

SWT Corporate Scrutiny Committee - 7 December 2022

Present: Councillor Loretta Whetlor (Chair)
Councillors Janet Lloyd, Ian Aldridge, Habib Farbahi, Ed Firmin,
Nicole Hawkins and Libby Lisgo

Officers: Amy Tregellas, Paul Fitzgerald, Sam Murrell, Chris Hall, Alison Blom
Cooper, Lisa Tuck, Gordon Dwyer, Malcolm Riches
(Alison North joined via zoom)

Also Present: Councillors Benet Allen and Cllr Mike Rigby
(Councillor Sarah Wakefield joined via zoom)

(The meeting commenced at 6.15 pm)

63. Appointment of the Chair

Due to both the Chair and Vice Chair being absent due to ill health, the meeting was opened by the Clerk.

Cllr Whetlor was nominated to be temporary chair by Cllr Habib Farbahi. This was seconded by Cllr Janet Lloyd. Cllr Whetlor took the Chair for the duration of the meeting

Cllr Whetlor nominated Cllr Lloyd to be Vice Chair. This was seconded by Cllr Habib Farbahi. Cllr Lloyd was Vice Chair for the duration of the meeting.

64. Apologies

Apologies were received from Cllr Gwil Wren (subs Janet Lloyd), Cllr Sue Buller, Cllr Simon Coles, Cllr Nick Thwaites, Cllr Norman Cavill, Cllr Marcus Kravis and Cllr Simon Nicholls.

Cllr Danny Weddercopp had resigned as a Cllr so there was a vacant Lib-Dem seat on the committee.

Cllr Lisgo expressed her displeasure at the number of apologies without a substitute being found. She considered it was very disrespectful to their respective wards, and not least the officers who outnumbered the Members in the JMR. She asked that substitutions are found by absentees to ensure the meeting remains quorate, and good debate and representation is assured.

65. Minutes of the previous Corporate Scrutiny Committee

The Minutes of the previous meeting of Corporate Scrutiny Committee held on 2 November 2022, were confirmed as a true record.

Prop: Lloyd / Sec: Farbahi (Unanimous)

66. **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 I Aldridge	All Items	Williton	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr H Farbahi	All Items	SCC & Shadow Taunton Town	Personal	Spoked and Voted
Cllr L Lisgo	All Items	Taunton Charter Trustee & Shadow Taunton Town	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr J Lloyd	All Items	Wellington & Sampford Arundel	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr L Whetlor	All Items	Watchet	Personal	Spoke and Voted

67. **Public Participation**

No items or questions had been submitted in advance of the meeting for public participation.

68. **Corporate Scrutiny Request/Recommendation Trackers**

There were no new recommendations to update.

The Written Answer Tracker had been updated with a supplementary sheet from the Somerset Rivers Authority which was requested at the last meeting. This provided detailed responses on specific ward areas as requested by Councillors.

The Committee was unanimous in accepting the trackers.

69. **Corporate Scrutiny Committee Forward Plan**

The Committee reviewed the remaining three meetings of the Corporate Scrutiny Committee.

The planning performance update has been added to January's agenda.

Cllr Lloyd commented that there was no business currently listed for February beyond the usual standing item on LGR. Is this meeting likely to be cancelled? The Monitoring Officer said that this would be discussed at the next Coordinating Scrutiny Meeting which was due to take place on the 13 December. In the meantime, the situation would be monitored, as business was brought forward from members, SMT and officers.

The Committee unanimously accepted the Forward Plan.

70. **Executive and Full Council Forward Plan**

Both the Executive and Full Council Forward Plans were unanimously approved by the Committee.

71. **Somerset Innovation Exchange - Outcomes and Opportunities.**

Executive Councillor for Economic Development, Planning and Transportation, Mike Rigby requested that this item was heard earlier on the agenda as he had a prior engagement at 7pm.

The Chair asked the Committee if this was acceptable, and they unanimously voted in favour.

The report author Gordon Dwyer, accompanied by Lisa Tuck did a presentation to the Committee, which included a video made on the day of the Innovation Exchange. The slides can be viewed [here](#).

Questions from the floor were as follows:-

- Cllr Habib Farbahi asked what policies and plans were going to be taken forward as a result of the Innovation Exchange? In the past (2018) when he convened a similar conference there were clear policies and outcomes for Taunton, which would tap into the potential growth and levelling up funds? *Cllr Rigby responded that this expo had not been established to deliver policies as this would ultimately rest with the New Somerset Council. It will feed into existing strategies, will encourage investment and networking. The successful results of this were already being realised as groups from different business sectors were already starting to meet and collaborate. Some of the delegates were starting to drive this themselves. Cllr Rigby asked that Cllr Farbahi pass on any relevant contacts so that these can be followed up by the team.*
- What are the plans for the Nexus Site on Junction 25? What is the potential for growth in Somerset and in which sector? *Somerset Council will be looking to establish an innovation hub here. There is no limit to what might be achieved working within Somerset Council. SWT has already managed to lever in funding from various sources such as Heritage England and the High Street Fund. That energy does need to be transferred into the new authority and sustained.*
- What would be done differently if a future conference was planned? *The internal arrangements within the venue may be changed to encourage more people to visit the workshops and trade stands. The split arrangement over two floors meant that some delegates didn't experience all that the conference had to offer. There was also a marked difference to the venue and what was happening there, as opposed to the main Taunton Town. The use of the automated vehicle through the town did encourage interest but this could be expanded for a future meeting, to include the businesses in the High Street.*
- Cllr Lloyd asked how many delegates attended?

