

SWT Community Scrutiny Committee - 29 June 2022

Present: Councillor Libby Lisgo (Chair)

Councillors Dave Mansell, Simon Coles, Tom Deakin, Steve Griffiths, Dawn Johnson, Richard Lees, Andy Milne, Martin Peters, Vivienne Stock-Williams, Ray Tully and Loretta Whetlor as subs for Janet Lloyd

Officers: Sam Murrell, Marcus Prouse, Chris Hall, Simon Lewis, Kerry Prisco, Scott Weetch

Guests: Chief Inspector Justin French (ASP)
Inspector Mike Griffiths (ASP)

Also Present: Councillors Chris Booth
Brenda Weston and Janet Lloyd (Via zoom)

(The meeting commenced at 6.16 pm)

11. Apologies

Apologies were received from Councillors Janet Lloyd (via zoom), Mark Lithgow and Roger Habgood

12. Minutes of the previous meeting of the Community Scrutiny Committee

The minutes of the previous meeting held on 25 May 2022 were approved, subject to changes in items 6,7,8 – Text “chair noted” to be amended to the “committee noted”. *(Cllr Mansell prop and Cllr S Coles Sec. Unanimous)*

13. Declarations of Interest

Members present at the meeting declared the following personal interests in their capacity as a Councillor or Clerk of a County, Town or Parish Council or any other Local Authority:-

Name	Minute No.	Description of Interest	Reason	Action Taken
Cllr S Coles	All Items	SCC & Taunton Charter Trustee	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr T Deakin	All Items	SCC & Taunton Charter Trustee	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr D Johnson	All Items	SCC	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr R Lees	All Items	Taunton Charter Trustee	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr L Lisgo	All Items	Taunton Charter Trustee	Personal	Spoke and Voted

Cllr D Mansell	All Items	SCC	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr M Peters	All Items	Taunton Charter Trustee	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr R Tully	All Items	West Monkton	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr L Whetlor	All Items	Watchet	Personal	Spoke and Voted

14. **Public Participation**

There were no requests for public participation.

15. **Community Scrutiny Request/Recommendation Trackers**

No outstanding items to report

16. **Community Scrutiny Forward Plan**

The Committee noted the Community Scrutiny Forward Plan. (*Unanimous*)

17. **Executive and Full Council Forward Plans**

The Committee noted the Executive and Full Council forward plans. (*Unanimous*)

18. **Update from Avon and Somerset Police**

Unparished Area Crime Statistics for the unparished part of Taunton were read out by Insp. Mike Griffiths for the last 3 months. This consisted of 844 crimes broken down as follows:-

- 232 offences of violence against the person
- 271 offences of theft
- 139 public order offences
- 78 arson and criminal damage type offences
- 30 vehicle offences
- 19 sexual offences
- 26 burglaries
- 16 robberies
- 9 drug related offences
- 5 fraud offences
- 2 carrying/possession of weapons (knives)

It was stated that this was typical for a town centre which included a high street (daytime) and night-time economy as well as some residential areas. Crime had reduced in these areas during the pandemic but was returning to pre-pandemic levels.

During the debate the following points were raised:

Offences against the person – violence. Is this centred around the night-time economy and is alcohol a contributing factor? Does it escalate around the weekend when there are more people in the town centre. For example, historically Thursday night when there was a concentration of marines in the town, there was known to be a lot of fighting at kicking out time.

- *The night-time economy has slowed down and police have thus scaled back operational resources. There are no longer the mass congregations of people outside nightclubs on Saturday nights. Also, partnership working through CCTV and street pastors has helped in reducing crime. The culture of the marines has changed and there is less participation in the Thursday evening drinking activity, unless it is a public holiday or shore leave. (Most of the marines, live locally and have integrated with their families into their communities so they return home rather than go out in the town). That being said, a high proportion of violence against the person offences will be alcohol related. (This includes drinking in the PSPO areas, shoplifting and other anti-social behaviour).*
- *Violent crime is now being subjected to “Hot Spot policing” which is known to be a pro-active way of reducing crime. The police target areas that have a high incidence of VAP and are highly visible for about 15mins. Their patrolling and visibility mean that there have been noticeable reductions in crime and greater confidence in the police. This has managed to reduce crime in these areas by as much as 30%.*

Communication channels

How can this be improved, especially in the rural areas? How can Councillors help with relaying messages about crime prevention and other statistics in their ward areas?

