

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 December 2024 at 10.00 am

**Present:**

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

Cllr Simon Coles	Cllr Lance Duddridge
Cllr Pauline Ham	Cllr Susannah Hart
Cllr Andy Kendall	Cllr Marcus Kravis
Cllr Kathy Pearce	Cllr Tom Power
Cllr Hazel Prior-Sankey	Cllr Wes Read

**In attendance:**

**Other Members present remotely:**

Cllr Andy Dingwall	Cllr Leigh Redman
Cllr Federica Smith-Roberts	Cllr Mike Stanton
Cllr Sarah Wakefield	Cllr Rosemary Woods

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

Apologies were received from Councillor Suria Aujla

**74 Minutes from the Previous Meeting - 30 October 2024 - Agenda Item 2**

Resolved that the minutes of the Scrutiny Committee – Communities held on 30 October 2024 be confirmed as a correct record.

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

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

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

Nick Hall spoke in a personal capacity on the issue of regulating Glastonbury Festival. At the last Scrutiny Communities Committee on 24 October, he had attended and raised questions regarding Glastonbury Festival. He requested a full

written response to his questions before Christmas.

Sarah Dowden explained it had not been possible to obtain the information required to provide answers in time for the committee meeting, but she confirmed that Nick Hall will receive a response by the end of 23 December 2024.

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

The Committee noted the current work programme. The Chair wanted to limit the items being discussed at the January meeting to the four listed due to the fixed finish time of the meeting.

Regarding future items:

- The Chair had decided it was more appropriate for the Octagon briefing to be shared as an all member briefing rather than coming to this committee.
- The Chair has contacted the chair of Harbour Management Advisory Committee, and he will now consider if its more appropriate for an officer to attend a future meeting to provide an update.
- Liz Dawson to be invited to a future committee meeting to update particularly regarding Yeovil devolution.

Two items, Rights of Way and Project Delivery on Town Deals, were requested. However, these fall under the remit of the Scrutiny Climate & Place committee. The Chair has requested that the clerk for this committee be contacted to confirm if these items are scheduled for consideration.

## **78 Month 6 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 Evans explained although showing an underspend – this will just reduce the amount we need to use through reserves. The overspend in housing had reduced as fewer families are now in Bed & Breakfast accommodation. Two main issues in relation to MTFP are Beach parking and Grounds Maintenance/Street cleansing.

Chris Hall highlighted the following:

- Rent housing options - although it shows as an overspend, we also have government grants who offset that decisions need to be made whether we call down the grant first of all or we do it at the end of the year.
- Lifeline – appears there was an issue regarding when fees and charges were set but this can be fixed for the next years budget. The Chair felt it was important for this information to be as accurate as possible.

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

- Chris Hall confirmed rough sleepers would remain under the remit for this committee and that a request could be made for the relevant Service Director to speak to committee regarding this and the pressure in housing.
- Regarding Housing and Bed and Breakfast Accommodation and questions

relating to comparison on figures with previous years, any increase in request for temporary accommodation, how are decisions made regarding the banding? Concerns that with the restructure things may get worse rather than improving. Chris Hall confirmed changes to banding are not done to save money but relate to a legitimate change in circumstances rather than how long a person has been on the waiting list. When temporary accommodation is full then Bed and Breakfast or Hotel accommodation is required.

- This Committee may wish to request a specific update regarding temporary accommodation and incorporate it into the rough/sleeping and housing options discussion.
- Chair agreed to respond to further questions by email outside of the meeting.
- Regarding timescales for assessing eligibility for accommodation, Chris Hall advised that this area also included Adults Services and agreed to respond following the meeting which is attached in appendix 1 to the minutes.

## **79 HRA Q2 Budget Monitoring Report - Agenda Item 7**

Kerry Prisco - Management Accounting & Reporting Lead introduced the report:

- explained the improved position regarding the forecast overspend,
- highlighting the main areas of pressure as voids from rents and having to spend money improving properties.
- Team is working hard to reduce the levels of voids. issue of projects spanning over financial years e.g. North Taunton and the issue with procurement and tender process relating to fire doors.

During the discussion, the following points were raised and Chis Hall Executive Director, Community Place & Economy provided responses: -

Fire Doors – could the installers please check residents are able to operate these before they leave the property? There were initially issues with these but now there is a push button which is installed for power assistance, and it may be possible for these to be retrofitted if requested.

