

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, 11 September 2024 at 10.00 am

**Present:**

Cllr Dawn Johnson (Vice-Chair)

Cllr Simon Coles

Cllr Pauline Ham

Cllr Wes Read

Cllr Emily Pearlstone

Cllr Andy Dingwall

Cllr Hazel Prior-Sankey

Cllr Henry Hobhouse

**In attendance:**

**Other Members present remotely:**

Cllr Dawn Denton

Cllr Liz Leyshon

Cllr Sarah Wakefield

Cllr Christine Lawrence

Cllr Leigh Redman

**55 Apologies for Absence - Agenda Item 1**

Apologies were received from Cllr Gwil Wren with Cllr Dawn Johnson covering the role of Chair, Cllr Edric Hobbs with Cllr Henry Hobhouse as substitute, Cllr Andy Kendall with Cllr Emily Pearlstone as substitute, Cllr Susannah Hart

**56 Minutes from the Previous Meeting - 13 June 2024 - Agenda Item 2**

Resolved that the minutes of the Scrutiny Committee – Communities held on 13 June 2024 be confirmed as a correct record.

**57 Declarations of Interest - Agenda Item 3**

No additional interest, new or updated declarations of interest were made at the meeting.

**58 Public Question Time - Agenda Item 4**

There were no questions asked, statements made or petitions presented.

**59 Work Programme - Agenda Item 5**

Cllr Andy Dingwell raised a question about whether the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) should remain under community responsibility in the new structure, or if it would be more appropriate for it to be managed by a different committee? Chris Hall confirmed that it currently is split between Communities and Adults but he felt that it made sense for it to come to Communities committee for discussion however the business plan and strategy would be held within Adults so there is a conversation that is required.

Chris also reported that Responsibility for rough sleepers had already moved to Adults responsibility.

Cllr Dawn Denton queried whether it was possible to include within the work programme any additional pressures we have as a Council and look at how we could support residents through libraries/communities spaces? Chris Hall agreed this would be ok to include on the forward plan for the committee but being careful to ensure we don't duplicate any work already happening through revenues and benefits team.

The CCTV service was discussed and it was agreed that now would be a good time to rearrange the visit to the team noting this is coming back for discussion at the next committee meeting.

Glastonbury Festival wash up item this was discussed and Chris Hall although the report covers various council's responsibilities the intention is to come to Communities with a single report and presentation as required which other departments have fed into as required.

It was agreed that Environmental Health could come to a future meeting to explain the overspend their budget.

As Chair, Cllr Dawn Johnson encouraged members to raise any other items they feel should come to the committee between the meetings.

The Committee resolved to add the following items to the Work Programme: -

- Open Spaces,
- Visit to CCTV site in Bridgwater,
- HRA budgets (Housing Revenue Account),
- Customer Service Annual Report,
- Environmental Health and
- Financial Hardship and local support available.

#### **60 Future Meetings - Agenda Item 6**

Jennie Murphy - Democratic Services Specialist updated the committee regarding the meeting venue and times now that the Deane House meeting room is shared with the NHS we need to finish our meetings promptly to allow access to the meeting room from Wednesday lunchtime. Views of the Committee were requested – after discussion it was agreed to trial keeping the meeting times and venue as they are but the meeting will need to be carefully chaired and the meeting agenda managed carefully and members disciplined to ensure the meeting time does not run over. Agreed to the potential to move the start time forward if an agenda is looking particularly full.

The Committee resolved to keep the meeting time and location for the moment but agreed to review should there be inadequate time to cover all the agenda items.

#### **61 Update L2/L3 Restructure - Agenda Item 7**

Chris Hall, Executive Director for Community, Place and Economy confirmed that the recent structural update relates only to the Communities Directorate and highlighted that Housing responsibility has recently shifted to the Adults Directorate. He advised members to continue using the current structure for contacting directorates unless informed otherwise. Members expressed understanding of the challenges staff face due to these changes and requested that contact details for all departments be kept up to date on the members' resources site. They also agreed that having generic email addresses for contacting departments is useful. Additionally, Cllr Redman reminded members to use the council's website links for reporting issues like potholes.

Chris Hall confirmed that Currently Climate & Place Scrutiny and Communities sit independently as committees however with the restructure of the organisation this

may change and he will be seeking advice from Democratic Services Team.

Cllr Andy Dingwall highlighted that the proposed restructure notice could potentially mean affected staff are informed regarding the future of the roles over the Christmas period.

The Committee resolved to have a further verbal update as further details of the restructure are determined.

## **62 Budget Outturn 23/24 and Month 3 Report - Agenda Item 8**

Christian Evans - Head of Business Partnering attended with Kerry Happel – Finance Service Manager for Communities Climate and Place and Alana Paula from Corporate Finance to update the committee on the current budget situation up to and including the end of June 2024. It is an opportunity for Members to feed back to Executive if there are comments/observations they wish to feed back to Executive and if there are any further actions Members would wish to be included.