- *Covid hit policing in a variety of ways, not least that there were a new cohort of police recruits who joined in the middle of the pandemic and had to find new ways of engagement. (They had never experienced the night-time economy or face-to face policing because of the restrictions). Online Facebook Live surgeries were innovative, and ASP were the first to undertake them. As communities re-open there has been a return to face-to-face beat surgeries, visible policing at schools and community events, newsletters and live-streaming webinars.*
- *Although it is difficult for beat officers and PCSOs to attend every parish meeting, they will try to attend as often as possible and, in their absence, submit a crime stats report. Their attendance is dependent on meeting the demands of crime, and they are extremely busy. Can parish councils please be welcoming of young officers and PCSOs when they come along to parish meetings. Some of them are new recruits and want to work with local agencies. They cannot be answerable for operational matters or decide how resources are allocated. Please can this be viewed as an exercise in how to work together for the benefit of residents.*
- *Councillors can assist with this via their own local communication channels providing they have the information. It would be useful if a link could be established that would be mutually beneficial. They also tap into local networks such as neighbourhood watch and community groups which are a good way of sharing intelligence. Insp. Griffiths acknowledged that this was a valuable resource which he would be following up.*

- *Parish Council attendance will be encouraged but it likely to not be more than once or twice a year at most. In the absence of an officer a crime sheet will be submitted with latest statistics.*

Rural Crime

Accepting of the fact that resources need to be allocated where there is the greatest concentration of people, (Taunton), but can more be sent to the rural areas such as Exmoor, Minehead and Watchet which seem largely forgotten.

It was noted that there had been an improvement in the level of patrolling in the rural areas particularly in Porlock, but it would be preferable if there was active engagement/patrolling for 15mins or so, rather than just driving through the village.

- *Resources are allocated using the Threat, Harm, Risk assessment. Risk or harm, threat to life will always take priority over other crimes. Nevertheless, if a crime is in progress, it should always be reported via the 999-emergency number.*
- *Resource is sparse but the police are concentrating heavily on prevention and education to reduce crime. A greater priority is now being given to high value agricultural crime which is looking to tackle organised cross border theft of quad bikes and farm machinery. Previously this was assigned a crime number in the Communications Centre at Portishead, assessed and filed with no further action. Due to changes in the processing system, it is now devolved back to the Rural Affairs Policing team to investigate and follow up the lines of enquiry, increasing the chances of recovery and arrest.*
- *Recently two county line networks were taken out in Minehead. The police are using the Threat, Harm, Risk assessment to prioritise their casework. These types of crimes do take a lot of police time but the PCSOs will try and be more accessible to their local communities and improve engagement.*

Minehead

Has the removal of an established police base in Minehead resulted in any variation to the crime figures in that area?

- *Remained consistent. A fantastic team of officers who have managed to adjust to the changing environment by altering their working methods. PCSOs are embedded in their local communities and are finding innovative ways to prevent crime and work with residents. Examples of recent initiatives in Minehead:*
- *An officer identified that there were a growing number of distraction type burglaries. They used camera doorbell technology from neighbours to identify an offender and subsequently make an arrest, which resulted in a prison sentence.*
- *The PCSOs have also undertaken youth activities with young people, to paint and locate bird nesting boxes on Seaward Way in Minehead. This is in preparation for the new housing scheme that is being built and to welcome new residents to the neighbourhood. By engaging young people to have a pride in their local area, it will reduce ASB, vandalism and encourage community cohesion.*

- *A group of approximately 20 young people had disconnected from school and were in danger of falling into crime. A PCSO worked with local partner agencies to secure them employment and take them off the streets.*
- *Currently there is still a police presence in the Minehead Police Station, and it is hoped that this will be maintained once the station is closed. There are plans for the team to be based in an alternative location. ASP recognise that a great deal of good work goes on as part of the West Somerset One Team, and wider multi-agency working which is seen as “trail-blazing” across the force area and demonstrates good practice.*

Did Covid contribute to rising ASB, neighbour disputes and vandalism? Did this escalate these types of issues?

- *Yes – This was apparent across the whole country, not just in Avon and Somerset. There are now a cohort of young people who have “found their freedom” and are acting out to kick back against the perceived restraints they had over the last two years. A lot of work is being done with the CPS and education providers to work on prevention and reduce criminal behaviour. Unfortunately, due to the delays in processing and court proceedings, there have been backlogs in bringing perpetrators to justice.*
- *The emphasis now is on multi-agency working to intervene early and prevent these types of situations. It is important to recognise the signs and take steps to ensure young people do not engage in ASB or low-level criminal activity.*
- *There also seems to be a greater incidence in lack of parental responsibility. Social Services seem to be engaging a lot earlier in the process than they have in the past. Parents need to take accountability for their children. Unfortunately, a small number of young people tie up a lot of resources in what is usually complex casework. Parents need to be proactive about engaging with support services if needed and know where and what their children are doing.*

Wellington Town Council – Well served by the local beat team. Regular attendance at the Town Council meetings, or if absent a submitted report. Mini police in the primary schools are well supported. The local neighbourhood beat team are efficient, visible and provide a good service.

