

South Somerset District Council

Minutes of a meeting of the **Scrutiny Committee** held by video-conference using **Zoom meeting software on Tuesday 31 August 2021.**

(10.30 am - 12.35 pm)

Present:

Members: Councillor Gerard Tucker (Chairman)

Robin Bastable
Brian Hamilton
Charlie Hull

Sue Osborne
Robin Pailthorpe
Linda Vijeh



Also Present:

Jason Baker
John Clark

Peter Seib

Officers

Jan Gamon	Director (Place and Recovery)
Kirsty Larkins	Director (Service Delivery)
Jill Byron	Monitoring Officer
Karen Watling	Interim Section 151 Officer
Alison Hann	Specialist - Revenues
Joe Walsh	Specialist (Economic Development)
Helen Morris	Specialist Team Manager
Paul Matravers	Lead Specialist (Finance)
Robert Orrett	Commercial Property, Land & Development Manager
Brendan Fisher	Property & Development Project Manager
Stephanie Gold	Specialist (Scrutiny & Member Development)
Becky Sanders	Case Officer (Strategy & Support Services)

54. Minutes (Agenda Item 1)

The minutes of previous meetings held on 30 March 2021, 3 August 2021 and 16 August 2021 were approved as correct records and would be signed by the Chairman.

55. Apologies for absence (Agenda Item 2)

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Louise Clarke, Karl Gill, Paul Maxwell, Oliver Patrick and Crispin Raikes.

56. Declarations of Interest (Agenda Item 3)

There were no declarations of interest.

57. Public question time (Agenda Item 4)

There were no members of the public present at the meeting.

58. Issues arising from previous meetings (Agenda Item 5)

A member referred to two previous meetings where he raised about getting a breakdown of the costs in the CEO expenditure programme. He noted that apologies for delays had been received from the Lead Specialist (Finance), however as yet the requested information had still not been received. He had also asked a subsequent question about Transformation and whether agency costs had been taken into account when the savings figures relating to Transformation had been stated - and this had also not been answered.

59. Chairman's Announcements (Agenda Item 6)

There were no announcements from the Chairman.

60. Verbal update on reports considered by District Executive on 5 August 2021 and 17 August 2021 (Agenda Item 7)

The Chairman reminded members that updates from the previous meeting of District Executive had been circulated to members for information.

61. Reports to be considered by District Executive on 2 September 2021 (Agenda Item 8)

Members considered the reports within the District Executive agenda for 2 September 2021 (Informal Consultative Meeting) and raised comments as detailed below. Responses to most questions and comments were provided at Scrutiny Committee (Informal Meeting) by the relevant officers or Portfolio Holder – except those marked by an asterisk:

Additional Restrictions Grant – Discretionary Business Support Scheme (Agenda item 6)

- Members asked if there was anything that could be done to increase uptake?
- A member sought clarification that any monies unspent would need to be returned to central government. Another member asked if there might be an option to re-open any grant programmes to businesses who may have missed out previously?
- Regarding networking with business groups – a member asked what progress had been made?
- A member noted at this stage it looked like around 17-18% of the grant was unspent – was this is an expected position and how does it compare to other authorities?
- Are available grants being promoted via social media etc?

- Para 17 – regarding the key areas of business grant funding and business support initiatives – how will financing for the two areas of work be split?
- A member expressed concern that some data may not have been fully up to date regarding businesses eligible for grants. What is or has been done to address this?, and it was also queried why the situation had occurred?

Council Tax – Care Leavers Discount Review (Agenda item 7)

- Members queried if the other Somerset authorities had debated the matter yet and if so, what their response had been? It was also queried if the other authorities were aligned?
- Para 11 - Regarding the number of discounts currently paid, a member queried if we were confident the figure was fairly stable as a significant increase could have an impact on the budget.

