

Report of the Scrutiny Committee for Policies and Place

Cabinet Member: N/A

Division and Local Member: All

Chair: Cllr Anna Groskop

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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 Committee meetings held on 7 December, 12 January and the Advisory Board held on 1st February 2022.
- 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 of the Advisory Board will be held virtually at 10.00am on 15 March 2022.

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 December 2021

Local Government Reorganisation in Somerset: Update

The first item the Committee considered the Local Government Reorganisation in Somerset Update

This report set out the Local Government Reorganisation update and reported that the government had confirmed that the Council would be a Continuing Authority, 110 members would be elected in May 2022. The estimated savings of the new Council were in the region of £18,000,000.

The Programme Director provided a presentation with details of the key points which included that there would be a joint local, County and Town/Parish election in May 2022 for a 5-year term, to oversee the start of the Unitary Council in April 2023, running for 4 years to May 2027. Withing the LGR programme there were 6 workstreams led by two senior officers (one County and One District) looking at how services would be managed and these had over 40 sub-groups supporting them.

The committee discussed council tax and budget setting in advance of April 2023 in the first full year of the New Council. Communication with Town and Parish Councils was a concern in relation to LGR and their continuing roles. Parish and Town Councils were encouraged to be part of the twice monthly consultation meetings. Reassurance was provided that communications would be made once the Act of Parliament for the election had been approved for all Councils.

The committee considered and noted the update.

2021/22 Budget Monitoring Report – Month 6 – End of September.

The second item the committee considered was the 2021/22 Budget Monitoring Report.

The report set out a comprehensive view of the Council's Financial position. At the end of September 2021 the outturn revenue forecast expenditure position was reported at £354.4 million, which represented a £3 million underspend against the budget of £357.4 million and was an improved picture from month 5. Overspends were predicted in some services, especially with the continuing COVID impact and placement issues, as encountered in other Councils.

There remained £5million reserves unallocated, and £3million Corporate Contingencies, however Winter Pressures could require some of this funding. Details of the Capital Programme was detailed in the report and set out a year end estimated budget of £171.3 million against a budget of £217.1 million, reporting an estimated underspend of £7.6 million over the life of the programme.

The committee discussed delays and shortages in supplies impacting on the Council in 2022. This was a recognised risk alongside a shortage in recruitment in the workforce in some services.

The committee noted the forecast underspend of £3million.

12 January 2022

Climate Change Update

The first item considered was the Climate Change Update.

The Climate Change Programme Manager introduced the update which set out Climate Change activities at the Council. The key Actions of the County Council included the Climate Emergency Community Fund which had funded 44 projects, Carbon Literacy Training, Energy Assessor and Community Engagement Officer. The Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme had provided improvements to 12 Buildings including County Hall and Taunton and Yeovil Libraries which had led to a carbon reduction of up to 27% across the non-schools estate.

The committee discussed EV charging provision, housing retrofitting, Climate Change funding, building standards for new council buildings and schools, reductions in car travel alongside better provision in low carbon public transport and the Saltlands Energy Park and a similar project in Glastonbury. Funding for projects across the county set out that 9 had been completed and 35 underway through the Community Fund.

The committee noted the update.

Current Section 19 Flood Investigations

The second item considered Current Section 19 Flood Investigations

The role of the lead local flood authority was set out, and the role of the flood and water management team, and the instance where it was necessary to investigate a flood water event.

Risk Management authorities exercising functions in these events. Publish results of the investigations and notify the risk management authorities. The flooding was a surface water event, the Environment Agency wasn't involved in the flood event. Chard was already a known area of concern within Somerset and there was also an integrated catchment study underway before the flooding event.

A timeline of the incident response was set out. SCC was not a category 1 responder, so role was around emergency planning, recover and investigation.

The Committee discussed lessons learnt from recent flooding events as part of future procedure. Policy when formal investigation work once a section 19 investigation was instigated was considered. Reassurance was provided to the committee that partnership working and integrated studies included partners including Wessex Water, the Environment Agency and Wessex Water.

The committee noted the update

2021/22 Revenue Budget Monitoring Report – Month 7 – End of October 2021

The third item considered was the 2021/22 Revenue Budget Monitoring Report – Month 7.

The overall forecast outturn position was a £1.3m favourable variance after taking into account all service expenditure and contingencies against a net budget of £357.4m which represented a variance of 0.36%. A summary of the budget was provided, with projections and variances on a service by service basis with further detail and mitigations being taken by the responsible director outlined in the body of the report.

Significant variances were set out in the report and included Adults and Children's Services and Economic and Community Infrastructure. Favourable variances were reported in Corporate Costs and Contingencies.

