as part of the future service and safety of passengers using the evening services to access the night-time economy.

The Scrutiny for Policies and Place Committee:-

1. Considered the emerging principles of the Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) as set out in the initial draft (Appendix A) and outlined in the accompanying presentation (Appendix B), which will inform the final BSIP due to be considered at Cabinet on 20th October 2021.
2. Considered on the outline Terms of Reference for a Bus Advisory Board (Appendix C).

Trading Standards Update

The second item considered was the Trading Standards Update. The Chair invited the Cabinet Member for Economic Development, Planning and Community Infrastructure, Councillor David Hall to introduce the item, praising the work of the staff in the service throughout the pandemic, the Council's Strategic Manager for the Economy and Planning Paul Hickson and the Trading Standards Service Manager Paul Thomas to introduce and provide a Powerpoint presentation setting out the service update and its achievements.

The Committee discussed monitoring social media, action fraud reporting, and work alongside the Citizens Advice in reporting fraudulent activity.

The Scrutiny for Policies and Place Committee noted the Trading Standards Update.

2021/22 Revenue Budget Monitoring Report – Month 4 – End of July

The third item considered was the 2021/22 Revenue Budget Monitoring Report – Month 4. The Chair invited the Cabinet Member for Resources, Councillor Mandy Chilcott and the Council's Strategic Manager for Finance, Christian Evans to introduce and present the report. The report provided an overview of the Council's financial position from the Director of Finance as the Council's S151 Officer with detail from each service and commentary from the responsible Director set out in the body of the report. The forecast outturn for service expenditure as at the end of July set out an underspend of £0.7m for the year if no further actions were taken.

The significant variances were set out with further detail and actions being taken by the responsible Director outlined in the report. There remained £1.9m of the Covid-19 Emergency budget unallocated but this would be fully utilised in the financial year to cover Covid-19 costs. When setting the 2021/22 budget it was clear that there were a significant number of uncertainties and to mitigate against this £6m was set aside in the Corporate Contingency. The significant variances and expectations in relation to the National pay award were set out.

The committee discussed the staff pay award, assurance was provided that the budget would be adjusted accordingly following any announcement. Costs incurred due to flooding in Chard were being claimed through the Bellwin scheme, the claim was currently being progressed with an update to be provided in due course. Further pressure and requests were expected from the ECI budget. Further details were requested in relation to costs incurred from Ash dieback treatment.

The Scrutiny for Policies and Place Committee:-

1. Noted the overall forecast underspend of £0.7m (section 12) and the key risks, future issues and opportunities detailed in the report which will be closely monitored and updated throughout the year.
2. Noted the request to use £1.167m from Funding Volatility Reserve to support additional maintenance activities on the County Highways network in 2021/22 as set in the Executive Summary of this report.

Asset Transfer Policy Update

The fourth item considered was the Asset Transfer Policy Update. The Chair welcomed the Cabinet Member for Resources and the Head of Property to introduce and provide an update in relation to the Asset Transfer Policy Update

The Head of Property provided a PowerPoint presentation relating to the Corporate Property Asset Management Plan & Asset Strategy and provided background to the asset transfer policy, setting out the purpose, qualifying criteria, and underpinning principles of Community Asset Transfers. The process of Community Asset Transfers was outlined with recent CAT Applications.

The committee discussed openness and transparency as part of future asset transactions. A full list of transactions at less than consideration since 2014 was requested. The effectiveness of the asset transfer policy was considered, which set a high bar but also allowed for the various circumstances encountered in respect of its assets.

The Scrutiny for Policies and Place Committee noted the Asset Transfer Policy Update.

2 November 2021

Phosphates Update

The first item considered was a Phosphates Update.

The Chair welcomed the Service Manager for Development and Planning who provided a PowerPoint presentation updating the Committee on work undertaken by Somerset County Council and partners in mitigating phosphate levels in watercourses across the County.

The committee discussed mitigation measures and working alongside partners such as District Councils, DEFRA and the Environment Agency. The impact on housing and land supply was considered alongside how mitigation measures compared with other Counties. Phosphate mitigation measures would be considered in the same sense as any other mitigation measures alongside developments to ensure that water quality would be improved across the Ramsar site.

The Scrutiny for Policies and Place Committee recommended that:-

1. Somerset County Council wait for the Somerset Wide Phosphate Strategy, before taking action, so that efforts are focused where they will have maximum impact.
2. Once the strategy work is concluded, it was recommended that SCC look at land holdings and assess land that could be used to assist with the offsetting of Phosphorous, possibly through the creation of credits that can be sold.

Rights of Way Update

The second item considered was a Rights of Way Update

The Chair welcomed the Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport and the Rights of Way Service Manager introduced the item and provided a Powerpoint presentation on the Service. There had been an increase in appetite in applications and service requests over the pandemic. The officer resource had been increased to help enable consideration of a greater number of applications. The service had received a record number of volunteers which were welcomed due to an increase in pressures felt in the maintenance team due to elevated levels of usage and reporting of issues. There had been a 200% increase in paths being adopted by volunteers in the last two years. Two meetings had been conducted with the bridleway association which had been useful.

The Committee discussed the applicants opportunity for appeal, the average time to consider applications, the growth in the numbers of people using rights of way and walking during the pandemic and the increase in volunteers, the resourcing of the team and backlog in applications which was expected to decrease after 2026. Rights of Way officers were commended for their hard work and swift responses to Councillors queries. Further and continued work was welcomed with the Parish and Town Councils alongside a contribution from the health and wellbeing budget to recognise the benefits from rights of way access to the community.

The Scrutiny for Polices and Place Committee noted the Rights of Way Update.

2021/22 Budget Monitoring Report – Month 5

The third item considered was a 2022/22 Budget Monitoring Report – Month 5.

The Cabinet Member for Resources and Strategic Manager for Finance and Business partnering introduced the item.

The forecast outturn for the year was a reported overspend of £0.4m after taking into account the Corporate Contingency and unallocated Covid-19 funding. Although the overall position set out was broadly on budget, there were service overspends which were highlighted to the committee.

It was further reported that £2m of the Covid-19 Emergency budget remained unallocated, this would be fully utilised in the financial year to cover Covid-19 costs. When setting the 2021/22 budget it was clear that there were a significant number of uncertainties and to mitigate against this £6m was set aside in the Corporate Contingency. It would be prudent to assume use of this contingency stood at £3m given the potential need highlighted in the month four report, in relation to pay award negotiations and the Chard flooding event.

The Committee discussed pressures around Adult and Children's services and how

these services could be sustained. Further information was requested from the committee in relation to attracting business investment to Somerset. The impact of the pandemic would be felt in the budget for many years to come, adults services had been compounded by the pressures from the NHS, and mental health impacts from the pandemic continued to be experienced. It was recognised that these were unprecedented pressures and complex picture with little control over pressures from these areas.

The Scrutiny for Policies and Place Committee noted the overall forecast overspend of £0.4m (section 12) and the key risks, future issues and opportunities detailed in the report which will be closely monitored and updated throughout the year.

2.3. Consultations undertaken

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

3. Implications

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

4. Background papers

- 4.1.** 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.