

Minutes of a Meeting of the Scrutiny Committee - Climate and Place held in the Council Chamber, Council Offices, Cannards Grave Road, Shepton Mallet BA4 5BT, on Wednesday, 22 November 2023 at 10.00 am

Present:

Cllr Adam Boyden (Vice-Chair)

Cllr Steve Ashton

Cllr Henry Hobhouse

Cllr Dave Mansell

Cllr Harry Munt

Cllr Bente Height

Cllr Marcus Kravis

Cllr Matthew Martin

In attendance:

Other Members present remotely:

30 Apologies for Absence - Agenda Item 1

Apologies were received from Councillors.....Dimmery, Power, Wiltshire, Hobbs, (Lovell Substituting for Hobbs).

31 Minutes from the Previous Meeting - Agenda Item 2

Resolved that the minutes of the Scrutiny Committee - Climate and Place held on 20th September 2023 be confirmed as a correct record.

32 Declarations of Interest - Agenda Item 3

No new declarations of Interest were made.

33 Public Question Time - Agenda Item 4

There were no public questions.

34 Externally Funded Regeneration Projects - Agenda Item 5

The interim Assistant Director for Assets and Major Projects provided a presentation to the Committee detailing the Externally Funded Regeneration Projects.

During the debate the following comments and questions were raised:-

- Yeovil refresh, £4.3 million needing to be redirected due to not being able to continue with cattle market developments.
- Using remaining funds on retail to residential conversion for buildings located in some of the redevelopments undertaken. The Wilkinsons building is still with the administrators, and being considered, The NHS confirmed they wanted a presence on the high street.
- The option of Council offices being located the town centre were are also being considered.
- Confirmed that the plan is for front offices to be installed into the library in the near future.
- Funding being received for regeneration across the county was considered a positive, however concerns were expressed over funding being focused on projects across the built-up areas of the county, funding towards the rural areas for employment opportunities, transport and infrastructure in Somerset was encouraged in not losing sight of rural areas.
- Funding for town deals were based on criteria government set out and based on a town investment plan being submitted.
- Although funding was targeted at towns, following the announcement this week for Tonedale Mill regeneration, there was disappointment that the rural mobility strategy has no funding associated to bid for and its left with existing resources to address this problem. There was a significant challenge to continue funding every project at the same level given the context of the financial emergency.
- Where there were instances of match funding commitments, it was questioned how this would work if match funding from the Council was withdrawn. This was a risk along with a recognised threat that this could be the last funding bids for several years due to a lack of resource due to the financial emergency.
- Match funding commitments totalled less than 1% of the £120million funding being allocated.
- Scope remained within funding streams to change by 30%. Beyond this approval is required from the department. The Council has good relationships

with colleagues in Homes England and beyond, all projects were suffering from inflation costs of materials for the projects whilst there being no spare money from the projects to address this.

- Difficult choices were having to be made in sustaining capacity across regeneration activity which remained discretionary activity.
- Staffing costs could be absorbed into the funding, work was ongoing to consider how partners could bring forward regeneration schemes with the Council playing an enabling role as opposed to a delivery role.
- Loss of skills and knowledge was recognised as an issue with large changes to the Council. There remained many town councils looking at what they could do, alongside the opportunity for bigger town councils to look at Economic Development functions.
- In reference to the Bridgwater Tidal barrier funding of £2 million. It was questioned if this was for flooding or electric generation? The tidal barrier was a flood defence project and part of a bigger programme than solely the funding, the £2 million was towards the creation of a cycle path and not the delivery of the barrier. The Council was only responsible for the delivery of the active travel element of the project.
- The Committee thanked Officer and noted the report.

35 LEP Integration - Agenda Item 6

The Service Manager for Economy presented the report to the Committee which set out the LEP Integration.

