

Full Council Meeting 29 March 2022

Corporate Scrutiny Committee Annual Report 2021/22

Foreword

Following the decision to split the Council's scrutiny function into two committees I was honoured to be appointed as Chair of the Corporate Scrutiny Committee at the Annual General Meeting of Council in May last year.

The decision to split into two committees had been made in part to cover the extensive workload and allow a more focussed approach to scrutiny of corporate and community matters. This also enabled both committees time to invite the Leader and Executive for extended sessions where their responsibilities could be examined in more depth than Full Council meetings allowed.

The Government's reluctance to renew legislation permitting remote meetings meant that all this year's meetings have been held in person. However, space limitations meant that non-committee Councillors and some officers had to attend and contribute by zoom. After some early technical issues this arrangement has worked reasonably well.

In 2019 the Government published new Guidance for Scrutiny Committees aiming to clarify and broaden their role and influence. Both myself and the Vice-Chair have worked hard to ensure that Scrutiny Councillors gained a greater oversight of their work programme using pre meetings to identify issues. This has allowed us to alert officers and ensure that responses were given at the public meeting rather than through a subsequent written answer. This gave us a stronger voice over the Executive reports we wished to look at in detail and enable maximum influence to be exerted.

Even with the limitations presented by Covid we also wanted to be more proactive and investigate external matters which had a bearing on the residents of our area.

The Leader of the Council continued to encourage transparency and the involvement of members and the programme of Briefings to provide information and background on Council business was able to continue successfully online. This allowed these matters to be aired and questioned without impinging on the committee process where time is limited.

As a Corporate Scrutiny Committee formulating our programme of work and getting updates on our suggestions and recommendations is a keyway that this Council can demonstrate the transparency and accountability that the residents of Somerset West and Taunton expect from their decision-makers. Scrutiny's role as critical friend of the Executive is vital in ensuring that the voice of the community is heard and should result in more inclusive decision-making.

2. Professional Development

2.1 We planned to hold a Scrutiny Cafe to follow up our 2020 'Away day' but unfortunately the Covid pandemic made face to face meetings extremely challenging and it was agreed to defer this until it could be held safely.

2.2 We continued to focus on:

- improving the involvement of outsiders and third parties to help deliver better outcomes.
- Ensuring we were aware of issues early enough to be able to make a positive contribution particularly in policy development.

- Improving the way that questions and issues raised in Committee were tracked and followed up.
- Having better communication with Executive members

2.3 Accordingly our Top Priority Tasks were:

- 1) Financial Monitoring
- 2) Policy Making
- 3) Holding Exec to Account/Critical Friend – check and balance
- 4) Evidence gathering
- 5) Policy Review – looking back

3. 2021/22 Programme

3.1 Overall the last year has been an extremely busy one for the Committee. We have discussed many and varied issues of community interest and concern such as:

- Distribution of Community Infrastructure Levy monies,
- The Commercial Investment Strategy,
- Innovation
- Phosphate in Watercourses and the impact on developments,
- Unitary Proposals

We also considered the Quarterly reports on Corporate Performance and Budgeting. (More details are in Appendix 1)

3.2 We have also instituted regular slots to question Executive Councillors. Not only does this offer Committee members a greater opportunity for extended questioning than is possible in normal meetings of the Full Council but it also offers Executive Members the chance to expand on their roles and responsibilities.

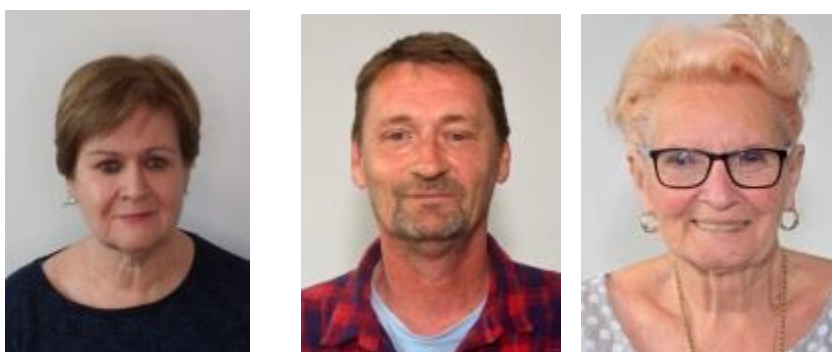
3.3 On a personal note I have been involved in several urgent decisions that require sign off by the Chair of Corporate Scrutiny. These often involved financial decisions and especially the urgent need to roll out grants to local businesses hit by the Covid pandemic. I was also involved in the interview process for both the new Chief Executive and Director of Development and Place.

3.4 As the current Municipal Year ends the Council enters its last year of existence it seems clear that some of our work will be subject to the demands of the emerging Unitary. However, as a sovereign Council, we still must ensure that we maintain our service levels and financial prudence meaning that the role of the Scrutiny Committee will be more important than ever.

3.5 In conclusion I would like to thank the Officers for all their support during a very challenging period. I believe the Committee has made significant progress this year despite the unusual circumstances and that we have a strong foundation going forward.

