

Minutes of a Meeting of the Scrutiny Committee - Communities held in the John Meikle Room, The Deane House, Belvedere Road, Taunton TA1 1HE, on Wednesday, 10 April 2024 at 10.00 am

Present:

Cllr Gwil Wren (Chair)

Cllr Dawn Johnson (Vice-Chair)

Cllr Andy Dingwall

Cllr Pauline Ham

Cllr Edric Hobbs

Cllr Andy Kendall

Cllr Wes Read

Cllr Martin Lovell

Cllr Rosemary Woods

In attendance:

Cllr Sarah Wakefield

Other Members present remotely:

Cllr Dawn Denton

Cllr Simon Carswell

Cllr Norman Cavill

Cllr Liz Leyshon

Cllr Tony Lock

Cllr Sue Osborne

Cllr Leigh Redman

Cllr Federica Smith-Roberts

Cllr Andy Soughton

35 Apologies for Absence - Agenda Item 1

Apologies were received from Councillors Kathy Pearce, Hazel Prior-Sankey, Lance Duddridge, Simon Coles, and Susannah Hart. Cllr Martin Lovell attended as substitute for Cllr Simon Coles and Cllr Rosemary Woods attended as substitute for Cllr Susannah Hart.

36 Minutes from the Previous Meeting - Agenda Item 2

Resolved that the minutes of the Scrutiny Committee – Communities held on 14th February 2024 be confirmed as a correct record.

37 Declarations of Interest - Agenda Item 3

There were no new declarations of interest.

38 Public Question Time - Agenda Item 4

The chair agreed that the public questions would be heard with the relevant agenda item (Taxi Fares – Tables 2024).

39 Work Programme - Agenda Item 5

An update was requested regarding the status of the Cultural Strategy item, and it was confirmed that it would be ready for the June 13th meeting of Scrutiny – Communities.

It was requested that a post-Glastonbury Festival ‘wash-up’ session be held later in the year.

It was clarified that future Scrutiny Committees would consistently be on Thursdays.

An item for Wheelchair Accessibility and Taxis was added to the work programme as it is considered within the purview of the committee.

40 Glastonbury Festival Verbal Update - Agenda Item 6

Sarah Dowden, Service Director for Regulatory and Operational Services, gave an update on the change in approach to managing Glastonbury Festival and monitoring the licensing conditions, and how efficiencies will be made by reducing staff on site this year.

During the discussion, the following points were raised:

- What are all the services on site that we are expected to provide? *We don't*

provide services, we monitor to ensure they are complying with their license.

- For services provided by the police and SWAST, do they fund their own operations? *Other agencies are able to charge for resources, if there are extra staff on site.*
- What about public health? *Not aware of the detail of that, but know that they work alongside UKHSA, so have external support. They don't charge for their services.*
- £32,000 is the maximum we can charge for licensing, could we ask them to volunteer more money to support services? *No, we are charging within the licensing regulatory framework.*
- Are there any test runs for the efficiency changes? What are the risks of the efficiencies? *We can adapt on site. That is the role of the silver officer. Two or three times a day there are formal feedback meetings with staff on site, allowing us to focus resources and be flexible in areas we are monitoring.*
- Is there scope to roll it back part way through the festival? *No, we wouldn't be able to get administrative staff on site. There will be capacity on site with the staff already there (over 80).*
- Are highways compensated for their work in the festival? *Not under the remit of licensing and regulatory, but don't believe so.*
- Highways falls under Climate and Place, which recently had an item on Glastonbury Festival. A post-Glastonbury wash up session probably needs to cover the whole festival, run jointly with Climate and Place. We would hope to get Glastonbury Festival to attend as well.
- We can only charge on a cost recovery basis, so it would be useful to review how much it actually costs us so that we can charge.
- Do we have an overall view of all the agencies involved? *Yes, there is a monthly all agency meeting chaired by Sarah Dowden. Looking at how to efficiently use staff resources.*
- How did you come by the figure of 80 officers? *This is the historic number from Mendip District Council. This is due to the rotas and the rest periods, as some work until 3am so time off is needed. There are also students, graduates, and volunteers. There are efficiencies to be made with the rotas.*
- Are staff paid overtime? *Some are, depending on TUPE conditions.*
- It is clear that our hands are tied financially with how much money we can charge and how much we are required to be on site.
- District councillors in the past have been invited on site to Glastonbury to see how much goes into monitoring. Would that be possible? *Yes, we can have a conversation to see if that is possible.*
- Positive feedback for Highways on improvements in recent years, leading to less disruption.
- Festival generates £32m for businesses in Somerset, £168m for businesses overall. We shouldn't underestimate the impact of it.

