

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of the Meeting held on 15 January 2015 at 3.30 pm

Present:

Councillor P H MurphyChairman
Councillor R LillisVice Chairman

Councillor M J Chilcott
Councillor J Freeman
Councillor D J Sanders

Councillor G S Dowding
Councillor B Heywood
Councillor K Ross

Members in Attendance:

Councillor K Kravis
Councillor T Taylor
Councillor A H Trollope-Bellew

Councillor K H Turner
Councillor D J Westcott

Officers in Attendance:

Assistant Chief Executive and Monitoring Officer (B Lang)
Assistant Director – Resources (P Fitzgerald)
Corporate Strategy and Performance Manager (P Harding)
Media and Communications Officer (D Rundle)
Scrutiny and Performance Officer (S Rawle)
Administrative Support (A Randell)

SC53 Apologies for Absence

Apologies were received from Councillors M Dewdney and K Mills.

SC54 Minutes

(Minutes of the Meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held on 1 December 2014 – circulated with the Agenda.)

Changes relating to SC49 and SC51 were agreed.

RESOLVED that the Minutes of the Scrutiny Committee held on 1 December be confirmed as a correct record following the inclusion of the agreed changes.

SC55 Declarations of Interest

Members present at the meeting declared the following personal interests in their capacity as a Member of a County, Parish or Town Council:

Name	Minute No.	Description of Interest	Personal or Prejudicial or Disclosable Pecuniary	Action Taken
Cllr K J Ross	All Items	Dulverton	Personal	Spoke and voted
Cllr P H Murphy	All Items	Watchet	Personal	Spoke and voted
Cllr K H Turner	All Items	Brompton Ralph	Personal	Spoke

SC56 Notes of Key Cabinet Decisions/Action Points

(Copy of Notes of Cabinet Decisions/Action Points, circulated with the agenda.)

RESOLVED that the Key Cabinet Decisions/Action Points from the meeting held on 3 December 2014, be noted.

SC57 Cabinet Forward Plan

(Copy of the Cabinet Forward Plan published 6 January 2015, circulated with the agenda.)

RESOLVED that the Cabinet Forward Plan published on 6 January 2015, be noted.

SC58 Financial Standing and Medium Term Financial Plan 2015/2016

(Report No WSC 11//15, circulated with the agenda.)

The purpose of the report was to inform members of the Scrutiny Committee of the latest status of the Councils financial planning, including the latest Medium Term Financial Plan forecasts and the processes involved in its drafting.

Achieving financial sustainability was a fundamental priority of the Council. The report set out to demonstrate the effective approach to the development of, and progress in the delivery of, a robust financial strategy that would achieve this priority.

During the course of discussion the following points were made:-

- What evidence was there for the estimated increase in the net Retained Business Rates funding detailed in Table 2 of the report. Did this take into account the addition of a number of new businesses moving into the area?. A number of assumptions had been given in relation to the figures provided in Table 2 which included an increase in new businesses along with successful Business Rate appeals. Assurance was given that this was a realistic estimate.
- Outstanding Business Rate appeals were deemed to be one of the main financial risks to forecasting.
- Discussion took place in relation to renewing the Microsoft license. It was requested that alternatives be considered such as Open Office which many authorities had been using.

- It was requested that the Microsoft Licensing issue be clarified and a written response circulated to Members prior to the next meeting of the Committee.
- The impact of the Council Tax freeze grant was £15,153. Members were advised that freezing the Council Tax for the next financial year would create a continuing reduction in revenue and a greater financial risk.
- It was confirmed that it would be for Cabinet to make a recommendation for Council to approve if it wanted to accept the Council Tax freeze grant.
- It would be for Members of the authority to make the decision on Council Tax and for officers to then implement this decision.
- If the freeze grant was taken then this would be absorbed into the Revenue Support Grant. Members were of the view that it made sense to raise the Council tax by 1.99% to guarantee that the Council Tax Base increased for future years instead of disappearing in the future reduction of the Revenues Support Grant.
- It was suggested that any savings or surplus generated be allocated to the unfunded Capital Programme.
- Comment was made as to the importance of maintaining the Council's assets so they were safe for community use.
- The £48,082 New Homes Bonus Reserve would be used on invest to save projects, which would overall reduce the budget gap.
- It was argued that aspects of the Capital Programme could be funded by other methods such as borrowing to take advantage of low borrowing costs that could increase the number of projects that could be undertaken.
- Discussion took place relating to the figure for minimum reserves and whether some of this could be utilised for supporting the discretionary grant programme for community groups. It was confirmed that it would be prudent to increase the level of reserves above the minimum to allow for 'elbow room' in order to increase the Council's resilience going forward in the financially challenging times.

RESOLVED that:- (1) the financial standing of the Council through the current Medium Term Financial Plan forecasts and the draft budget estimates and proposals for 2015/2016 be noted and; (2) the comments made by the Scrutiny Committee be referred to the Cabinet for consideration.

SC59 Service Plans 2015

(Report No WSC 12/14, circulated with the agenda.)

The report provided the Scrutiny Committee with the opportunity of scrutinising and influencing the draft Service Plans for 2015/2016 prior to their finalisation and approval.

Paul Harding, the Corporate Strategy and Performance Manager, presented the report which provided a brief summary and introduction on the Corporate Performance Update and the Service Plans for 2015/2016.

During the course of the discussion the following points were raised:-

- New photographs of West Somerset were requested to be used on the front sheet of the Service Plans.

- An update was requested on the Community Asset Transfer Policy and it was questioned how empty homes were being monitored. Work was being done to bring empty homes back into use with the recruitment of an Empty Homes Officer.
- The authority was confident that the empty homes data was accurate due to the Council Tax Reduction incentive for owners to inform the Council when properties were no longer in residential use. An Empty Homes Officer was being put in place to monitor and address empty homes across both authorities to encourage quicker turnaround times for them to be put back into residential use.
- All Service Plans were valued and welcomed by the Committee. Concern was raised over vacant job positions. These were dependent on additional funding and would therefore need to be approved by members.
- Councillors were informed that the first performance review would be held around June or July 2015.

RESOLVED that:- the Scrutiny Committee note Corporate performance update and draft service plans for 2015/16.

SC60 Scrutiny Committee Work Plan

(The Scrutiny Committee Work Plan, circulated with the agenda was considered.)

The report provided the Scrutiny Committee with the opportunity to consider the meeting timetable for 2015/2016.

Councillors were requested to consider and comment on the proposed Work Plan submitted.

During the course of the discussion the following points were raised:-

- The GP 'Out of Hours' written update was discussed. Members were informed that an update would be brought to the Committee in the next month.
- It was requested that a report on Empty Homes be scheduled for a future meeting after discussions with officers to agree the most appropriate time.
- An update and response from Cabinet relating to the item on the Rhynes was also requested to be provided as soon as possible.

RESOLVED that the Work Plan be adopted

The meeting closed at 5.25 pm.