

CORPORATE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE ANNUAL REPORT 2022/23

1.Introduction

As Chair of the Committee, I have the pleasure in providing what will be the last Corporate Scrutiny report for Somerset West and Taunton (SWT), as this council draws to a close prior to formation of the new Unitary Council on 1 April 2023.

2022/23 marks the second year of division between the two Scrutiny committees and both committees have worked closely together in identifying which items require scrutiny and which committee takes responsibility to scrutinise a particular item. Both Chairs have worked closely together to ensure a focussed approach in order to ensure active debate, transparency, and accountability. Committee members have actively attempted, and somewhat succeeded in, ensuring their communities' voices have been considered as part of inclusive and democratic decision making.

2. 2022/23 Programme

Unfortunately, the impact of the reorganisation of the five councils which will form the new Unitary council has impacted on the level of work the Committee has had to review. This is on the whole unavoidable, and effectively has provided the Unitary with the breathing space to assess its work in progress even though this might have hindered local initiatives. The shadow Unitary council is well underway in setting the cogs in motion to enable it to organise its finances and establish which projects do in fact progress. As a matter of prudence, the shadow Unitary council also agreed spending limits with individual district councils in order to monitor and agree various projects. These items alone, have impacted on business projects at SWT.

As Chair, I requested that the Committee was provided with a monthly overview of the Local Government Reorganisation (LGR). This has been implemented as a monthly standing item, either in person or via Zoom and has allowed councillors to question various stages of the LGR. This has also afforded our communities a glimpse of what is happening behind the scenes.

The Corporate Scrutiny Committee reviewed the following items during the current year.

- Connecting our Garden Communities
- Flooding Projects
- Garden Town Status Update
- Firepool Design Guidance and Masterplan
- Governance for Taunton Garden Town
- Review of Commercial Property Activity
- Planning Performance
- Public Transport Task and Finish Report
- Local Labour Agreements
- Innovation Exchange Update

- Corporate Performance Reports for quarters 1&2. Quarter 3 forms part of the March agenda

The minutes of the various meetings reflect and record the challenges made and questions raised by committee members, together with recommendations made to the executive.

Unfortunately, we had few executive members attend for extended questioning. However, the portfolio holder and senior members of the planning team did attend to answer questions on Garden Town Status update, Firepool Design Guidance and Masterplan. The same portfolio holder and members of the planning team were also in attendance to answer members' questions on the Planning Performance Update. Both items being extremely important to our communities. In October, the committee was also provided with a detailed and very helpful update on Flooding Projects by the assistant director of Climate Change. This particular item had been requested by Scrutiny members in July.

3. Conclusion

As a committee, we have taken the view that one of our tasks was to effectively ensure smooth passage of SWT into dry dock and I consider we have achieved that task.

As this sovereign council draws to a close in a few weeks' time, we look forward to seeing how the Unitary evolves and serves our wider communities. Staff in particular are to be applauded as they evolve/ merge into their new roles. This is especially so as many of this same workforce worked hard to bring together the former TDBC and West Somerset councils in just four years, overcoming the many hurdles which were certainly not envisaged or identified at inception. The whole committee wishes them well in the next chapter of their careers.

I would like to personally thank our allocated three Corporate Scrutiny officers for their dedication and flexibility throughout this last year. Even though staff priorities have been stretched, they never failed to deliver a dedicated service.

I am sure the whole committee, will join me in wishing them well in their new Unitary roles.

I would also like to thank my member colleagues for their flexibility, support, and hard work over the last year, actively challenging the various items brought before us. This includes my fellow Community Scrutiny Chair Libby Lisgo, together with the vice chairs who helped enormously to ensure the smooth running of the two committees.

I wish you all well in your new ventures whatever they might be.

This report is the responsibility of Councillor Sue Buller – Chair of Corporate Scrutiny and has been drafted in collaboration with the Vice Chair, Councillor Nick Thwaites.