The Committee discussed the funding that remained in the Outbreak Management Fund. Current figures as part of the homecare hours were requested to consider what could be done to prevent NHS bed blocking.

The Committee:-

- a) Noted the overall forecast underspend of £1.3m (section 12) and the key risks, future issues and opportunities detailed in the report which will be closely monitored and updated throughout the year.
- b) To note that all of the £10.8m Covid- 19 Emergency Fund is expected to be fully spent within the year
- c) A receive a verbal update on the MTFP and Finance Settlement.

Selection of Preferred Partner in relation to the future Business Support System

The fourth item considered the preferred partner in relation to the future Business Support System.

The proposal and decision related to the first discovery phase. This would be looked at with the new councils IT requirements, working closely with the LGR team and district colleagues, progressing to the next decision gateway in March 2022. SAP end of life planning had been recognised for some time. A further decision in March would reflect the needs and ambitions for the new council.

The committee discussed what involvement the District Councils had in respect of the consideration of the future business support system. The existing SAP system and the option of further extending this until after the vesting day of the new Council. Concerns were expressed by the committee in respect of the risks around the implementation of the new system due to the short timeframe before implementation alongside the number of partners involved in transferring the existing systems across the County and District Councils.

The Scrutiny for Policies and Place Committee:-

1. The Scrutiny for Policies and Place Committee recommends that Cabinet ensure that full integration with the District Councils occurs on this most critical of decisions, in consultation with the Senior Leadership and Political Leadership Teams.
2. The Committee requested that a full exploration of a fall-back position of SAP takes place, led by the finance team.
3. The risks of this decision be fully considered as part of Somerset County Council's risk register and as part of the Local Government Reorganisation risks.

1 February 2022 (Scrutiny for Policy and Place Advisory Board)

2021/22 Revenue Budget Monitoring Report – Month 8 – End of November 2021

The first item considered was the 2021/22 Revenue Budget Monitoring Report – Month 8.

The projected outturn position was reported at £356.2m against a net budget of £357.3m. This provided a £1.1m favourable variance which represented a variance of 0.3%. This was a small adverse movement of £0.2m since month seven.

A summary of the budget was provided with projections and variances on a service-by-service basis with further detail and mitigations being taken by the responsible director outlined in the body of the report. The significant adverse variances were reported in Adults and Children's Services and Economic and Community Infrastructure. Favourable variances were reported in Corporate Costs and contingencies.

The committee discussed and requested increased funding for highways to enable service and highways improvements.

The Advisory Board:-

- a) Noted the overall forecast underspend of £1.1m (section 12) and the key risks, future issues and opportunities detailed in the report which will be closely monitored and updated throughout the year.
- b) Noted the use of £1.4m Covid-19 Emergency Fund for use against additional pressures in Children's Services relating to the pandemic (sections 14 and 22)

Medium Term Financial Plan 2022/23 Budget Update

The second item considered was the Medium Term Financial Plan 2022/23 Budget Update.

The report introduced the key areas of specific interest within the Medium-Term Financial Plan to the Scrutiny Advisory Board for Policies and Place Services as well as an overview of the overall budget for 2022/23. The report was considered by Cabinet on the 20th January and set out proposals that produce a balanced budget for 2022/23. The appropriate Directors would attend the Committee to provide assurances around the changes made to budgets and funding for 2022/23.

The Board discussed finance risk in relation to Local Government Reorganisation. Further information was requested in relation to carbon capture, tree canopy and funding for walking and cycling initiatives. Funding for Voluntary sector organisations and LGR IT projects was requested to be provided following the meeting

The Advisory Board reviewed and noted specific proposals for changes from previous years, so that they can comment on them and the overall robustness of the proposed budget for 2022/23 as part of the overall assurance framework to Cabinet. As part of that assurance the Committee is requested to identify any matters for consideration

that they would like to highlight to the Cabinet on the 14th February 2022.

Somerset's Enhanced Partnership (EP) Plan and Scheme

Following the launch of the government's National Bus Strategy: Bus Back Better in March 2021, in June 2021, Somerset County Council (SCC) committed to creating an Enhanced Partnership (EP) with local bus operators and published a Statutory Notice of Intent confirming this intention. This was followed by the publication of the initial Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) in October 2021, which following engagement with local bus operators, other key stakeholders and members of the public, sets out Somerset's high-level ambition for public transport across the County and bids for a share of the governments' bus transformation fund.

The Board discussed the prioritisation of the elements of the plan depending the level of funding received by central government, disabled access to public transport and future provision of more environmentally friendly busses across the county.

The Advisory Board considered and noted the draft Enhanced Partnership (EP) Plan and Scheme (Appendix A) in advance of the final EP Plan and Scheme being considered at Cabinet on 16th March 2022.

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.