

Report from the Council's Five Scrutiny Committees

Chairs of Scrutiny Committees: Councillor Gill Slocombe, Councillor Gwil Wren, Councillor Martin Dimery, Councillor Leigh Redman, Councillor Bob Filmer

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1. Summary

1.1. The Scrutiny Committees are required by the Constitution to provide Full Council with a summary progress report and outcomes of scrutiny. This report covers meetings since February 2024.

1.2. Members of the Council are reminded that:

- All Members have been invited to attend meetings of the five Scrutiny Committees and to contribute freely on any agenda item.
- Any Member could propose a topic for inclusion on the Scrutiny Work Programme.
- Any Member can be asked by the Committee to contribute information and evidence and to participate in specific scrutiny reviews.

2. Background

2.1. The 5 Scrutiny Committees met 5 times over the period of 4th February to 1st April 2024.

2.2. Scrutiny – Adults and Health

Scrutiny – Adults and Health met once over the stated period.

Meeting 07 February 2024

Public Question Time

A question was raised regarding the stroke service reconfiguration by Ray Tostevin, chair of Quicksilver Community Group.

The Committee resolved to write to the Secretary of State to ask them to use their powers under the Health and Care Act 2022 to intervene in the NHS Somerset stroke reconfiguration plan. The Committee sought clarity on the position of Somerset Council as CEO Duncan Sharkey is a voting member at the ICB Committee that took the decision. They later met with Duncan Sharkey to discuss his position and role on the board.

They also requested ongoing communications work around this issue.

Work Programme

Members of the Committee raised a number of areas that they were interested in exploring in future Scrutiny Committees, and these were added to the work programme.

- Workforce
- Public Health Covid Update
- Ambulance Service Update
- Dentistry, following indication that model will change
- Mental Health
- Focus area on cancer community support
- Social Care Training (Bridgwater Academy)

Healthy Weston

The Committee received a presentation detailing the overall vision for Weston, the successes they had already achieved, particularly in hospital improvements, and the next phase of Healthy Weston. One area that showed marked improvement was recruitment and retention at Weston General Hospital. The chair thanked the officers for their presentation and requested a further update once there was more work completed on the surgical hub and public engagement with the project.

Annual Report of the Director of Public Health

The Committee received a presentation on the upcoming Annual Report of the Director of Public Health, prior to it going to Executive Committee. The theme for this report was 'homes and health', and 'neighbourhood', highlighting how homes provide a strong essential foundation for good health and resilient communities can support people to live healthy independent lives.

During the discussion, it was highlighted how difficult it is for councillors to tackle an issue as complex as housing, and the need for joined up work between various groups to create a holistic approach. The possibility of a workshop

involving Housing, Social Care, and Public Health was raised. Issues around transport planning not joining up with housing planning, meaning people found it difficult to access healthcare, were also raised.

23/24 Budget Monitoring Report Month 9

The Committee received a presentation and a report that provided the overview on the current position in the whole council and Adult Services specifically, highlighting the pressures and mitigations in the service. This included ongoing work to support and stabilise the market of care providers, such as through supporting international recruitment.

The Committee sought a closer look at workforce, and the possibility of a workshop on the social care workforce was raised. The importance of working jointly with the VCSE sector and placing people with local care providers were both highlighted. Members also scrutinised the future direction of travel towards more care being provided in homes and the impact of that on the system as a whole, as well as the people receiving care.

2.3. Scrutiny – Children and Families

Scrutiny - Children and Families met once over the stated period.

Meeting 13 March 2024

Children’s Mental Health and Wellbeing in Somerset

The Committee received a presentation with a focus on system wide support for children and young people who self-injure.

2023/24 Children’s Services – Budget Monitoring

The Committee received a presentation on the 2023/24 budget position – month 10. This focussed on external placements monitoring and forecasting, CLA key cost drivers and the 23/24 DSG budget monitoring (High Needs, home to school transport and SEND transport).

DSG Deficit Management Plan

The Committee received a presentation on the High Needs Block and SEND and the refreshed DSG Deficit Management Plan, outlining the actions to mitigate overspending and the DMP.

At the end of the discussion, a member training session on the DSG Deficit

Management Planning was suggested and considered.

Understanding Elective Home Education

The Committee received a presentation to inform them on the issues around Elective Home Education.