How many voids at any one time and how long are they void for?

Chris Hall confirmed we don't receive information from registered providers or social landlord re the void performance. Voids are taking longer and costing more – rise in material costs and workers and issues with access to properties to carry out work.

What percentage of properties are difficult to access

Chris Hall responded that Figure was not available, this item should come back to committee when we have an item on housing as part of a more detailed response.

Chris Hall confirmed that HRA is overseen by the Adults Team who set the business plan and strategic direction. When it comes to delivery, HRA delivery and the landlord function sits within Community Place and Economy

The Chair thanked officers for the presentation and the Committee noted the report.

## 80 Housing Development Team - Agenda Item 8

Chris Hall was joined by Peter Hatch from Homes in Sedgemoor to present this report.

Decision was made not to replace the Housing Services Director when they left Somerset Council in the summer.

Seeking a decision to combine the two separate housing teams into one team rather than replace the Director. Discussions already taken place with Tenants Strategic Board who had no concerns.

Although Homes of Sedgemoor is separate it is part of Somerset Council so there is no affect to tenancies or change of ownership. This proposal would go to Executive for approval before consultation with staff. Proposed name change to Homes in Somerset (Homes in Sedgemoor are in agreement with the proposed name change).

Response to questions from members:

- Regarding finances – Chris Hall confirmed Somerset Council are still the commissioners so no change to the timetable or funding just the people doing the work.
- Regarding ownership – it's the people delivering the stock who would move to one location but no change to ownership.

**Recommendation** –the Scrutiny Committee provides their support to the Executive on the following - to accept the proposed name change from Homes in Sedgemoor to Homes in Somerset, and we approve the principle of TUPE transfer of the Somerset Council Development Teams to Homes in Sedgemoor Homes in Somerset with the associated change to the Management Agreement, subject to formal HR consultation. **Proposed by Cllr Power and seconded by Cllr Dawn Johnson agreed unanimously by the committee.**

## 81 Devolution Update - Agenda Item 9

Jonathan Stevens, Head of Operations, Regulatory & Operational Services attended to update the Committee. He shared his presentation, highlighted each particular area and confirmed that his update refers to devolution of services rather than of Assets.

In response to member questions, confirmation was provided that: this agenda item only relates to those areas where devolution is already underway it has been necessary to prioritise those with most benefit to the MTFP to help close the budget gap.

Devolution work would continue for as long as its required, there is no cut off proposed.

The reason cleansing of toilets was removed from the contract early was because of the end of an external contract and city town and parishes have taken on the costs of servicing those toilets.

The query regarding asset transfer timescales would need to be answered by legal colleagues. Agreed to request an update.

Agreed to provide a list of those areas included in tranche 2.

LCN's had not been involved in discussions about Devolution. If wishing to transfer assets via public ownerships, there would need to be a valid reason for transferring.

Difficult to compare costs of providing services once devolved as some may wish to improve services following devolution, e.g. more regular bin emptying, improved toilet provision would increase costs.

Any issues over a long lease asset for example this would be addressed at Asset Management Group for a decision.

## **82 Transformation Update - Agenda Item 10**

Chris Hall provided the committee with a verbal update:

- Layers 2 and three roles confirmed - Some staff still working notice periods, others are leaving at the end of March.
- Ongoing consultation for wider organisation ends this week. Members encouraged to respond. Deadline has been extended at the request of the unions. After the end of the consultation some staff become at risk of redundancy and go through a recruitment process.
- Transformation is looking at a top to bottom redesign of Somerset Council while supporting statutory services.
- During the consultation period a mid point review took place and as a result some changes and improvements have been made already as a result of feedback.
- Some roles may continue beyond April if alternative options still need to be explored – redeployment etc. Others may still have notice period to be worked through.
- SLT are doing their best to manage service impacts.

In response to member questions:

- Changes at the midpoint stage of the consultation have not impacted the budget, but some additional staff are now affected. This is being managed carefully. Some planning cuts were unsustainable and have been highlighted.
- Members are encouraged to respond to the consultation and contact Senior officers with questions.
- HR and Renovo coaching support is available for staff, with sessions from NHS and other partners. Although staff turnover data is unavailable, some may be considering other options.
- The impact on highway support is uncertain, but alternative options will be considered by ELT.

**(The meeting ended at 12.04 pm)**

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**CHAIR**