This Report is the responsibility of Councillor Gwilym Wren – Chair of the Scrutiny Committee and has been compiled in collaboration with the Vice Chair, Councillor Nick Thwaites.

Somerset West and Taunton Scrutiny Committee 2021/22*
***As constituted at Annual Council on 4th May 2021**



- | | | | |
|-----|---------------------------------------|-----|-----------------------------|
| 1. | Councillor Gwilym Wren (Chair) | 11. | Councillor Barrie Hall |
| 2. | Councillor Nick Thwaites (Vice-Chair) | 12. | Councillor John Hassell |
| 3. | Councillor Ian Aldridge | 13. | Councillor Libby Lisgo |
| 4. | Councillor Benet Allen | 14. | Councillor Danny Weddercopp |
| 5. | Councillor Marcus Barr | 15. | Councillor Loretta Whetlor |
| 6. | Councillor Sue Buller | | |
| 7. | Councillor Norman Cavill | | |
| 8. | Councillor Simon Coles | | |
| 9. | Councillor Habib Farbahi | | |
| 10. | Councillor Ed Firmin | | |

APPENDIX 1

Topics considered By SWT Scrutiny Committee this year:

May 2021

Corporate Risk Management Update

In considering this report the Committee made the following key points:

- The risk assessment process in staff operations was considered inadequate and the seriousness of implications were encouraged to be considered in further detail.
- The issues log had 3 red indicators; it was questioned if these had been resolved.
- Preparation of risks in advance of the creation of the Unitary Council was encouraged
- IT processing and logging issues and cyber security risks were considered
- Gaps in training, including Health and Safety training in the workforce were identified. Assurance was given these training gaps would be addressed.

June 2021

Executive Cllr PFH Session - Portfolio Holder for Culture Cllr Caroline Ellis

Cllr Ellis engaged in a very open and informative session discussing her ambitions for improving the cultural offer across the district. The Committee made the following key points:

- Adverting the cultural offer from areas outside of Taunton was encouraged. Cllr Ellis was compiling a database of all arts and cultural organisations and groups both large and small.
- An update around the Regal Theatre was requested. There had been a new roof and ventilation system installed. The dialogue had been positive, members of the Committee were reminded this did not receive Council funding.
- Encouraging participation for all members of society as parts of the local arts and culture offering was emphasised.
- The future of the cultural offering in Taunton was considered alongside a new venue and the future of the Brewhouse.

Review of the Commercial Property Investment Activity and Performance Report

During the debate the following comments and questions were raised by the Committee:

- The risk around receiving income based on rents was questioned.
- Discussion took place around why the target related properties and notional figures differed.
- In questioning the income flow it was explained that some rent payments had been received in advance, this related to the period of the end of this financial year. The incomes had been delayed reflecting the period, and this was common for tenants who paid in advance.
- It was questioned if agents were used for the tenants and further information was requested on rent defaults and future rent increases.
- The future market demand for commercial buildings was considered, the impact on the long-term commercial market was understandably uncertain in the long term.
- Concerns over interest rates were questioned, this was a recognised risk however the market remained strong. Potential revisions in anticipated income were always possible in the future depending on the recovery and market demand.
- The Committee considered that communications underpinning the strategy needed to be reconsidered, allowing for the large sums of money involved and the risks of the circumstances
- The commercial legacy of properties would be incorporated at the December meeting.

July 2021

The July meeting considered the Year End financial reports for 2020/21 including:

- Financial Monitoring - Outturn Position 2020/21

- Financial Strategy 2021/22 to 2022/23
- Corporate Performance Report, Quarter 4 and Outturn, 2020/21

The Committee sought clarity on the following points:

- Can the Finance team provide a comparison with this year's outturn and last years on debts written off?
- Performance Report – Extensions to Planning applications due to phosphates – further detail on how many had had multiple extensions? As reported to Planning Committee there were currently approximately 100 applications, equating to 2,300 dwellings with 13 sites awaiting the discharge of conditions equating to approximately 450 dwellings NB A verbal update was given to the Corporate Scrutiny Committee by Alison Blom-Cooper during the committee meeting on 3/11/21.

August 2021

In August the Committee considered the Innovation Report and a confidential Levelling Up bid. Some Committee members were not happy with the Innovation Report and the subject came before the Committee again in November.

September 2021

The September meeting considered the Quarter 1 2021/22 General Fund Financial Monitoring, the Quarter 1 2021/22 Housing Revenue Account Financial Monitoring and the Corporate Performance Report

Among the issues raised were:

- Collation of parking income was requested along with the projected shortfall with comparison to pre pandemic levels. In response income was consistently 30% lower on pre Covid levels and was not expected to increase this financial year.
- Comparison with the budget agreed in February was considered, with a request for further information in comparison to the detail of the variances.
- HRA Financial Monitoring as at Q1 - There had been a revenue forecast overspend of £610k, with the recommendation setting out £869k, information relating to the variance in the figures was requested.

