

South Somerset District Council

Minutes of a meeting of the **District Executive** held as a **Virtual Meeting using Zoom meeting software on Thursday 1 July 2021.**

(9.30 - 11.05 am)

Present:

Councillor Val Keitch (Chairman)

Jason Baker
Mike Best
John Clark
Adam Dance
Sarah Dyke

Peter Gubbins
Henry Hobhouse
Tony Lock
Peter Seib



Also Present:

Brian Hamilton
Sue Osborne
Gina Seaton

Gerard Tucker
Linda Vijeh

Officers:

Nicola Hix	Director (Strategy and Support Services)
Kirsty Larkins	Director (Service Delivery)
Jill Byron	Monitoring Officer
Karen Watling	Interim Section 151 Officer
Paul Matravers	Lead Specialist (Finance)
Ian Timms	Yeovil Refresh Project Manager
Leigh Rampton	Lead Specialist (Communities)
Stephanie Gold	Specialist (Scrutiny & Member Development)
Peter Paddon	Lead Specialist (Economy)
Joe Walsh	Specialist (Economic Development)
Natalie Fortt	Regeneration Programme Manager
Angela Cox	Specialist (Democratic Services)
Michelle Mainwaring	Case Officer (Strategy & Support Services)
Becky Sanders	Case Officer (Strategy & Support Services)

Note: All decisions were approved without dissent unless shown otherwise.

21. Apologies for Absence (Agenda Item 1)

An apology for absence was received from Alex Parmley, the Chief Executive, and Clare Pestell, Director for Commercial Services and Income Generation.

22. Declarations of Interest (Agenda Item 2)

There were no declarations of interest made by Members.

23. Public Question Time (Agenda Item 3)

There were no members of the public present.

24. Chairman's Announcements (Agenda Item 4)

The Chairman thanked Council staff for their work and particularly those who had responded to the flooding incident in Chard earlier in the week.

The Chairman advised that the Appointments Committee were meeting the following week and they hoped to recommend the appointment of an interim Chief Executive to Council on Thursday 8th July. She also noted that there was a special meeting of the District Executive on the morning of 8th July.

25. Planning Reimagined Update (Agenda Item 5)

The Portfolio Holder for Protecting Core Services introduced the report and said the planning service still required improvement but it was improving. He felt the Scrutiny Committee debate had been very good and he said officers were doing all they could to improve the service. The effects of COVID and the phosphate issues made evaluation of improvements in the service premature. The Planning Reimagined group would meet again in 6 months time and would report again to District Executive.

In response to questions from Members, the Portfolio Holder for Protecting Core Services the Director for Service Delivery advised:

- The number of planning enforcement reports had increased as people had worked from home and were more aware of their area but the staffing level had also increased. There was also now an on-line reporting system and there had been an increase in reports since this had been introduced.
- The majority of planning applications received were householder applications but there were still minor and major applications submitted. Statistics on the number and type of applications would be circulated to Members.
- The fees for householder applications were lower and they often took more time to assess than allocated. The recent amendments made to the Scheme of Delegation would save officer time as most applications would not be determined at Area Committees.
- It was very difficult to prevent breaches of planning permission.
- Planning conditions were clear and there were some repeat offenders who pushed the boundaries of their permission. Some cases were being progressed to court action and it was hoped this would be a deterrent to other.

- Meetings with Area Chairmen and planning officers had now started.
- Due to the size of the proposals, many solar panel applications were automatically referred to Regulation Committee under the two star referral process.
- Consideration that planning briefings should be compulsory for all Councillors.
- Planning application validation had been reduced to less than one week which was a great achievement and would be maintained.
- An interim Lead Specialist and a Technical Lead Specialist had been appointed to the planning service.
- The interim Lead Specialist had been liaising with Town and Parish Councils to provide specific training to them, focusing on their role as consultees in the planning process.
- The interim Lead Specialist would also be providing further training to all Councillors on the planning process, probity and the Member role as refresher training. Any changes in legislation would also be communicated to all Members.

During discussion the following points were made:-

- Review of 2 star reference of planning applications to the Regulation Committee was discussed at the Area Chairmens meeting the previous day.
- The Scrutiny Committee members had expressed their gratitude to the officers who had assisted in the flooding event in Chard earlier that week.

