

SCRUTINY FOR POLICIES AND PLACE COMMITTEE

Minutes of a Meeting of the Scrutiny for Policies and Place Committee held in the The Canalside Conference Centre, Marsh Lane, Huntworth, Somerset, TA6 6LQ, on Wednesday 1 February 2023 at 1.00 pm

Present: Cllr G Wren (Chair), Cllr M Barr, Cllr T Butt Philip, Cllr L Duddridge, Cllr E Hobbs, Cllr D Mansell, Cllr H Farbahi, Cllr J Roundell Greene, Cllr M Chilcott, Cllr S Carswell, Cllr M Lovell and Cllr R Wilkins

Other Members present:

Apologies for absence: Cllr D Johnson, Cllr T Deakin, Cllr A Dingwall, Cllr H Prior-Sankey, Cllr W Read and Cllr A Soughton

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

Cllr Mansell declared a pension from the Local Government Pension Scheme.

22 **Public Question Time** - Agenda Item 3

There were two questions, statements or petitions received.

Mr Peter Travis – Chair Somerset Bus User and Stakeholder Group:

- "Our original Bus Manifesto issued in May 2022 called for Somerset's spend on supporting buses to be increased during the term of the new councils up to the average of that of our neighbouring councils. This was endorsed by two thirds of newly elected Unitary Councillors. We believe Councillors across the political spectrum now recognise buses are a vital service on which many Somerset residents depend. Buses are integral part of how the Council addresses the challenges of its climate emergency agenda and the cost-of-living crisis. Important strides on buses have been made in Somerset during 2022/23. However, most of the initiatives introduced in Somerset this past year have been funded by central Government. Most notably, the £12m BSIP award made to SCC has funded the £1 fare in Taunton, the new evening services radiating out from Taunton and the bus priority schemes in our County town. The Government's Bus Recovery Grant has been used to fund the continuation of bus services in Wells, Frome and elsewhere. But there have been cuts in bus services, particularly in the Yeovil area. Despite the pressure on next year's council budget, we need to stabilise Somerset's bus network and prevent any further decline in our bus services. That is likely to require increased funding from the new Somerset

Council. That was a view supported of the majority of councillors elected to the Unitary Council.”

Mr David Redgewell – South West Transport Network

- “We would like to ask the following questions on budget and public transport services provided by Somerset County Council. Will the council bus service support budget be increased to cover the on-going support for bus services
 - Frome Town service 30 ,68 Yeovil bus and coach station to Yeovil pen mill and Yeovil junction railway service,
 - 81 South Petherton to Yeovil bus and coach station,
 - D2 Bath spa bus and coach station to Midford Norton St Phillips Rode, Beckington and Frome,
 - Evening service, Sunday service is support by the Department for transport covid 19 bus service recovery grant,
 - 126 Wells bus and coach station to Draycott, Cheddar, Axbridge, Winscombe, Banwell, Locking, Weston bus and coach station. This bus service need to extend to Weston super mare bus and coach in partnership with North Somerset Council
 - The 173/172 is still at risk of being cut back between Wells Bus and Coach Station to Chilcompton or Paulton, Midsomer Norton, Westfield Radstock, Peasdown St John and Bath spa bus and coach station, 172 evening service is being withdrawn on 1st April 2023. This s discussion with West of England Mayoral Combined Transport Authority metro mayor Dan Norris.

With bus service inflation costs on 47% on tender prices provision needs to be made to support county council support bus services. There are concerns from passenger group that theses bus service will be support by the local transport authority Somerset Council if government funding is reduced by the Department for Transport. With the county council being now Somerset Council, taking in provision of taking over Somerset bus and coach stations at Wells, Bridgwater, Yeovil, Wincanton bus and coach station, Frome Cork Street, coach stations in Glastonbury, Street and Wellington. What is the maintenance budget for such facilities including the new Taunton transport hub formerly Taunton bus and coach station? Along with bus stops and shelters, public transport information outside Taunton Bus Service Improvement Plan improvement area, the public transport support service grant needs to be increased to allow for the county having less commercial bus companies.

We would ask the Scrutiny Committee to look at funding of public transport network services:

- money for further Development work at Wellington station, and
- financial support that required to keep the Somerset Council own West Somerset railway safe, or
- development design work at Somerton and Langport station if it goes ahead
- money to improve public footways and cycle way provision especially in Somerset urban centres of Frome, Yeovil Bridgwater Taunton and Wellington.

A written answer will be provided to both submissions.

23 **Proposed Council Plan for Somerset Council - Agenda Item 4**

The Chair invited Leader of the Council, Cllr Bill Revans to introduce the report. Cllr Revans also introduced the Strategic Manager – Commissioning Development, Sunita (Sam) Mills.

The following key points were highlighted:

- New Somerset Council Plans sets out ambition for greener, more sustainable Somerset that is healthier and more caring, and a flourishing and more resilient county.
- Cross-cutting values have been identified and form a key component.
- Engagement with partners and other stakeholders now complete and feedback being carefully considered.
- Plan is high level vision to be supported by forthcoming Business Plan with more detail on how to deliver the Council Plan's priorities.
- Overarching commitment to build a fairer, greener, more flourishing Somerset that cares for the vulnerable.