Christian Evans highlighted the following points:

- Budget position is masked by corporate contingency which is a £6 million underspend.
- Finance are looking at how we report the corporate contingency because there are large overspends in children families and climate and place.
- Housing Options service has seen an increase in those approaching the service where we have a duty to provide relief or accommodation. Expensive Bed and Breakfast accommodation has continued to increase.
- Thrive 16+ contract has been inherited although the money associated with this transfer has yet to be received.
- Environmental health overspend related to increase in public health funerals

Chris Hall confirmed this was a forecast/an early indication and that there is still time for the financial situation to be improved before the end of the financial year and work was being done to reduce the overspend. There is some expenditure for which we don't have control over – e.g coroners service which we have to provide.

Comments/questions from members included :

- Would the addition of HRA bring in additional spend?
- Are we reducing services levels to maintain the budget in customer services?
- Definition of Resources was requested and provided by Sarah Dowden – Service Director for Regulatory and Operation Services. It includes wardens for Breen to Burnham beaches but only a small team.

- Sarah Dowdon confirmed the Open spaces overspend related to an ID Verde contract which is going to end in May 2025 the brought inhouse.
- An updated from the open spaces team was requested for a future meeting work programme
- Cllr Liz Leyshon reminded Members reminded members about he current budget situation and confirmed that Maria Christofias interim Section 151 officer will be doing a revision on our MTFP strategy due to be published in the next few weeks which will be coming for consideration by all Scrutiny Committees and Executive.
- Sarah Dowden was asked to give members further information regarding the spend on the Coroner services to help the members understand the costs in this area. She confirmed that this role is independent but the Coroner works for us and we pay their salary and support them to perform their public duty. The increase in pathology fees has resulted in the need for conversations with the NHS to see if they can part fund the role.

Questions from Members regarding the pressures on temporary accommodation.

Christian Evans confirmed that significant effort is being put into consolidating legacy budgets, supporting managers through the restructuring process, and working on the Medium-Term Financial Plan (MTFP) and budget monitoring. Many budgets will be reallocated between departments. He also noted increasing pressure on temporary accommodation, despite some government funding to address rising homelessness.

### **63 Wheelchair Accessible Taxis - Agenda Item 9**

Meeting Chair, Dawn Johnson reported that she had requested that this item come to the committee , she had a lot of people in her area reliant on taxis and buses. John Rendell – Licensing Function attended to present the update:

- There is minimal legislation relating to taxi specifications which gives the council a log of discretion in this area.
- His report sets out the responsibilities drivers have regarding assisting and carrying people with disabilities.
- The team are addressing the issues they are aware of in the Taunton Deane area in particular (despite this being the area with the largest number of Wheelchair Accessible Vehicles (WAVs). Team are looking at other factors and incentives for the trade that may improve their availability.
- The team are preparing a new taxi and licensing policy for Somerset - The council inherited 5 separate taxi and private hire licencing policies and a

uniform approach is required for the future in line with the latest government guidance.

Comments/questions:

- Relating to the South Somerset area - what would be the cost to providers for adapting to provide the WAVs? – John confirmed yes and that driver training and attitude is a problem, so training is required.
- John Rendell confirmed they are already working on a list of approved suppliers. They are also considering adding this as a standards requirement due to the particular issues being experienced at the moment.
- Issues were raised regarding access to WAVS for events in the evenings Yeovil.
- Members were surprised that only one previous authority had required taxi drivers to be trained.
- Hopeful that further training for the drivers will mean they are more confident to deal with people with disabilities and different needs
- John Rendell confirmed that although it is possible to prosecute drivers for refusing the work, it is not usually done on a first offence. They find its more effective to impose other sanctions for example – revoking a licence.
- The team are looking to harmonise the way penalties etc are dealt with there are currently multiple policies.
- Unacceptable when 20% of the population is disabled that people are struggling with access to WAVs
- The team always encourage public to raise complaints however they recognise the people may be reluctant to do so. There are offences under the Equalities Act.
- Discussion regarding the vital role volunteer teams – e.g Wivvy Care and Blackdown provide supporting the rural communities provide and the needs to develop these and see if the LCN's can provide any support or funding.
- Suggested that taxi groups could meet with disability group representatives. And could MP's assist.
- Members were keen that taxis had the opportunity to advertise as being accessibility and disability compliant.
- Members felt that the Mendip area may have been influenced by the large number of community car schemes in this area.

The Committee requested that the proposed policy document was shared in advance so they will be able to scrutinise and comment on the policy before it is formally introduced.

The chair thanked officers for their reports to this meeting.

**(The meeting ended at 11.48 am)**

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**CHAIR**