At their meeting earlier in the week, the Scrutiny Committee had questioned how SSDC's planning service performance compared to other local and national authorities. They also raised questions regarding ward member involvement in applications going forward to Regulation Committee, concerns regarding timeframes and processes for notifying parish / town councils and receiving their comments, concern about enforcement which was often a controversial subject at parish meetings, a training video for members or parishes, and, if the planning re-imagined workshops would be reconvening in the near future?

It was noted that these questions had been answered at the meeting by the Director for Service Delivery.

At the conclusion of the debate, the majority of Members were content to propose the recommendations for confirmation by the Chief Executive.

RESOLVED: That District Executive recommend that Chief Executive agrees to:-

- a. note the contents of the report.
- b. an update on the implementation of the action agreed by the working group to come forward to District Executive in

January 2022.

Reason: To note the progress made on the Planning Reimagined Action Plan developed through a series of workshops with cross-party members

(Voting: 9 in favour, 0 against, 1 abstention)

26. Review of Priority Project 1 of the Council's Annual Action Plan 2021- 2022 (Agenda Item 6)

The Portfolio Holder for Commercial Services and Income Generation advised that it was correct to review the Priority Project 1 of the Annual Action Plan as the Council recovered from the effects of the COVID pandemic and add a quarterly action plan.

The Economic Development Specialist advised that if agreed, the outcomes and key milestones within Priority Project 1 would be aligned with the Recovery and Renewal Strategy as adopted by District Executive on 1st April and would allow a more focussed delivery of the objectives.

The Chairman of the Scrutiny Committee said they had raised several points regarding sources of funding, engagement with education providers to assist with employment, what progress had been made with the health and well-being framework, more information required on the digital infrastructure, how the Action Plan would integrate in the future of local government in Somerset, and, any carry over of work not completed in quarter one to quarter two. He noted that the majority of questions were answered at their meeting.

The Portfolio Holder for Commercial Services and Income Generation advised that the funding of all Council Plan actions and objectives were regularly reviewed and further details would be reported shortly to the District Executive within the Financial Strategy report. He also confirmed that SSDC worked closely with Yeovil College as an education provider of leadership in employment.

The Lead Specialist for Economy, Place and Recovery confirmed that he had attended the Scrutiny Committee meeting to answer their questions and he could provide more detail if required, particularly regarding the welfare and wellbeing plan, which was a joint project between Economy and Community.

The Lead Specialist for Communities advised that as the NHS emerged from the pandemic, they were more collaborative at a local level and they were developing a neighbourhood approach to working with SSDC and the voluntary sector to address health. The long term health effects of COVID were not yet known and the NHS had done some public health profiling so they could work together on a Health and Wellbeing Framework and use the information to bring funding applications forward.

In response to a question, the Economic Development Specialist confirmed that the recovery and growth projects being progressed by Economic Development team had two overarching themes of inclusivity and environment. Green jobs had been discussed with staff at Yeovil College in their training provision for re-skilling workers and there was an aspiration for employment hubs across the district which would link to the Government's green jobs plan.

At the conclusion of the debate, Members were content to propose the recommendations to Full Council.

RESOLVED: That District Executive recommend that the Chief Executive propose to Full Council that the outcomes and key milestones contained in Priority Project 1 are revised as per Appendix A of this report.

Reason: To recommend the revised Priority Project 1 outcomes and key milestones for adoption within the Council's Annual Action Plan 2021-2022 to reflect the current Covid 19 Recovery and Renewal Strategy as adopted by District Executive on 1st April 2021.

27. 2020/21 Revenue Outturn Report Period Ending 31st March 2021 (Agenda Item 7)

The Portfolio Holder for Finance and Legal Services advised that the impact of COVID had affected staff as they administered the new business grants as well as continuing in their budget forecasting and monitoring roles and he thanked them for their work in a challenging year. He said there were some favourable and some adverse variances by service as detailed in table 2 and he said the key areas for the year were the adverse impact in the commercial investments, car park income, the suspension of the recovery action in revenues and benefits, the increase in planning applications for development management and the enforcement action required. Also, the remote working by all staff had meant a number of changes to support this. He concluded that the Council continued to secure value for money and remain in a good financial position. Some unallocated funds had been drawn down but this was within tolerance. He proposed that the recommendations be agreed by Members.