- Have we had the opportunity to learn from other global events around the country? *Yes, have spoken to local authorities of some of the festivals around the country, including Reading and Leeds, and taken learning from that.*
- Are there plans for counties that host music festival to be involved in more lobbying around license fees? *No, we are not involved.*
- Do we get a license fee for other events Glastonbury holds, such as the Extravaganza, Pilton Party, etc.? *The license is related to the premises, so those based elsewhere have separate licenses. Can't confirm from memory.*

41 Devolution of Services Verbal Update - Agenda Item 7

Sarah Dowden, Service Director for Regulatory and Operational Services, gave an update on the current progress of devolution based on the pilot carried out with Bridgwater Town Council. Service transferred include street cleansing, street sweeping, ground maintenance, open spaces, play areas, and fly tipping. The proposed transfer date is 1st May 2024.

During the discussion, the following points were raised:

- Where there are existing contracts in place are they continuing with those contracts? *For Bridgwater area staff are in-house. There is no contract in place. This allows us to be more flexible with timelines as we are not dealing with contract expiry or transfer.*
- Open air street markets not in the list – is that because there aren't any? *No markets are covered under this.*
- Will there be things to do with Bridgwater Carnival that are devolved? *Yes, work around the carnival such as post-midnight cleanup will now fall to Bridgwater Town Council.*
- Is the overall cost to the taxpayer going to be higher than currently, with each town council having their own contract? *We don't know what it will look like at the end of devolution. It's not clear what services will be left over.*
- For Bridgwater Town Council, precept increased for Band D of £3.52 per week, £183 per year. *Appendix 16C to the budget gives every Parish precept. This can be shared so councillors can see the increase cost to taxpayers.*
- Will trucks get to the sign and turn around? *Yes, unless they choose to buy services in with us, everything else will in effect turn around at the boundary.*
- Some of these are statutory functions. Do we have to be assured that these functions will be carried out to the statutory standard? *Yes.*
- If service levels were dropping in Bridgwater, how would we deal with that? *There are quarterly meetings. It would be a different process to review it.*

- There is a benefit to staff being TUPEd across as there is consistency in who will be doing the work. The cost of staffing then transfers to Bridgwater Town Council.
- What are the possibilities of Bridgwater Town Council handing them back to us? *It is possible, but they have set their precept in order to fund this.*
- Is there a contract with a timeframe? *There is an agreement, with no end date.*
- This will be a partnership going forward. The Bridgwater Town Council Clerk will be happy to share information with parishes or towns on how the devolution process has gone.
- It would be helpful to see what the action is in Service Level Agreements if the service level is not met and how that would roll out to other devolution agreements. *Yes, this can be added to the Work Programme later in the year.*
- Were there things that were not possible or viable for the devolution? *Yes, but that is a question for the overall devolution programme. We only deal with regulatory and operations and they guide the conversation.*
- Williton Parish Council would like to be included in the conversation, feel they have not been. There are buildings in Williton that they would like to be included in the discussion. *Devolution of assets is a separate workstream.*
- For other towns and parishes in the pipeline, we would like to know where they are and what the learning points are from Bridgwater Town Council Devolution.
- Devolution as a whole is dealt with by Partnerships and Localities, which holds a central register of all people interested but these have been prioritised based on financial benefit. When a town or parish will give enough financial benefit, a service manager is assigned as a sponsor. For some items, such as car parks, these are fee earning so are a financial loss if devolved. There are also different legislation and governance procedures for transfer of services compared to transfer of assets.
- At Full Council, £600,000 was allocated in the budget to support devolution with legal resources and other costs. This is not money that will go to town and parish councils.