The presentation set out the Council's approach and responsibilities to EHE children and their families, the current data set for EHE in Somerset and specifically Frome as an 'area in focus' due to its high number EHE children, and the changes to government guidance and legislation in the pipeline including mandatory registers of children not in school, guidance around what is considered to be a 'suitable education', more support for EHE families and guidance on Local Authority schools attendance orders.

Update from Education Standards Standing Panel

The Committee received a verbal update from the Chair of the Panel, Cllr Evie Potts-Jones and members were invited to attend the meetings of this sub-committee.

Report back from committee members on Children's Services Transformation Priorities/Areas

The committee received verbal updates from members of the Committee on the Children's Services Transformation priorities / areas:

- Education for Life Strategy
- Children Looked After (CLA) Transformation
- Special Educational Needs & Disabilities (SEND) Strategy
- Connect Somerset

2.4. Scrutiny – Climate and Place

Scrutiny – Climate and Place met once over the stated period.

Meeting 20 March 2024

Public Question Time

There were two members of the public registered to speak.

The first public speaker had submitted questions regarding Glastonbury Festival Traffic Management and the difficulties faced by residents of Pilton in engaging with Glastonbury Festival Events Ltd. The member of the public also felt that

Somerset Council had not provided responses to the questions that had been submitted to the previous meeting on the 17th January. The committee heard that the Service Director for Infrastructure and Transport would follow up with a full written responses to the member of the public after the meeting.

The second public speaker had submitted questions regarding the use of Canalside Conference Centre for Full Council meetings, and the challenges associated with reduced bus timetables in the county. The committee heard the reasoning behind the use of Canalside Conference Centre, Nr Bridgwater as the preferred venue for Full Council meetings, but that other options have and would be considered, and that Somerset Council will continue to fully subsidise bus service provision in Somerset, continually reviewing bus timetabling in terms of viability of bus routes whilst meeting the needs of bus users across the county.

Work Programme

The committee were advised that an additional meeting to discuss Water Quality in Somerset has been confirmed for 26th April, and that the Forward Plan will include quarterly budget monitoring and performance going forward.

Annual report on the Trading Standards Service

The Committee received the annual report of the Trading Standards Service for information. Members were advised that specific case details of open/pending investigations could not be disclosed, but there was a discussion around some key issues such as pet food sampling, identity fraud/online/telephone scams, and the light touch approach to enforcement of the recent ban on single use plastics.

Section 19 Reports from 2020-2022 Flood Events

The Committee received a presentation to summarise the findings of the outstanding S19 reports. During the discussion, concerns were raised regarding the difficulties in applying for planning permission to install flood defences on listed buildings, agricultural issues leading to increased flood risk such as maize and potato growing, the need for a common-sense, case by case approach to flood prevention, particularly on small scale investigations where decision making can be taken at a more localised level.

The Committee resolved to recommend that the Somerset Council Planning Service review its policies and advice to residents regarding the application of flood defence mechanisms to listed buildings.

Preliminary Report Section 19s 2023 Flood Event

The Committee noted the reports and were advised that these preliminary reports set out the methodology for the full Section 19 Flood Investigation Report.

The committee were reassured that in terms of workforce planning, the flood investigation team at Somerset Council is in a stronger position than it has been in recent years, and that this would result in a faster turnaround for S19 Flood Investigation Reports going forward.

Somerset Energy Investment Plan – Report of the Task and Finish Group

The Committee received the report from the Task and Finish Group. They unanimously agreed to accept the recommendations as set out in the report, which included appraisal for solar and wind power installations at ten council sites, a land use framework to underpin the development of Local Plan policies on renewable energy generation, support for local hubs to develop local skills for low carbon heating and retrofitting installations, implementing a Net Zero Heat Village trial, and council engagement with the new Regional Energy Strategic Planner to influence investment in the electricity network, as well as recommendations to continue ongoing decarbonisation, policy planning, and travel infrastructure work.

In addition to this, the Committee resolved to recommend that the Planning Service reports back to the committee on the efficacy of providing a supplementary planning document on how we approach energy efficiency developments in listed buildings and a policy like BCS14 ‘Heat Hierarchy’ at Bristol City Council.

2023-24 Budget Monitoring Report – Month 10

The Committee received the update on the Climate and Place month 10 budget position, noting the £7 million underspend. There was a query concerning the use of drawback funds from the Connecting Devon and Somerset underspend, and a request for more information on this from the Service Director Economy, Employment and Planning.