In response to a question, the Director for Strategy and Support Services said she would confirm later that SSDC data had been passed to SCC on those businesses who had previously received government grants to help them administer the new £6M for business grants.

The Portfolio Holder for Finance and Legal Services said that Somerset had a high proportion of micro businesses and many missed out in the original government COVID grants scheme for various reasons. It was hoped that the new funding would be targeted towards those businesses.

The Chairman of the Scrutiny Committee said they had sought clarification on the term re-gear in relation to the commercial investments in the report and also Table 1 – page 23 – members noted there was a large variation on spend associated with the Chief Executives (Directorate) budget.

The Lead Specialist for Finance confirmed that there had been an overspend of £270,000 relating to the Director post, an efficiency of service, transformation and consultancy costs and a small amount on Stronger Somerset.

The recommendations were proposed and seconded and were unanimously agreed by Members.

RESOLVED: That District Executive recommend that Chief Executive agrees to:-

- a. Note the net spending for the year of £15,188,955, the variance position compared to final budget, and the explanations of variances from budget holders for the 2020/21 financial year;
- b. Approve budget carry forwards of £364,860 into the 2021/22 budget (as shown in Appendix B);
- c. Approve the budget virements in paragraph 45, table 9;
- d. Note the virements in Appendix E;
- e. Note the use of the specific reserves in paragraph 38 and the transfers to and from balances outlined in the General Fund table paragraph 40, table 7;
- f. Note the position of the Area Committee balances in paragraph 42.

Reason: To provide Members with the actual spending and income (“outturn”) against the Council’s approved Revenue Budget for the financial year, and to explain the variations against budget.

28. 2020/21 Capital Outturn Report Period Ending 31st March 2021 (Agenda Item 8)

The Portfolio Holder for Finance and Legal Services noted that SSDC had increased the capital allocated for commercial investment during the year to allow the Fareham battery storage project to come forward, but there was still an underspend at the year-end. He noted that the majority of expenditure had been on commercial investments made to support the delivery of council services. The council’s regeneration schemes had benefitted from capital expenditure as

detailed in paragraph 8 of the report. The Council's borrowing was mainly internal borrowing and it was backed by the assets bought. He concluded the year end point was favourable in a changeable financial environment and he proposed the recommendations be agreed by Members.

The Chairman of the Scrutiny Committee said they had asked if there was any update regarding the Arlingclose review of external borrowing options and if so, could it be circulated to Scrutiny members for information? They had also requested additional training regarding capital and interest payments and had asked why the council was barred from utilising Public Works Loans Board for low interest borrowing, for which a response had been provided.

The Portfolio Holder for Finance and Legal Services advised that there were restrictions placed by the Government recently on how the Public Works Loan Board could be used to discourage some Councils from using it to gain commercial income. Therefore SSDC could not use this as a source of funding as it had future intent to borrow for commercial income generation.

The recommendations were proposed and seconded and unanimously agreed by Members.

RESOLVED: That District Executive recommend that Chief Executive agrees to:-

- a. Note the overall capital outturn position as described in this report.
- b. Approve the revised quarter 4 capital budget as described in paragraph 11.

Reason: To inform Members of the total spend for the year 2020/21 on the capital programme and how this compares with the agreed budget for the year, with explanations for the main differences. The report also summarises what outcomes were delivered through the capital invested and how this has been funded.

29. Financing the Yeovil Refresh (Agenda Item 9)

The Portfolio Holder for the Yeovil Refresh said that unless grant funding was forthcoming then areas of the Yeovil Refresh scheme would have to be deleted and SSDC would have to re-apply to the Future High Streets Fund. Doing this then ran a risk of not meeting future criteria of the Future High Streets Fund and so also risked losing the £9.75m granted by them. He said that town centres were changing and they needed the support of their local councils to survive, as they were being supported by various local employers and national companies.