October 2021

Due to a lack of business the October meeting was cancelled.

November 2021

Executive Cllr PFH Session: leader of the Council and Communications Portfolio Holder - Cllr Federica Smith Roberts

A very useful session concentrated on the forthcoming arrangements for transition to the new Somerset Council. The Committee sought assurance that District and particularly SWT interests would be protected particularly in more remote areas and that we would play a full part in the ongoing process. A lot of concern was raised about the organisation and nature of the proposed Local Community Networks.

There were also questions about arrangements to create a Taunton Town Council.

There were again comments about improving internal communications especially for elected members.

Innovation District Update

The Committee questioned whether there were strategic aims in place yet from the Innovation District for improving innovation and if so what the details of those aims were.

In particular:

- Encouraging more young people to stay in or move to the area would be important in enabling innovation and development.

- Concerns were raised about poor broadband and digital infrastructure in the district hindering innovation and development.
- Setting up strategic partnerships was encouraged.
- The evidence and reasoning for not pursuing a science park in Somerset West and Taunton was questioned and discussed.
- Concerns were raised that the terms of reference for the study were not followed in the EIBC study, and it was questioned why this was the case. Concerns were also raised about members having not been provided with the full report. Officers informed the Committee that the release of the full report was not possible due to the confidentiality agreements originally made with businesses who participated in the study. However, the committee was informed that a redacted version would be issued to members.
- It was questioned why the report mentioned an additional employment space review being undertaken for West Somerset to identify more employment land whilst elsewhere in the report it mentions 54,000 square feet of potential land.
- The planned ratio between manufacturing and service industries as part of innovation and development was questioned and it was asked how sustainable employment opportunities would be created.
- Concerns were raised about the suggestion that an Innovation Centre be built in Watchet given the poor transport links in West Somerset. It was questioned whether the aim was to create new employment or attract jobs from elsewhere into the area.
- It was questioned whether a different approach is needed in Somerset West and Taunton or whether instead lessons could be learned, and ideas taken from areas where innovation has been successful.
- It was discussed whether an innovation hub would be better than an innovation district and that having an innovation hub in Taunton initially and then expanding innovation across the district afterwards may be better than immediately looking to establish an innovation district. It was suggested that businesses may initially be more attracted to Taunton due to its proximity to the motorway.
- It was suggested that a feasibility study for an innovation hub in Taunton be undertaken

In conclusion the Committee Recommended to the Executive that:

A feasibility study is undertaken for the provision of an innovation hub based in Taunton and that the Council brings the results of such a study back through the democratic path when completed. The funding for this proposal is to be found within existing 2021/22 budgets where possible.

In response the Executive resolved to progress the work identified in the 'Developing the Innovation Ecosystem in Somerset West and Taunton – Framework for Action' report and not to carry out an additional feasibility study for an innovation hub in Taunton, however as part of SWT's role as an enabler to deliver the space necessary for research and innovation within the district, the council will finance and host a R&I conference in Taunton by or during the summer 2022.

December 2021

The December meeting considered the Quarter 2 Corporate Performance Report, the Quarter 2 General Fund Financial Monitoring and the Draft 2022-23 General Fund Budget Update.

As part of the scrutiny of these reports the Committee queried:

- Why West Somerset was apparently being prioritised for infrastructure? This is to resolve long standing issues in Minehead and W Somerset. In response there is a need for economic support and employment land.

- Whether the average relet time of 44 days under homes and communities was normal? In response this target was set under Covid conditions and benchmarked against other District Council performance
- Fly tipping was raised as being a big issue and it was questioned what was being done to address this. In response at the end of September, performance for the year-to date is 81% which is exceeding the target of 80%. Fly-tipping is dealt with by an external contactor and performance has improved during the year.
- What is the current Phosphate progress? In response the Council had difficulty in recruiting to essential posts, but this was now in hand.
- It was reported that car parking losses had been partially covered by Covid grants and funds have been taken from the Emergency Risk fund. The change in parking behaviours was having an impact on income and a Car Parking Review was being proposed.

January 2022 (Meeting 1)

The Committee considered:

The Annual Infrastructure Funding Statement with questions about CIL especially going forward into Unitary. The Committee also felt that a review of CIL in the District was needed. In addition, the council had to ensure that all funds held were advertised and spent in a timely manner.

The confidential Commercial Property Investment Strategy, Six Monthly Performance Review and Asset Management Strategy was also considered.

January 2022 (Meeting 2)

At the end of January, the Committee scrutinised the Budget proposals for 2022/23.

February 2022

The Committee held sessions with two Executive Portfolio holders.

Councillor Marcus Kravis – Economic Development & Asset Management

Topics covered included:

- The Coal Orchard development and the difficulties facing the contractors
- The future of Taunton Bus Station
- West Somerset Employment land
- The Innovation Committee

Councillor Mike Rigby – Planning and Transport

Topics covered included:

- Progress on resolving the Phosphate planning delays
- Car parking and the Parking review.
- The Local Plan review.
- District Housing supply.