

South Somerset District Council

Minutes of a meeting of the **District Executive** held as a **Virtual Meeting using Zoom meeting software on Thursday 3 March 2022.**

(9.30 - 11.02 am)

Present:

Councillor Val Keitch (Chairman)

Jason Baker
Mike Best
John Clark
Adam Dance

Peter Gubbins
Tony Lock
Peter Seib



Also Present:

Gerard Tucker

Officers:

Jane Portman
Jan Gamon
Kirsty Larkins
Jill Byron
Anna Matthews
John Hammond
Peter Paddon
Robert Orrett
Stephanie Gold
Angela Cox
Jo Morris

Chief Executive
Director (Place and Recovery)
Director (Service Delivery)
Monitoring Officer
Chard High Street HAZ Project Manager
Lead Specialist (Built Environment)
Acting Director (Place and Recovery)
Commercial Property, Land & Development Manager
Specialist (Scrutiny & Member Development)
Specialist (Democratic Services)
Case Officer (Strategy & Support Services)

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

153. Minutes of Previous Meetings (Agenda Item 1)

The minutes of the previous meeting held on 10 February and the special meeting held on 17 February 2022 were approved as correct records and would be signed by the Chairman.

154. Apologies for Absence (Agenda Item 2)

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Sarah Dyke and Henry Hobhouse.

155. Declarations of Interest (Agenda Item 3)

There were no declarations of interest made by Members at the meeting.

156. Public Question Time (Agenda Item 4)

There were no members of the public present.

157. Chairman's Announcements (Agenda Item 5)

The Chairman expressed her concerned and anxiety regarding the current situation in the Ukraine but said she was heartened to hear of local peoples response, particularly from the local polish community to take aid to the Ukrainian people.

158. Chard Shop Front Design Guide (Agenda Item 6)

The Portfolio Holder for Area West advised that with the completion of the Chard Leisure Centre, the focus was now on the town centre improvements which included paving and the public realm. The town centre improvements had attracted £1m in funding from Historic England and the Shop Front Design Guide was a key component of the improvements. The guide offered advice to achieving improvements to shop fronts in the town centre.

In response to a question the Acting Director for Place and Recovery advised that the guide would become a Supplementary Planning Document and would be relevant to all planning situations from applications to enforcement.

The Chairman of the Scrutiny Committee advised that they had asked what could be done to replicate the scheme in other towns and they had been advised that any town entering into a Neighbourhood Plan could address design within their plan, including more specific policy on shopfronts if they chose to. He said they were broadly accepting of the guide and had asked questions regarding incentives to encourage people to make the improvements set out in the design guide.

At the conclusion of the debate, the recommendations were proposed and seconded and agreed by Members.

The Chairman thanked the officers involved for their work in compiling the guide.

RESOLVED: That District Executive recommend:-

- a. that Full Council agree to formally adopt the attached Chard Shop Front Design Guide (Appendix A) as a Supplementary Planning Document (SPD), and subsequently to delegate to

the HSHAZ Project Manager to make copies of the SPD and adoption statement available to the public for the prescribed period.

- b. that the Chief Executive agrees to delegate to the Acting Director/HSHAZ Project Manager the authority to make any factual or typographical corrections to the SPD prior to making the copies available in this way.

Reason: To seek formal adoption of the Chard Shop Front Design Guide as a Supplementary Planning Document, supporting policies in the South Somerset Local Plan 2006-2028, in accordance with The Town and Country Planning (Local Planning) (England) Regulations 2012.

159. Planning Reimagined (Agenda Item 7)

The Portfolio Holder advised that the cross-party workshops held with officers and an external facilitator had been extremely useful and had been one of the best he had participated in and a healthy debate had taken place on a number of issues and a great deal had been achieved. He noted that SSDC was now 6 out of 21 authorities in terms of speed and 90% of applications had been determined within time over the last 24 months. .

In response to questions from Members, the Lead Specialist for Built Environment and the Director for Service Delivery advised:-

- Every planning application impacted by phosphates had a specific review by Natural England which was a resource issue. Until the Council had a standard position then all of the variables were being checked on applications which was doubling the workload in some cases and until SSDC had credit releases Natural England would have to audit the appraisal.
- There had been around a 22% increase in householder applications and approximately 300 held up due to phosphates.
- It was hoped to provide a solution to the phosphate issue with En Trade.
- Point 9 of the report included agreed extensions of time.
- Part of the improvement package was to prioritise planning enforcement and good progress had been made as the number of cases had reduced from 500 to 360.
- 21 days was the standard deadline for consultation responses but officers would accept comments up to when their report was written.
- The service had relied on using Locality Officers to conduct site visits but recently they were employing more geographically local officers to conduct their own site visits.

- Planning enforcement action was now being prioritised and there were 16 active cases being progressed to court action.

The Portfolio Holder noted that the Lead Specialist for Built Environment had provided an excellent update at Area South Committee the previous day and some issues relating to the phosphates issue were beyond the Council's control.

The Director for Service Delivery and the Portfolio Holder for Area South thanked both officers and Members who had taken part in the Planning Reimagined workshops.