42 Community Services Budget Monitoring (Month 10) - Agenda Item 8

Budget Monitoring

Christian Evans, Head of Finance Business Partnering, gave a report on the financial position at the end of January, showing the overall position as well as the position within Community Services specifically. Community Services had a £700,000 underspend, an improvement of £400,000 from month 9.

During the discussion, the following points were raised:

- Congratulations to the Community Directorate on balancing the budget within the year.
- For Housing options, grant funding seems to have doubled. Is that funding for future years or is there going to be additional pressure in the future budget? *Housing options has ringfenced government grants. There are reserves in the budget, but don't have the figures available.*
- Were there any costs associated with the increased ticket sales for the pantomime, such as marketing? *The entertainment venue worked very hard on this, thinking about it in a different way. Not aware of costs.*

The committee commended the team for their hard work on the budget.

43 Taxi Fares - Tables 2024 - Agenda Item 9

Public Statements were read by Jared Colclough and Robin Colclough.

Robin Colclough:

“Hello my name is Robin Colclough, and I have been a licenced taxi driver in Taunton Deane for very nearly 30 years. I have been the owner & operator of Scorpio cars for 28 of those years.

I am also the spokesperson for the Taunton taxi drivers and owners trade association, When we saw the first proposed tariff change, we were extremely worried about the following points,

The change to the timing of time and a half from 22;00 to 23;00 and the loss of Saturday daytime would have a devastating effect on taxi owners but more importantly a crippling effect on a drivers ability to earn a living wage.

A driver who normally works these hours would see a average loss of nearly £80 a week in takings, bad enough for the owner but critical for the driver on commission, this would equate to £2000 a year in lost earnings for a driver on the national average commission of 50% - even after taking into account the increase in the basic tariff the driver would still be down over £1200 a year in earnings.

In previous years that might be the loss of a week away with the kids in summer, now it could be the gas or electric bill that doesn't get paid!

Drivers on 50% commission very rarely earn minimum wage and evenings and weekends are the chance to make up weekly pay.

If they lose this opportunity, then I can assure you Taunton will steadily lose drivers

who will leave for better paid jobs.

This also applies to owners who will struggle to maintain their business's with lower earnings.

When time and half was reduced from 23:30 to 22:00 I personally presented some research I did to the licensing committee.

The basic premise of this research was, the time at which 6 large companies in Taunton paid an enhanced hourly rate,

The earliest was Maynards bakery who paid a higher rate to those starting their evening shift at 17:00 the latest was Asda who paid a higher rate from 21:00. When the time was lowered from 23:30 to 22:00 we, as a trade, made a promise not to ask for it be to any lower in future. The proposal to move it back to 23:00 is a low blow we never expected. It is bad enough that we have to wait until 22:00 but 23:00 is quite simply not fair.

I can absolutely guarantee that any and all passengers traveling after 22:00 will be paid an enhanced hourly rate long before the taxi driver is.

A lot of taxis in Taunton cover school run contracts for Somerset Council, at a rate lower than metered rate. The ability to earn extra from time and a half to cover the bills associated with the business and to earn a living themselves isn't a desire but an absolute necessity.

Whist I do not wish to labour a point, The earnings from working at time and a half as per the current tariff are critical for the continuation of taxi businesses in Taunton Deane."

Jared Colclough:

"Hello, My name is Jared Colclough, I have been a licensed taxi driver in Taunton Deane for nearly 14 years, I am the owner / Operator of Grab-A-Cab Taunton Ltd, a small taxi business running 4 Taxis.

The extra charge of £2 per passenger over four in 6 and 8 seater taxis is in no way enough to cover the extra cost of buying and running these vehicles.

Six and Eight Seater Hackney Vehicles cost between 30 & 40% more to buy and roughly the same in extra insurance premium costs, they are also far less economical in fuel, 25 MPG v 40+ for a four seater saloon car.

A fare to wellington from Taunton currently costs £20 at day rate, £30 at time and a half, a six seater vehicle carrying 5 passengers after 22:00 can currently charge £40 for this journey, if the new tariff is introduced they would on be able to charge £32.

The extra £2 would barely cover the extra fuel used and would go no way towards the extra purchase and running costs.