Recruitment and retention

- *There is a lengthy 3-year process to recruit new police officers, who come in at degree level entry. The most recent recruits did their training through Covid and are adjusting to the new patterns of working and engagement.*
- *It is hard to retain good PCSO’s because the most successful ones quickly move on to other opportunities within ASP, and as such there is quite a high turnover in certain areas.*

Speeding

What are the police doing to tackle such issues as speeding through the villages?

- *The police are trying to re-ignite local community speed watch initiatives, and can assist with this, but it is a volunteer led activity, not a police responsibility.*

Gang culture – is it growing?

- *Young children are being heavily influenced by social media, which is contributing to a “gang culture mentality”, in some parts of Taunton. These “gangs” are not directly drug related and dealing county lines, but some children have been arrested for carrying knives, and are trying to imitate the gang behaviour they perceive via media channels. It is not as serious as some of the gang related incidents that take place in the cities such as London or Bristol and the police are aware and are dealing with it. Various operations are taking place to tackle this issue although the process is complex and drawn out. Fortunately, despite local perceptions it is confined to a small minority of young people.*
- *Current plans include a multi-agency approach to tackling and preventing youth crime during the school summer holidays. Activities are being planned that will reduce ASB, and communication strategies are being developed to ensure that these activities are well publicised.*

West Monkton – No police presence at a parish meeting in 10 years, and no visible police presence anywhere in the parish, since a very pro-active police officer was moved to a different area. A crime was being committed, and a local businessman rang 101 and tried to get through for 2 hours. There was no response!

- *Always ring 999 when a crime is in progress. The operator will assess the situation and decide how to allocate resources.*
- *Inspector Mike Griffiths arranged to follow up with individual councillors on how the police could work with them. All parishes should receive a newsletter or have some way of communicating with their local beat officers.*
- *Insp Griffiths has been signposted to the SWT website where all information on Cllrs and parish/town contacts is available.*

The Chair thanked the police for attending.

19. **To Consider Report from Executive Councillor for Community - Councillor Chris Booth**

Various policies and support initiatives are being put in place to deal with the cost-of-living crisis.

- Cost of Living Emergency Fund to be distributed via CAB. There is currently 50K set aside for this budget.
- Household Support Fund – Administered by SCC.
- The Community Pantries at Rowbarton and Minehead are at capacity and operating well. Rockwell Green Pantry is due to open imminently. These are stocked by Fareshare (ambient food) with some surplus being provided by other suppliers. Users are currently charged £3.50 per week across all the pantries and the team are testing to see if there is some degree of consistency around this. The offer needs to

be standardised so that participants know what they can expect for their money.

- CCTV is proving to be a challenging multi-agency project due to the variety of equipment in the different geographical areas. There is a need to replace old hardware in some areas which adds to the cost of the service.
- Somerset West Lottery. Work is now being undertaken to merge this with the Mendip lottery to create one lottery for the whole of Somerset under the new unitary authority.
- The grants scheme has now been taken back in-house from Somerset Community Foundation, so is administered by the SWT team led by Christine Gale. It was noted that SWT was rarely recognised for its grants when the foundation was assessing them in the past, so this will now be rectified. A lot of work to support the VCSE through grants and support is continuing together with assistance from Spark. Spark have also been helping the West Somerset Food Cupboard become a charity, vet volunteers and attract funding for their projects.
- The TYCC – legacy funding has now been allocated to the YMCA building for repairs to the roof, as well as distributed to the equestrian centre at Norton Fitzwarren.- Cllr Lisgo queried this and asked for the criteria on which these applications had been assessed. (*Christine Gale followed up this query which has been progressed on the Written Answer Tracker*).

During the debate the following points were raised:

- West Monkton also has established a community fridge, but this is a separate scheme run by the parish council. All volunteers are expected to hold food hygiene certificates. This is open to the public.
- Wivey Food Shares and Wivey Grows are also tackling food poverty in the Wiveliscombe area. Would be good to tap into and support this resource.
- Cllr Martin Peters asked whether the 50K budget allocated to tackle the cost-of-living crisis could be increased to help more people. This money has been earmarked from a previous underspend in last year's budget. If more funds can be found from other sources this will be supplemented, but at the present time this is limited to the 50K.