Chard Regeneration Programme Finance Update (Agenda item 8)

- Para 28, table 3 – a member sought clarity about how the figures had been derived.
- Appx A, page 22 – members commented it would be useful if the information included the budget spent/committed to date.
- Para 9, page 16 – A member noted his disappointment regarding the situation with Boden Mill as he struggled to understand why it was not suitable for sale. He queried why decontaminate the site rather than accepting a lower offer for sale? In his opinion every year the building stood empty it was worth less.
- A member asked for an explanation of net and gross budgeting, and why we were moving away from net budgeting?
- *A member asked who we approached for grant funding, who we actually applied to and why were rejected for some grants? (*in response an officer explained they would liaise with the member direct*).
- It was noted the problems with Boden Mill hadn't just appeared. When looking at what property could be sold for funding going forward, why was the situation not known or considered at that time?
- Will the leisure centre require more investment in future years?
- Members felt that the Scrutiny Committee should see and consider the lessons learned report when available.
- Para 26, page 20 – regarding the management fee agreed with Freedom Leisure, a member asked why we had settled for the figure of £191k which seemed low for a new facility.
- Para 29, page 20 – members sought clarity about the meaning of the paragraph as it was difficult to understand.
- *Para 29, page 20 – a member queried what decarbonisation costs were at leisure centres as it appeared to be a significant budget involved. If grants were received for decarbonisation, why was it down as a cost?

2021/22 Revenue Budget Monitoring Report for the Period Ending 31 July 2021 (Agenda item 9)

- Para 12, page 25 – a member queried why it cost more to use agency staff? They also sought assurance that we were being vigorous in our agency selection.
- *Para 12, top of page 26 – reference to SWP and a Service Breakdown Warning Notice – A member asked if a notice been served?

- Para 12, top of page 26 – regarding the projected overspend of £107k – was that expected and what will the impact be?
- Para 12, top of page 27 – a member queried what the £181k Sports Council England grant was for?
- Para 17, table on page 29 – members noted that not all of the mandatory grant had been used. It was queried if the government may allow us to re-open any schemes and use the funding rather than return it?

Investment Asset Update Report (Agenda item 10)

(Note – Scrutiny did not go into confidential session)

- Rec C – a member queried the target of 7%. When looking at the figures it appeared the 7% referred to a gross figure rather than net. He suggested the recommendation should make clear that it is a gross figure. He also sought clarity on what the net figure was?
- A member queried what we paid for the assets and their current value – was it something that was looked at and reviewed? (in response it was agreed the member would liaise direct with officers).
- Para 29 – Marlborough development – a member felt there was a huge lesson to be learned with the project, but there was also a need to understand why we have not be able to achieve a good return.
- Rec F – Members sought clarification about what information the proposed dashboard would include?
- Members also queried if it was known how the forthcoming Statutory Change Order may impact on what we can do?
- Scrutiny have requested that the Commercial Property, Land and Development Manager bring back a more detailed report to the next Scrutiny Committee regarding the Marlborough development, and this has been agreed by the officer. The report to include information on what has been achieved, or not been achieved and why.

District Executive Forward Plan (Agenda item 11)

- No comments.

62. Verbal update on Task and Finish reviews (Agenda Item 9)

The Chairman provided a brief verbal update on the progress of Task and Finish groups including:

SSDC Environment Strategy - Energy Supplier - a final Task and Finish report would be circulated to members shortly.

There were no updates since the last meeting regarding other Task and Finish groups.

63. Update on matters of interest (Agenda Item 10)

The Specialist (Scrutiny and Member Development), reminded members to forward to her any questions for the Joint Waste Scrutiny Panel. During a short discussion members asked that the invite to submit questions was extended to all members, with a further reminder sent shortly before the Panel meeting.

Members noted the long-term absence of two senior officers and asked the Specialist (Scrutiny and Member Development) to request that an update be circulated to members. In particular members were seeking clarification and assurance that work was being covered in their absence, and which alternative officers could be contacted if necessary.

64. Scrutiny Work Programme (Agenda Item 11)

A member referred to the Local Plan Update and the pending Structural Change Order (SCO), and asked if Scrutiny were likely to have any input into the SCO or would it be left to officers to propose potential warding arrangements. She felt if there was some Scrutiny involvement it would provide some transparency. In response, the Monitoring Officer advised that there were very short timeframes and officers were looking at the technical detail for future warding arrangements, and political groups had also been asked for comments.

Members were content to note the Scrutiny Work Programme.

65. Date of next meeting (Agenda Item 12)

Members noted that the next meeting of the Scrutiny Committee was scheduled for Tuesday 5 October 2021 at 10.30am - as a virtual meeting using Zoom.

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Chairman