180 delegates were present which was a combination of elected members, businesses from various sectors, education providers and the invited speakers. Most of the invitees were representative of Somerset as a county as it was relevant to draw investment in. The marketing was done in a variety of ways, by both using an external marketing company and drawing on the networks in the team. There would be future lessons learnt around this if another event is planned.

- Cllr Lisgo applauded the strong local political leadership which became apparent in the video and interviews on the day. She asked if invitations had been sent to MPs to try and include Westminster into the talks, because it was imperative that political will was driving this?
The team had invited a Minister from Westminster to be a key-note speaker but that request had been declined. It was also difficult to pin down the MPs although Rebecca Pow had been invited. Cllr Farbahi echoed Cllr Lisgo's point and said it was vitally important that MPs needed to drive this forward from the front.

The Chair thanked the Portfolio Holder and officers for a very informative presentation. They subsequently left the meeting.

72. **Update on Local Government Review (via zoom)**

Cllr Wakefield joined via zoom. She asked that in future she was allowed to speak earlier on the agenda, so that she could attend her local parish council meeting which starts at 7.00pm.

Local Government Reorganisation

- This was now at the implementation stage. The County Governance team were now working on planning and licensing committees as these are due to be taken into the new council. They are examining the working methods to ensure that best practice is taken forward from April.
- Due to the LCN consultation having no clear outcomes or outright winner on the boundary review, this has been deferred to January. This will give the team more time to evaluate the results and report back to the Executive.
- In advance of close-down of the payroll, staff will be transferring across to SCC soon. This will enable any glitches to be picked up prior to vesting day.

Local Community Governance Review – parishing of Taunton

- The first two meetings of the Taunton Shadow Council had now taken place.
- The clerk position has been advertised and interviews will be taking place before Christmas. The clerk's position will be a temporary role until the new Taunton Town Council is formed properly in May. At this point the newly elected Councillors can decide how to proceed and whether they wish to appoint their own clerk. It is hoped that the temporary position will be filled in the early New Year, but this will of course have to be negotiated with the successful applicant.

- The Taunton Area Trustees who form part of the Shadow Council will continue until May, when the election will take place. At this point some will be required to stand down.
- The polling district revisions have been agreed at Full Council.

73. **Corporate Performance Report Quarter 2 - 2022/23**

This matter is the responsibility of Executive Councillor Benet Allen .
Report Author: Malcolm Riches.

The portfolio holder introduced the report by saying the last quarter had been extremely challenging due to the Cost-of-Living Crisis, the war in Ukraine, staff shortages and a pay rise which came in above the projected forecast. This had all added to pressure on resource and budgets. That being said the Portfolio Holder congratulated and thanked staff for all their hard work over the year.

Comments from the Committee included:-

- Cllr Farbahi asked what was being done to tackle the Water Companies and the approach to phosphates? Chris Hall agreed to provide a written answer to this but has now added it to his report for an expanded response. The report will be coming to Committee as part of the Planning Performance Update in January.
- Cllr Lloyd expressed dismay at the length of time calls were waiting. It was responded that SWT was not alone in this deficiency. Call demand has increased since the pandemic and there is greater pressure on staff. Services have changed to try and accommodate this, and SWT is trying to encourage customers to use the website. Additional resource has been put in place to try and address the problem but it proving difficult to tackle.
- Cllr Lisgo asked if the abandonment rate was monitored, and if this was followed up? The call abandonment rate is picked up on the customer services software. This evaluates the length of time customers wait before they ring off. Cllr Lisgo asked if a written answer could be provided on the average wait times.
- Cllr Aldridge said that he prefers call centres to state how many are in the queuing system, as this gives hope to the caller. They have a better idea of how long they are likely to be waiting. He also stated that officers need to be prioritising their time and getting ready for vesting day. He didn't see the point in members asking for irrelevant reports when the end of SWT was on the horizon.
- Cllr Whetlor responded that the demise of SWT was close, but in the meantime members and officers still needed to provide an exemplary service to residents.
- Cllr Farbahi asked why the rate of processing planning applications and responding to Fly-tipping had dropped and was now flagged as amber? Cllr Allen said that they had only just failed to meet the target by a couple of percentage points. Due to the direction of travel falling below the target this had to be flagged accordingly. He was hopeful that this would be corrected by the next quarter report.
- Cllr Aldridge had concerns about a planning application in his ward area which seemed to be taking a very long time to process. Chris Hall asked him to contact the team directly, and a written response would be provided.

74. **Access to Information - Exclusion of the Press and Public - Appendix F ONLY**

It was unanimously agreed by the Committee that they would enter Closed Session in the event of the confidential item being discussed.

It was agreed that appendix F should not need to be referred to as part of the debate, so members proceeded.

75. **General Fund Financial Performance Qtr2 2033/23**

This item was introduced by the Executive Member for Resources, Cllr Benet Allen.

In the absence of the report author Kerry Prisco, Paul Fitzgerald answered questions on this item.

In his summary he stated that the General Fund is currently underspent and therefore money will be returned to the Council General Reserves. The mid-year report and the position has improved from the predicted forecast at the end of Qtr1. The Treasury costs have also put SWT in a better position.

- Cllr Lloyd asked what would happen if the General Fund was overspent at the end of the Financial Year? *Money would be transferred from the reserve to cover the deficit, in the same way that it might happen if the HRA is overspent. At the moment the reserves are in a healthy position, but this will be consistently monitored.*

The recommendations to the Executive are listed in point 2 of the report. Cllr Whetlor took them en-bloc and the Committee unanimously supported them.

Prop: Firmin / Sec: Aldridge.

(The Meeting ended at 7.59 pm)