He also thanked officers for their commitment to the projects and he proposed that the recommendations be agreed by Members.

The Portfolio Holder for Finance and Legal Services noted that Councillors had benefitted from a confidential appendix which detailed the additional costs which could not be made public without compromising the Council's commercial position. He noted that development costs had increased in some areas and all the possible savings had been reviewed. The town centre workspace project was not included and it would come forward as a separate business case. He said it was an unavoidable cost to move forward with the Yeovil Refresh and it was affordable. It would attract attention from developers and businesses who were looking for places to invest and he seconded the recommendations.

During discussion, Members voiced their support for the Yeovil Refresh and to support long term regeneration across the district.

It was clarified that the Yeovil Vision had covered the whole of the town and surrounding area whereas the Yeovil Refresh was specific to the town centre.

The Chairman of the Scrutiny Committee thanked the Portfolio Holder for the Yeovil Refresh and the Portfolio Holder for Protecting Core Services for attending their meeting and answering Members questions. He said they had questioned the repayment period of 50 years for the loans and also whether there would be developer contributions or business rates pooling funding in the scheme. They had also asked what would happen if the funding detailed in the report recommendation was not agreed and how much of the scheme would be scaled-back.

The recommendation, having been proposed and seconded, were unanimously agreed by Members.

RESOLVED: That District Executive recommend that Chief Executive agrees to recommend that Council agrees:-

- a. an increase of the Yeovil Refresh **net** budget of £2,604,168.
- b. an increase in long term borrowing of £2,604,168 to fund the project.
- c. an increase to the gross budget by £367k from the current approved budget (see Appendix A for more detail)

That District Executive recommends that the Chief Executive agrees to ask Council to note:

- a. that a future Council meeting will consider the Business Case for establishing a cooperative working space at Yeovil.

- b. that in the worst case scenario the Council may need to increase its long term borrowing to £4,529,168m in total (ref. Para 26)

Reason: To outline the current position relating to delivery of the Yeovil Refresh and the additional funding to be unlocked if SSDC wish to fully benefit from the successful Future High Streets Fund (FHSF) bid.

30. District Executive Forward Plan (Agenda Item 10)

The following additions and amendments to the Forward Plan were noted:

- Cyber Security Strategy – August 2021
- SSDC Financial Strategy – moved to Sept 2021
- Review of SSDC Commercial Strategy – moved to Sept 2021
- Capital and Revenue Budget Monitoring reports for Quarter 1 – moved to Sept 2021
- Refresh of Medium Term Financial Plan – Sept 2021
- Review of Chard Regeneration Scheme – Sept 2021
- Update on the Recycle More Project – November 2021

It was also noted that the Scrutiny Committee had suggested it would be useful to compare and align the Scrutiny Work Programme with the District Executive Forward Plan where appropriate. Scrutiny Members had also asked when the CIL funding and allocation report would be presented to Council, the status of the current Local Plan review and also regarding the A358 Taunton to Southfields dualling, what role did SSDC have in supporting the parishes affected.

RESOLVED: That the District Executive request that the Chief Executive:-

1. approve the updated Executive Forward Plan for publication as attached at Appendix A, with the following amendments;
 - Cyber Security Strategy – August 2021
 - SSDC Financial Strategy – moved to Sept 2021
 - Review of SSDC Commercial Strategy – moved to Sept 2021
 - Capital and Revenue Budget Monitoring reports for Quarter 1 – moved to Sept 2021
 - Refresh of Medium Term Financial Plan – Sept 2021
 - Review of Chard Regeneration Scheme – Sept 2021
 - Update on the Recycle More Project – November 2021

2. noted the contents of the Consultation Database as shown at Appendix B.

Reason: The Forward Plan is a statutory document.

31. Date of Next Meeting (Agenda Item 11)

Members noted that there was a Special meeting of the District Executive on **Thursday 8th July 2021** commencing at 9.30am as a virtual meeting via Zoom.

They also noted that the next monthly meeting of the District Executive would take place on **Thursday, 5th August 2021** commencing at 9.30 a.m.

The venue of the meeting would depend upon the decision of Council on 8th July 2021.

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Chairman

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Date