

Minutes of a Meeting of the Scrutiny Committee - Communities held in the Luttrell Room - County Hall, Taunton TA1 4DY, on Wednesday, 12 March 2025 at 10.00 am

**Present:**

Cllr Gwil Wren (Chair)  
Cllr Dawn Johnson (Vice-Chair)

Cllr Susannah Hart  
Cllr Kathy Pearce  
Cllr Henry Hobhouse

Cllr Marcus Kravis  
Cllr Hazel Prior-Sankey  
Cllr Martin Lovell

**In attendance:**

Cllr Mike Rigby

Cllr Federica Smith-Roberts

**Other Members present remotely:**

Cllr Suria Aujla  
Cllr Dawn Denton  
Cllr Bob Filmer  
Cllr Rosemary Woods

Cllr Andy Kendall  
Cllr Andy Dingwall  
Cllr Sue Osborne

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

Apologies were received from Councillors:

Simon Coles (Councillor Henry Hobhouse substituted), Councillor Pauline Ham (Councillor Martin Lovell substituted). Councillor Tom Power, Councillor Wes Reed and Councillor Lance Dudridge.

**93 Minutes from the Previous Meeting - 22 January 2025 - Agenda Item 2**

Councillor Prior-Sankey proposed and Councillor Pearce seconded that the minutes of the Scrutiny Committee – Communities held on 22 January 2025 be accepted as correct record

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

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

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

No public questions were submitted.

## **96 Work Programme - Agenda Item 5**

Following items were requested to be added to the work programme:

- Devolution Service Level Agreements Post April 2025
- Joint with Climate & Place – Glastonbury Festival - Wash Up Session Also to include traffic and air and noise pollution issue. Request for an all-Member briefing ahead of this year's festival.
- Air Quality -Sarah Dowden. Will be discussed at next pre meeting to see how this can be scrutinised.
- Report on the Seaward Way Council Housing in Minehead -How the scheme allocated housing - and access to the houses for those with local connections and the ranking, need to ensure this process is fair in the future. Members were made aware of the crossover with Adults Services for this item.
- Library Proposals following Needs Assessment (Chris Hall) – April's meeting.
- Homefinder Policy and Annual Review of Policy

Chris Hall, Executive Director, Community Place & Economy requested an amendment to the Work Programme, for the General report devolution item for April's meeting, to be reassigned to Sara Skirton.

Wilton Library temporary closure – confirmation that Wilton Parish Council had been notified regarding the temporary closure of the library.

Regarding Complaints against Members, the Member agreed to contact the Chair of Standards Committee regarding this issue.

Glastonbury Festival and Tourist Tax – it was noted this would be an issue for Scrutiny Climate and Place and confirmation was provided to Members regarding the Licencing fee which is set by Government.

Gypsy-traveller issues – The Member agreed to contact the Chair regarding any specific concerns before looking to add this to work programme.

An update was requested regarding the leisure centre in Frome, however, the Committee has recently reviewed items from other leisure centres. It was noted that the leisure centres are at different stages of their contracts, with a long-term goal to align them. Councillor Smith-Roberts is aware of community comments about the Frome leisure centre, and these are being addressed by the relevant Head of Service. A meeting and site tour will be conducted, and local and town councillors will be kept informed.

## **97 Month 9 Budget Monitoring Report - Agenda Item 6**

Christian Evans, Head of Finance Business Partnering gave a presentation on the

Communities Revenue Budget. It is an opportunity for Members to feed back to Executive and if there were any further actions Members would wish to be included.

Christian highlighted:

- Net budget of £33.242m community services are forecasting underspend of £1.314m (3.95%) decrease of £0.152m since month 7.
- Housing and Customer Services forecasted on budget.
- Cultural Services forecasted underspend £1.186m mainly due to the underspend in Leisure.
- Regulatory & Operational Services forecasting an underspend of £0.128m
- Members were referred to the Communities Services MTFP savings tracker - Where savings are 'At risk' or 'Unachievable', Savings have been offset by underspends elsewhere within Community Services.

During the discussion, the following points were raised and responded to: -

Members congratulated the Directorate on its financial performance but expressed concern about the impact of the Section 151 officer's departure.

Chris Hall acknowledged the financial difficulties many councils face due to housing costs and noted that the financial report is first presented to the Executive before individual Scrutiny committees. He mentioned that further breakdowns of figures could be provided if needed.

Christian Evans reminded Members that the report focuses on monthly changes and is a high-level strategic document. A list of grant income within Community Services was requested.

Regarding the Housing Revenue Account (HRA), it was confirmed that the Council borrows at a preferential rate. There is increased pressure from the high volume of support requests, limited stock, and expensive temporary accommodation, creating a growing general fund pressure.

Members requested that items highlighted in red be linked to additional details to help their understanding of overspend situations. An officer would need to provide further information on the percentage of funding allocated to temporary accommodation.

Members appreciated seeing the underspends but questioned their impact on services. Chris Hall explained that while some underspends were due to efficiencies, most result from a spending halt due to the financial emergency. Departments were instructed to reduce budget spending, leading to various consequences.

For the next financial year, the expectation is to continue saving money and aim to spend under budget to support other areas of the Council. Members highlighted that many valued services are not providing as much value as before to residents.