The longer the journey the more deficit the owner is into, a journey from Taunton to Bridgwater at the 3 current rates would be £30 - £45 & £60 but at the proposed tariff the maximum chargeable with 5 passengers would be £47 with all the aforementioned costs, we realise with the proposed rate change in the new tariff that these journey prices would go up but the negative effect would be the same,

These taxis owners would very quickly abandon the larger vehicles as they would no longer be economically viable.

The traveling public would be restricted to 4 seaters, The effect of this when traveling home at the end of the night is as follows.

TAUNTON TO WELLINGTON

1 six seater £40

2 X Four seaters £60

TAUNTON TO BRIDGWATER

1 x Six Seater £60

2 X four Seaters £90

As you can see, the loss of the 6-8 seater fleet would have a huge knock on cost for transport and ultimately a loss of people choosing to travel further than the local pub for their evening's entertainment, or possibly taking the risk of drink driving to save the cost of 2 Taxis, a consequence that horrifies the taxi trade.

In conclusion – I would like to say that the trade by and large is against the tariff first proposed but is universally in favour of the 2nd and amended tariff proposal which is a maintenance of the status quo to include an increase to the base rate that is desperately needed by the trade to go some way towards offsetting the increase in business costs and the ever rise in cost of living.

We would like to thank you for giving us the opportunity to speak and look forward to the conclusion of your deliberations.”

John Rendell, Licensing Manager, gave a report that detailed the process and modelling of the new taxi fares table, which is bringing 4 tables from districts together.

During the discussion, the following points were raised:

- What about when contracts come up for renewal? *Contract renewal is a separate process, it is not at a metred rate. Those won't change until September.*
- There is a need to balance taxi drivers needs to earn a living with vulnerable people reliant on taxis.
- There is not enough information on comparable taxi fares across the country. *There is a league table of 344 authorities available.*
- What proportion of journeys require larger vehicles?
- Would a 10 mile journey be a more useful measure with the rurality of Somerset? *The distance makes no difference as it is metred, you can extrapolate 2 miles to 10 miles.*
- As these tables only set the maximum rate, people are still free to negotiate prices with operators.
- What is driving the desire to harmonise everything? *There are several*

benefits, each rate would need to be reviewed separately, and then amended, taking time. It makes it fair and even across the county. It is still a maximum so there will be some variants.

- Are these rates a price cut in Taunton? *No, the original proposal in January was. The new one addresses the concerns raised by Taunton drivers.*
- Appendix 5 – We have chosen the higher end of fare charges, so they will increase? *Yes, this is to balance changes to night time and weekend charges.*
- In Mendip and South Somerset it will be a larger increase? *Yes.*
- Due to when taxi ranks are busiest, on the weekends and evenings, the increase during the week won't offset the loss of earnings from reduction in time and a half in the evenings and weekends.
- Where are we in the democratic process? *The decision needs to be made by the 8th of May.*
- There isn't enough data to make an honest assessment of what the price should be.

The committee resolved to recommend that the Executive Committee looks at all the factors that determine taxi driver incomes, the total impact on income of the proposed changes and at comparisons across rural authorities with regard to day/time pricing and days charged at time and a half when coming to a decision.

44 Octagon Theatre - Capital Programme - Agenda Item 10

Steve Hughes, Programme Manager, and Liz Dawson, Service Director for Cultural Services, gave a report on the revised plan for the Octagon Theatre ahead of it being added to the capital programme.

During the discussion, the following points were raised:

- Is there a specific reason Somerset Council take responsibility for the overspend of the project should it happen? *The theatre is currently closed, and the risk does currently sit with this council. The officer responsible is confident it will not materialise and the reduced scheme can be delivered within the budget, and has a track record of projects delivered under budget.*
- Is the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) funding on the way? *Town clerk is not aware of the status of this. We meet with the Yeovil Town Clerk on a weekly basis to talk about the devolution programme and where we are with the project. Can take it away as an action to ensure there is no confusion. The approach with DCMS is a phased approach, the outline business case has been submitted. There is a requirement for a final and full business case that will be submitted on time.*