During the debate the following comments and questions were raised:-

- More information was requested in respect of how Somerset benefits.
- Reason government is moving on from LEP's is due to the democratic deficit.
- In its peak period LEP's managed a growth deal funding regime which was a capital funding regime around £100million of growth deal capital. Somersets benefit was £35 million.
- Local control is really important, as a result the government is moving away from Local Enterprise Partnerships.
- Concerns that the required extra funding for this could cause future revenue problems, there is no current information provided on what future government funding allocations will look like to deliver LEP functions.
- It could be considered an opportunity for Somerset with a more democratic process and an opportunity to take better ownership of implementing funding.
- Engaging with individuals in local processes could give greater internal

control over investment decisions made for Somerset.

- The economic growth board and how would this work with the regeneration board was questioned, further work was needed in Governance terms, and consider guidance that comes out of Government.
- The Committee thanked the Service Manager and noted the report.

36 UK Shared Prosperity Fund and Rural England Prosperity Fund - Agenda Item 7

The Service Manager for Economy presented a report which provided an update on the Shared and Rural Prosperity Fund for England.

During the debate the following comments and questions were raised:-

- Concerns were expressed with the difficulties experienced in accessing funds. It was questioned how the fund helps those in the rural areas and where the funding is being distributed across Somerset.
- More information was requested in respect of the governance processes of the two funds and how initiatives could be put forward. This could be done using the standard governance processes for officer non key decision process in consultation with UKSPF and members.
- The process encouraged all applicants to work across Somerset where appropriate, discrepancies could be monitored and targeted across the geographical spread in the rural communities. This was a relatively small pot of money for a large scheme so there was a strategic approach for provision across all areas.
- Funding not allocated to 2024/2025 will be returned. Concerns were expressed by elected members not seeing money land.
- A more detailed overview of the UKSPF was requested. The Governance came from Government which had to be followed; to manage the money in a compliant process.
- The Impact of the fund distribution to communities would be covered in a fuller more detailed response.
- Councillors raised concerns in relation to rural towns being left feeling neglected and not having the support they need.
- Match funding was reported 50% but can be considered on a case by case basis.
- The responsibility was with the applicants to evidence and seek match funding, and it was recognised project management was a constraint, to ensure that delivery elements were in place.
- There were areas of deprivation across the Somerset, with specific areas needing to be picked out to focus on addressing this deprivation. This had been targeted in terms of need and hotspots of unemployment were

targeted with support. Deprivation in rural and coastal areas were covered in addition to this.

- There remain particular sectors of society that struggle with employment such as the disabled and elderly.
- It was considered how to encourage people to apply for this funding, to spread the message and ensure access and support is based in local areas asking those eligible to apply.
- It was confirmed that there were applications received from the Exmoor and for 2024/25. Work was ongoing to identify organisations to come forward where relevant.
- When there are examples of how funds would be used, it would become clearer around priorities in what we want to achieve from the fund.
- A Somerset wide initiative for larger organisations to be involved and for a larger scale case studies could make the scheme clearer in addressing needs across specific areas.

The Committee thanked officers for the presentation and noted the report, recognising the need for a member's workshop on these funds and economic development across Somerset.

37 Decision to award a contract for the provision of the Park & Ride Service in Taunton - Agenda Item 8

The Service Director for Infrastructure and Transport provided a report setting out the decision to award a contract for the provision of the Park and Ride service in Taunton.

During the debate the following comments and questions were raised:-

- It was considered if exploring the opportunity to introduce electric buses on this route would be suitable look at decarbonisation and meeting the Councils climate objectives.
- Government funding to pay for EV buses and has this been connected to procurement?
- The longer contract enabled the contractor to invest in own infrastructure. It was questioned if EV busses should have been looked at to enable investment.
- As part of the contract, it was considered to specify zero emissions vehicles. EV alternatives remained far more expensive than diesel vehicles, although Euro 6 engines were required. The length of contract enables some flexibility. Due to cost it was almost double the cost with EV buses than traditional diesel.
- The timing for the contract tender deadline didn't coincide with the Zebra EV Grant timescales. The Council is working with FirstGroup to submit a bid for

Zebra funding for other rural routes.