Cllr Lisgo reiterated the recommendation that was passed by Full Council to ensure that the VCSE was financially supported during the transition to the new unitary authority, and this would continue for the first year of business.

20. **Housing Revenue Account Financial Monitoring - Outturn Position 2021/22**

Kerry Prisco presented the report on the provisional outturn of the HRA financial monitoring. This has been a very challenging economic environment for the HRA

with greater financial restraints put upon the service but coupled with greater pressures and demands for delivery from both a political and regulatory point of view.

There have been backlogs in responsive, planned maintenance, as well as compliance works due to rising costs in materials adding additional pressures. Covid has continued to impact business operations by increasing costs in such areas as deep cleaning on shared accommodation and staffing requirements being maintained in tenancy support. Covid has also caused delays in delivery of the capital programme, as such the senior housing management team have proposed budget returns to reel on the capital programme.

The positive financial impact of this is that it increased investment income. In addition, there have also been two further financial one-off adjustments this year, which has helped the overall out-turn position.

- The first is the successful open contract project which identified major repairs as part of the void process, could be capitalised, and this reduced pressure on the revenue account.
- The second is that debtors in balance have been resolved during the year, resulting in a favourable one-off adjustment.

So, whilst the overall favourable position of the HRA 2021/22 is a net underspend of £170k: the unstable economic operating environment, along with the regulatory and political pressures means the HRA will still experience high levels of volatility and financial movements that are high risk in the financial year coming up.

Earmarked reserves are put to be at 54k and are committed to support spending in future years. During the year approval was given to return 1.044m of earmarked reserves that are no longer required, and these were put back into General Reserves.

General Reserves are projected to be 3.413m, so that is 1.4m above recommended balance of 2million. That additional balance on reserves should provide sufficient capacity to support the medium-term financial plan. In terms of the capital out-turn position the actual spend for the year related to capital maintenance for the existing housing stock, and for development of new stock.

The Housing SMT are proposing to return of 11.8m of capital money to general reserves and this will positively impact the 30 years financial business plan., as well as the council's treasury management strategy.

During the debate the following points were raised:

- The assumption on voids is that they are running on 2% void rate. Is this an accurate assessment as this can have quite an effect on the HRA.
The 2% void rate is improving. An improvement plan was implemented in January to reduce the turnaround time and there have been gains but the

system still needs refining. Most of the delays occur around the choice-based lettings as there are no provision for refusals within the parameters.

It is also dependent on the volume of repairs required on the void property. Some take a lot longer to complete. It was recognised that some of the void properties had capital works undertaken whilst they were empty.

Major works on void properties would also fall under the capital programme, so there needs to be an assurance that the void work is not paid for from the HRA. This is a good thing, because where costs can be capitalised, it reduces capacity and pressure on the revenue budget.

700k was identified as being capitalised in this financial year as a one-off adjustment. Obviously going forward, the works will be aligned with the capital budget from the outset, so there will be no need to move it at year end from the housing revenue account.

- Underspend on assets – can the nature of the vacancies be explained?

Underspend on salaries – in part this is a result of not employing development staff for the capital projects. These have been delayed because of COVID, subsequent supply chain issues and or changes in the programme. Some salaries have been capitalised to account for the RTB scheme, and for the void programme. (Followed up on Written Answer Tracker by Chris Brown)

- Concern was also expressed about the reduction in the capital spend, as well as the HRA as this would reduce the level of funding available for such projects as the carbon retrofit programme. It was noted that 5m was being returned to General Reserves as not required, but this was resulting in a reduction of spend on air source heat pumps and insulation. Disappointment was expressed that despite the declared climate emergency, budgets for housing projects that could tackle it, were being reduced. (Followed up on Written Answer Tracker by Chris Brown)

The Housing SMT has taken a realistic approach to looking at previous carry forwards, which resulted from delays in delivery due to Covid. They have looked at outstanding work and assessed whether it is likely to be completed in the next financial year. In the likelihood that it isn't then they have decided to return the underspend capital money to balances. The work has not been carried out due to supply chain issues, sub-contractor difficulties and tenants not allowing access to their properties during Covid.

- Revenue is funded by the HRA and income is generated from dwelling rents, service charges and shop income. This budget can't be funded from other sources and or raised via loans. It's a self-contained budget. The capital budget, however, needs to find alternative methods of funding which can be done via loans or grants.

(The Meeting ended at 8.19 pm)