- Paragraph 2.1 – the new scheme will be funded by DCMS, Yeovil Town Council, Grant Funded – is this not confirmed? *Should the scheme go ahead, it will be funded by £10m from DCMS, £3.75m from Yeovil Town Council, and the rest of the funding is in hand.*
- There is no risk register against this project, so how can we have 100% confidence after a lot of building around the county has gone over budget? *There is a risk register, and an Octagon Project Board. It has been scrutinised and if there are risks we are dealing with them. Any project has risks, but we have already done surveys and have a lot of knowledge. There are a large number of officers working on this, including experts on risk assessments. Once there is a final business case, we will be looking at governance, and there will be a high level of involvement from strategic asset management to ensure we keep on top of risks and deal with them appropriately. The recommendation today is only to add it to the capital build programme – we are not asking for money. This project will come back through the governance process.*
- Could we have a risk register? *We will bring that next time this comes to committee.*
- There is in principal support from DCMS and Yeovil Town Council, and affordability is contingent on both these decisions. We won't be in a position to run the theatre until 2026 – when will YTC take responsibility for it? What is the risk it stays with Somerset Council? *There are ongoing discussions around devolution across directorates. Yeovil is a large package, and a lot of HR resource is being used. It is in everyone's interest to get the deal done in the right and proper process. There is a lot that needs to be done. Can come back and provide more information on Yeovil devolution.*
- What are the essential differences between the original scheme and the new scheme? *The original scheme added a balcony, increasing to 900 seats. This one doesn't increase the auditorium size. This one doesn't add to the overall footprint of the Octagon, apart from adding the fly tower. The original design was architectural, so this is scaled back.*
- What are the maintenance cost implications around the empty building? *The cost when closed is lower than the subsidy when open – it is £140,000 per year closed, the subsidy when open was around £267,000.*
- The project can't be micromanaged by the committee at this point. It would help to have a timetable put forward by the officers of expected milestones to be completed.
- Why wasn't the Outline Business Case added to as an appendix to the report? *This can be shared with councillors. It wasn't relevant as this is about adding it to the capital programme to enable further development at this stage.*
- One reason for not getting large productions was lack of seating capacity – will not increasing capacity undermine the original reason for doing this? *This*

is a very different scheme, refurbishment rather than redevelopment and expansion. It will have an impact on income, but Yeovil Town Council have accepted the principal of devolution based on current costs.

- *How much have we spent so far in fees getting to where we are today? We will need to commission new architects, there will be new project management costs. The initial spend was £1.6m by South Somerset District Council. For the costs going forward it will be managed internally by a programme manager, and all costs will be part of the £15m outlined.*
- *Historic Ticket Levy – this was used to support an internal loan to refurbish Westlands. Westlands has now taken up some of the work of the Octagon. What are the impacts? Octagon had a ticket levy for many years, £267,000 was the figure after income and levy to keep it operating. Westlands also had a levy but the position has improved and it is now supporting repayment of that loan. There is crossover in the two facilities, and both are now costing the council less. Ticket levy information is available in the budget setting papers.*
- *What are the £140,000 running costs while empty covering? Outstanding utilities, insurance, heating and ventilation. A detailed breakdown could be provided if it is important to the committee.*
- *We need to be certain this is something we really want to do and not prompted into doing because there is a large government grant available. As the theatre will be the same size as present, we need to ensure it won't require a six figure subsidy for Yeovil Town Council. If it weren't for the grant, we wouldn't have closed the Octagon, so we would have had an aging facility that required capital and revenue investment, which would have been dependent on borrowing. This will protect jobs, promote tourism, and be good for the local community. It goes beyond just the money. If we do nothing at this stage we will be left with a build that is closed without an obvious alternate use for it. The £10m is for a cultural arts hub, which will be part of the cultural strategy.*
- *For the fly tower – is it possible to add this without harming structural integrity? Not a structural engineer, but we will be employing one. There will likely be new foundations and a new steel frame to support the tower. The planning and design was completed for the original design. It will be done safely.*
- *What is the timeframe? There is a critical path that can be shared with you. DCMS need to know costs, we need to go onto the capital programme to enable procurement and ascertain costs. We expect to go to DCMS in September. We have a positive ongoing relationship with them.*

It was agreed that it would return to the Committee in August, ahead of the full business case going to DCMS in September.

(The meeting ended at 12.49 pm)

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CHAIR