- There was a need for reliable buses when older buses are used, unreliability of older stock is an issue in the County.
- First came forward that they wanted Somerset to be a vanguard scheme for rural electric busses which would link with the Councils climate change objectives.
- Cheaper price of electric of over cost of diesel, meant the payback period was between 5-6 years. The whole life cost was still more expensive, hence the subsidy of 70% of the difference if the operator pays 30%.
- The service was extended as a request for later operating to avoid parking on site at Musgrove and in residential areas.
- Officers were thanked for the report and the Committee noted the recommendations.

The Scrutiny Committee considered and noted the recommendations being put to Executive on 6th December 2023, to award a contract on a 3+2+2 year basis for the delivery of the Taunton Park & Ride service, subject to sufficient funding being confirmed through Executive's consideration of the financial position also on 6th December 2023.

38 Climate & Place Budget Monitoring Position Month 5 - Agenda Item 9

The Head of Business Partnering for Finance presented the Climate and Place Budget Monitoring Position month 5.

During the debate the following comments and questions were raised:-

- The causes of the £800k climate overspend were questioned which included the costs incurred as a result of the pay award in the waste collection service.
- It was questioned if there were full year impacts or if these were part year impacts and if this could be provided in the next report.
- It was questioned if there was changes made to the budget of the cycle path going into Minehead. Members were reminded that this was a revenue report and the cycle path was a capital scheme from an external capital grant, from memory this wasn't overspent.
- Two building control teams had been integrated into one. A head of service had been appointed to manage the whole service and its performance, retaining market share in building control and improved monitoring income compared to previous years, fees had been increased in line with inflation although slightly less income was anticipated than in previous years as a result of industry demand.
- Highways costs for adverse weather and climate change were considered. There remained significant challenges with dry weather and increases in

potholes and road damage. Flood Damage has a high cost, such as the mudslides at Coombe Florey and subsequent cleanup.

- There were also statutory obligations to house due to flooding, increasing costs. Highways teams have responded but some roads had not been able to reopen due to impacts.
- It was recognised that due to the financial emergency service standards would likely reduce.
- The cost that the extreme weather events and repairing highways and assets was likely to increase, this was a long term problem faced.
- The committee thanked officers noted the budget update.

39 Action Tracker - Agenda Item 10

The Scrutiny Manager presented the item of the Action Tracker:-

- Three task and finish groups are being created, the energy plan meeting on 22nd November at 4pm, this will report back to the committee. Highways and Transport Task & Finish Group hasn't been set up yet. The meetings of the Future Transport Plan Working Group and Climate Strategy Refresh Working Group were working towards December but can't provide a specific date.
- There still remained an issue from Parish Councils in respect of highways comments and issues. A current focus of attention from LCN's are for highways workshops to address issues.
- Feedback was requested on task and finish groups and the timing of the formation of these.
- A Climate Development Plan Document was needed to be in place to address impacts of climate emergency.
- The Committee were informed that the tracker would capture what happens to the recommendation in the tracker and ongoing activity at a later date. An outcome of progress as a narrative on what comes next would be added.
- The Committee noted the tracker.

40 Forward Plan - Agenda Item 11

The Service Director for Infrastructure and Transport presented the Forward Plan.

- An update was requested in respect of water quality meeting in Somerset. This meeting needed to be rescheduled as a separate meeting in January and added to the forward plan and scheduled as a separate meeting in January. Communication would be sent as a form of words to clarify who will attend

and what this will address in respect of phosphate pollution of Ramsar sites and mitigation plans.

- Natural England had changed their stance on phosphates, allowing officers to expedite issues to get some clarity. There is a process of ongoing discussions and providing a right of response with Natural England and Council officers.
- All members of the committee were reminded that they can raise items with the chair and vice chair with future consideration.
- The Committee noted the forward plan.

(The meeting ended at Time Not Specified)

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CHAIR