2.5. Scrutiny – Communities

Scrutiny – Communities met once over the stated period.

Meeting 14 February 2024

Community Services Budget Monitoring Update

The Committee received a presentation on the Month 9 budget position, giving an overview of the overall council position and the position in Communities specifically, with a predicted underspend of £300,000.

The Committee raised questions around which areas of the budget were demand driven, like rough sleeping, and what would be the result of an increase in demand. They also inquired as to which budget headlines were statutory and which weren't, and what would happen if the council isn't able to fund statutory services that are reliant on government grants. Because these are demand driven, there would be an overspend as a result of that. Some elements of income generation like crematorium services are also demand-driven, so they are difficult to predict how that will impact the budget.

The Committee thanked officers for all their hard work under the budget pressures.

Open Spaces Briefing

The Committee received a presentation on open spaces, detailing the amount, the different types, and how their maintenance was organised.

Areas of concern were raised around the current status of mapping these spaces, particularly as some of them are preparing to be devolved to town and parish councils. The development of a public mapping system is a project that is being worked on across multiple directorates, and the Committee asked to be kept updated on this. There were also questions raised about playground equipment that had broken down and who was responsible for or able to replace it, as well as funding from new housing developments.

The Committee also requested better communication with the public regarding the maintenance of open spaces and working with the public to support tree planting in order to improve the 50% rate of tree loss. The future of open spaces under a Section 114 notice being issued was also raised.

Growth/New Housing

The Committee received a presentation on the demand and supply for housing, the challenges around affordable housing delivery, and the local pressures.

During the discussion the councillors raised concerns around Right to Buy, the challenges of working with developers, the rough sleeping budget, and the high number of people on the waiting list. They also discussed pop up housing and the amount of land available for these projects.

Review of Street Cleansing and Groundcare Operations

The Committee received a report on this confidential item and discussed it in a private session.

2.6. Scrutiny – Corporate and Resources

Scrutiny – Corporate and Resources met once over the stated period.

Meeting 7 March 2024

Delivering Economic Growth via Gravity Enterprise Zone

The Committee received a report and presentation on the first of a series of decisions associated with the planned occupation of a large part of the Gravity Site near Bridgwater by Agratas to build the UK's largest gigafactory on the site.

During the discussion, concerns about travel, housing, and infrastructure were raised, as well as how governance for the plans would work, incorporating parishes and local colleges. The Committee looks forward to further updates on the project.

Developing the approach to Transformation

The Committee received a report on the Council-wide transformation programme and what Scrutiny's role would be in this.

During the discussion, members highlighted the risk of capacity issues and losing quality members of staff and how performance would be impacted. They raised concerns about LCNs, the impact on staff, and whether staff for devolved services would be transferred via TUPE. They were disappointed to not have been involved earlier in the process, and it was noted that there would be a plan agreed with Chair and Vice-Chair of each Committee to plan a way forward.

The Committee resolved to agree the recommendations detailed in the report and requested regular member briefings and that a joint programme of meetings and working groups be set up to assist with the scrutiny of this programme.

2023/2024 Budget Monitoring Report Month 10

The Committee received a presentation and report on the Month 10 Budget Monitoring.

The Committee noted the report and the change in scheduling that would allow

them to consider issues before they came to Executive, and requested a report on corporate performance.

Property Rationalisation Programme

The Committee received a presentation and a report on the key decision on this proposed programme, asking for their recommendations prior to it going to Executive Committee.

Members discussed the proposals and confirmed support for the sale of Petters Way, the West Somerset properties sale, requested confirmation of Maintenance costs and the suitability of the current offices and properties, with options for future use. They resolved that they supported the transfer of services, works to properties, and the sale of C Block, County Hall, Taunton.

3. Consultations undertaken

- 3.1.** The Committees invite and welcome all councillors, the press, and the public to attend and contribute to its meetings.

4. Implications

- 4.1.** The Committees consider carefully and often ask for further information about the implications as outlined in the reports considered at its meetings.

For further details of the reports considered by the Committees, please contact the author of this report.

5. Background papers

- 5.1.** Further information about the five Scrutiny Committees including dates of meetings and agendas and reports from previous meetings are available via the Council's website.

Note For sight of individual background papers please contact the report author