## **98 Customer Service Contact Centre Response Times - Agenda Item 7**

Sharon Jones, Head of Customer Operations shared the presentation and

highlighted:

- **Call Volume:** Highest in Revenues and Benefits.
- **Target Wait Time:** 80% of calls answered within 5 minutes; safeguarding concerns prioritized within 40 seconds.
- **Staff Resilience:** Covering multiple areas, especially during peak times; council tax staff working on four different systems.
- **New Ways of Working Plan (NWOW):** Transforming contact channels; 29,000 in-person visitors; converting Wiltton to customer access points to encourage self-service.
- **Complex Queue System:** Aligning resources; Children's team handling general enquiries and registration services.
- **Trends:** 75% increase in calls during March 2024 peak; high turnover and use of agency staff.
- **Digital First:** Training advisors to promote online services; moved 30,000 calls online; exceptional payment system for those unable to use automated systems.
- **Challenges for 2025:** Impact of organisational restructure; focus on digital first and self-help; increasing efficiency with AI; managing long call times due to council tax bill postings; supporting staff wellbeing during high demand periods; Mendip area work returning from CAPITA.

During the discussion, the following points were raised and responded to: -

Members acknowledged the importance of the service. The team prefers public to contact them via an enquiry form rather than email as this encourages website use. Sickness rates are in line with other services, though the role can be challenging when feeling unwell.

Members asked that the public should be informed about high demand periods due to council tax letters, potentially leading to longer response times. The team works with the communications and web teams to promote this.

Regarding recruitment and retention, the service experiences high staff turnover due to promotions within the council. The team faces more challenging customer behaviour, and staff now complete a leaving survey.

Members were encouraged to use online reporting. Staff will be reminded to contact local Members regarding any about Estate walkabouts in their divisions

In response to Member questions, Sharon confirmed that most customers are not waiting over 5 minutes. The impact of restructuring will be felt in March and April due to increased demand from council tax letters. Further KPI queries will be addressed outside the meeting.

To manage peak periods, resources will be moved and staff trained accordingly. Extra staff will cover the Capita contract, included in this year's budget. Most calls (79%) are resolved at first contact, and performance is strong compared to other southwest contact centres.

A separate discussion is needed on how Members can get their queries answered. The team works closely with the communications team, especially for social media issues. Customer Services will continue to be involved in integrating legacy council

systems

## 99 Management of Open Spaces - Agenda Item 8

Sarah Dowden – Service Director Regulatory and Operations shared the presentation. Sarah highlighted:

- The open spaces which Regs and Ops team have responsibility for – Play areas, Parks, Playing fields, Grass in and around HRA sites, Tree maintenance, Grass areas within our buildings and hubs.
- Devolution by areas:
  - **Wellington:** All open spaces, grounds maintenance, and play areas to be devolved.
  - **Taunton:** 11 parks to be devolved on 1st April.
  - **Bridgwater:** All grounds maintenance, open spaces, play areas, and street cleansing have been devolved.
  - **Wells:** All open spaces, grounds maintenance, and play areas to be devolved on 1st June 2025.
  - **Glastonbury:** 40% of open spaces and all play areas to be devolved on 1st June.
  - **Frome:** 40% of open spaces and all play areas to be devolved on 1st June
  - **Yeovil:** Key decision on open spaces expected by end of March, aiming for devolution on 1st June.
  - **Minehead:** All open spaces, grounds maintenance, and play areas to be devolved.
- Total savings through Devolution since vesting day = £1.3m, approximately 25 staff or posts have been transferred.
- Impact from Devolution since Vesting –transferring responsibilities for Play areas, community spaces, street cleansing, toilets, grounds and tree maintenance, fly tip collection to Parish Town and City Councils.
- Next steps – Continue with the next phase of devolution and assess the impact on services, bring consistency across Somerset by aligning grass schedules, tree work, and cleansing, and make this information available online. Make assumptions about the next phase of devolution, likely excluding cleansing and being smaller in scope. Evaluate depot usage, reach, and impact. Strengthen services in open spaces. Insourcing the former Mendip District Council area from June 2025.

During the discussion, the following points were raised and responded to: -

Decisions on prioritised areas were based on optimising spaces where staff are based. Operating out of Glastonbury allows resources to be more effectively distributed across the County.

A copy of the updated slides requested was shared with the committee following the meeting. There was also a request for a map showing responsibilities for individual Members' divisions.

Sarah confirmed that the service is experiencing an increasing workload. Teams have been able to work flexibly to manage this, and where staff have left to join parish councils, recruitment is underway to cover the extra workload. The transition to a unitary authority has resulted in some loss of local knowledge, and adjustments

are ongoing.

The team is collaborating well with parishes and Town councils, ensuring that areas of work not taken on by the team are still maintained. Members inquired about tree responsibilities, which are managed by a mix of in-house teams, surveyors, and inspection teams, with external contractors handling some tasks. Efforts are ongoing to consolidate different systems for reporting tree inspections into a single system. Members were informed about an online form for reporting tree issues, depending on whether they are on highways or open spaces.

The team continues to oversee fly-tipping, even as responsibilities are devolved, to ensure proper management. Parish/town councils will handle fly-tipping on land acquired through the devolution programme but will not address fly-tipping on private or HRA land.

Members requested further organisation training/briefing on how Members can use the Council's various online systems to log issues.

At her final meeting, Jennie Murphy was thanked by the Chair for her support for the committee during the past 18 months.

**(The meeting ended at 12.43 pm)**

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**CHAIR**