Member comments/questions were invited:

- Whilst 24 digital access to advice and support welcomed, request for other means (i.e. postal address) also to be included. Officer agreed.
- Request to strengthen commitment to sustainable development to ensure all decisions are taken in this context and to identify energy, as well as transport, as a key driver in aspiration to carbon neutrality. Officer agreed and also agreed to link the Plan to the Climate Emergency Statement.
- Request to continue commitment to Active Travel. Officer agreed.
- Welcomed commitment to collaboration (both internal and partner) to identify needs across whole organisation for joined-up approach to service delivery.
- A Councillor asked if new directorates deliberately align with areas of Council Plan. Officer confirmed and stated structure designed to identify

ownership but not exclusivity of service areas, and also to encourage cross-directorate working.

- Support for the most vulnerable welcomed and request for voice of children to be stronger.
- Budget commitment to LCNs deemed essential if to play intended key role.
- A Councillor asked if modest Public Health budget was sufficient to achieve aims of a healthy and caring Somerset in terms of preventative work. Officer confirmed budget would likely be insufficient but that the commitment to collaborative working would assist service delivery.
- Suggestion of incorporation of Public Health (PH) portfolio across all services with suggested PH Ambassadors with other services officers upskilled with PH knowledge.
- Request to include backbench members in consultations and also children where there can be high levels of 'eco-anxiety'. Suggestion of junior version of Plan.
- Request for inclusion of town-centre regeneration and coastal communities to address to address flourishing and resilient aims.

In summary:

- Members felt the message could be more forceful in terms of sustainable development. Members requested the Plan be as inclusive as possible. Ambitious views of Plan were welcomed. All present were broadly happy with the draft Plan.

The scrutiny committee reviewed the draft Council Plan as set out in appendix A and provided feedback.

24 Medium Term Financial Plan - Agenda Item 5

The Chair invited Lead Member for Finance and Human Resources – Cllr Liz Leyshon to introduce the report. Cllr Leyshon also introduced Director of Finance and Governance - Jason Vaughan.

The following key points were highlighted:

- Proposed balanced budget to protect frontline services delivered by existing Councils and voluntary sector partners.
- Complex process of combining five budgets for operation from 1 April.
- Unprecedented demand for services particularly in Social Care, as well as pressures of high inflation and LGR.
- Capital programme updated for new and existing schemes (some with government funding) now RAG rated.

- LGR implementation budget £3.12m for 2022-23 with £900,000 additional funding requirements so approx. £4m under flexible use of capital receipts.
- New savings proposals £3.9m related to staffing, £2.9m from tier 2 & 3 appointments and £1 from other appointments equating to 300 posts over 3 years.
- Section 25 checks show robust budget estimates, realistic projection for service demand; adequacy in level of reserves proposed to stay at £47.4m in the range of £30-50m; assurance of reasonable level of reserves for next year's budget.

Member comments/questions were invited:

- A Councillor asked how 1% increase in inflation would affect the budget. Officer stated example of staff pay award that was budgeted at 5%, so 1% inflation rise is £1.5m, which would come from the £6m general contingency.
- Asked for clarification of the £6m contingency. Officer explained this is 1.25% of service spend and any increase to contingency is detracted from services and therefore necessitate balanced approach. Contingency funds to considered with general reserves.
- Risk for Somerset Council for 2023-24 higher than most authorities due to LGR before savings realised.
- Stated Education SEND funds for 2023-24 included additional £3.2m from government.
- A Councillor asked for confirmation of inflation costs in proposed budget. Officer stated varying forms of inflation e.g., inflationary pay award, waste contract inflationary increases. General inflationary increases are not included.
- Asked what effect savings from inflationary charge increases (e.g., bulky waste collection) or proposed change to charged services (e.g. grit bins) on those with no alternative. Officer stated that most savings from alternatives to services rather than removal, such as move to charged service for grit bins.
- Request for overview of district capital projects and greater opportunity for scrutiny of larger projects including high profile cases. Officer stated the need for posting-vesting review of capital programme.
- Asked if fall in business rate income would be temporary. Officer outlined complex picture of business rate income and difficult task of predicting income due to government relief schemes. Total income projection for 2023-24 £122.173m, 50% of which goes to central government.
- Stated that CCTV removal saving should be reviewed to make savings only where quality of service is low. Call for review of service.

- Stated that proposed £1m saving in Children's Services from move away from costly unregulated placements, should be viewed as medium risk and was attracting national attention.

In summary:

- Members welcomed the balanced budget proposal and acknowledged the risk of £20m of reserves. Members requested urgent review of CCTV provision. All present were broadly content with the proposals.

The Scrutiny Committee are asked to consider the budget report as attached at Appendix A as requested by Executive on the 19 January 2023 and comment back to them on the 13 February 2023 including the following:

- **The overall proposals to balance the 2023/24 budget**
- **The savings proposals in Appendix 2 (within Appendix A) in conjunction with the Equalities Impact Assessments attached at Appendix B and the fees and charges proposals attached at Appendix C.**

**The meeting ended at 2.58pm
END**

(The meeting ended at Time Not Specified)

CHAIRMAN