The Chairman of the Scrutiny Committee said that planning was an emotive issue which was time-bound. The Scrutiny Committee had felt the cross-party group to review the service was very good. They had raised questions regarding extensions of time to applications, undertaking site-visits during Covid, and did SSDC have a landscape officer? They also felt it would have been useful to have a paper on the phosphate issue presented at the same time. Mention was also made to improve communication with town & parish councils and officers providing planning enforcement action.

At the conclusion of the debate, the Portfolio thanked officers for the work they had achieved and asked that the report be noted.

RESOLVED: The District Executive noted the content of the report, and progress made by the planning service.

Reason: To provide Members with an update on the work carried out in relation to the Planning Reimagined Action Plan (Appendix A)

160. Investment Asset Update Report (Agenda Item 8)

The Portfolio Holder for Economic Development noted this was a 6 month update report and provided the following highlights:-

- In excess of 95% of commercial rents on investment properties had been collected during the pandemic.
- The prudential code had changed in December 2021 which prevented further commercial investments.
- A total of £93.93m had been invested in commercial property of which £42m had been invested in battery and energy storage.
- The property prices at the Marlborough development had reduced by approximately 10% which was the expected profit margin so it was not expected to deliver a profit now.
- The Taunton battery storage unit was fully operational and energy producing and was expected to produce a gross profit of £3m for the current year but not all of that would come back to SSDC.

- Fareham phase 1 & 2 battery storage units were ahead of schedule and on budget so doing well.

He thanked the Commercial Property, Land and Development Manager and the Property Investment Project Manager for their work in managing the investment portfolio.

During discussion it was noted that:

- The comparison between the business case when SSDC first entered battery storage and the outcomes now and that they had proven to be a good investment.
- There had been delays between the loans for the first battery storage project and starting the business which had meant the first project had been the most difficult. Comparison on what we expected when we went in.
- The Internal Audit plan included a review of the business plan for the battery storage projects.
- The original battery storage project was producing stronger income than originally expected.
- Although the investment programme was coming to an end, active management of the investments was fundamental by in-house specialists.
- The investment programme had been started to produce an income to fund services.

The Chairman of the Scrutiny Committee said they had discussed the report in full and most of their questions had already been answered during the debate, however, they had noted some inconsistencies with the risk matrix charts at end of each report.

At the conclusion of the debate, Members were content to note the recommendations of the report.

RESOLVED: That District Executive:-

- a. noted progress made to date in acquiring new commercial property investments and the asset management following acquisition;
- b. noted the return being achieved across the portfolio which is in line with the Council's target of 7%;
- c. noted progress being made in securing income from our existing assets and the contribution to the revenue budget towards the revised £3.35m target;
- d. noted progress being made in disposals and transfers of existing assets, resulting in a reduction of future liabilities associated with these assets.

Reason: To update members on progress with implementing the commercial investment component of the Commercial Strategy agreed by Council including the commercial investments and management of the existing asset portfolio since the last half yearly update in June 2021 and quarterly update in September 2021.

161. Review of SSDC Commercial Strategy (Agenda Item 9)

The Portfolio Holder for Economic Development noted that the changes to the Commercial Strategy were made in response to the Local Government Review (LGR) and the proposed changes were tracked in red in the report. They were technical changes which reflected the change to the prudential code which prevented further commercial investments. The portfolio would be maintained until the new Somerset Council took them over. He also clarified that the second recommendation sought to dissolve two of the Council's subsidiary companies.

The Chairman of the Scrutiny Committee said they did not have many questions on the report other than some projects had performed better than others.

The Portfolio Holder for Finance and Legal Services noted that by closing the two companies started for private venture the risk was reduced and it was important the changes were made from a finance perspective.

At the conclusion of the debate the recommendations were proposed and seconded for confirmation by Council and the Chief Executive.

RESOLVED: That District Executive:-

- a. recommends to Council that the report be noted and the Commercial Strategy continue to 31 March 2023 subject to the amendments set out in paragraphs 17 and 18 of this report; and
- b. recommends that the Chief Executive authorises the Monitoring Officer to take such steps as are necessary to dissolve two of the Council's subsidiary companies, SSDC Business Solutions Ltd and Elleston Services Ltd.

Reason: To provide Members with a brief review of the Commercial Strategy 2017-2021 and recommend a course of action to cover the period to 31 March 2023, following which the new Somerset Council will take responsibility.

162. District Executive Forward Plan (Agenda Item 10)

The following addition to the Forward Plan was requested:-

- Phosphates update – June 2022

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

1. approve the updated Executive Forward Plan for publication as attached at Appendix A, with the following addition:-

- Phosphates Update – June 2022

Reason: The Forward Plan is a statutory document.

163. Date of Next Meeting (Agenda Item 11)

Members noted that the next scheduled meeting of the District Executive (informal) would take place on Thursday 7th April 2022 as a virtual meeting via Zoom commencing at 9.30 a.m.

164. Exclusion of Press and Public (Agenda Item 12)

The Chairman asked Members to agree that the press and public be excluded from the following item and this was agreed without dissent.

RESOLVED: That the following item be considered in Closed Session by virtue of the Local Government Act 1972, Schedule 12A under Paragraph 3: Information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information).

165. Briefing on Local Government Reorganisation (Confidential) (Agenda Item 13)

The Chief Executive provided members with a brief verbal update on the progress of Local Government Reorganisation in Somerset.

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Chairman

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Date