

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

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

Present:

Councillor P H MurphyChairman
Councillor R LillisVice Chairman

Councillor D Archer
Councillor G S Dowding
Councillor J Parbrook

Councillor A Behan
Councillor B Heywood
Councillor B Maitland-Walker

Members in Attendance:

Councillor I Aldridge
Councillor K H Turner
Councillor T Venner

Councillor M Chilcott
Councillor A Trollope-Bellew

Officers in Attendance:

Assistant Chief Executive and Monitoring Officer – (B Lang)
Democratic Services Coordinator (E McGuinness)
Assistant Director – Operational Delivery (C Hall)
Assistant Director – Resources (P Fitzgerald)
Performance and Development Manager (S Doyle)
Community and Client Services Manager (S Weetch)
Strategy and Partnership Lead (M Leeman)
Strategic Housing Manager (Dave Baxter)
Empty Homes Co-ordinator (S Perry)
Administrative Support (A Randell)

SC111 Apologies for Absence

No apologies for absence were received.

SC112 Minutes

(Minutes of the Meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held on 10 September 2015 – circulated with the Agenda.)

RESOLVED that the Minutes of the Scrutiny Committee held on 10 September 2015 be confirmed as a correct record.

SC113 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 P H Murphy	All Items	Watchet	Personal	Spoke and voted
Cllr D Archer	All Items	Minehead	Personal	Spoke and voted
Cllr J Parbrook	All Items	Minehead	Personal	Spoke and voted
Cllr A Trollope-Bellew	All items	Crowcombe	Personal	Spoke
Cllr T Venner	All items	Minehead and SCC	Personal	Spoke
Cllr I Aldridge	All items	Williton	Personal	Spoke
Cllr K Turner	All items	Brompton Ralph	Personal	Spoke

SC114 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 7 October 2015, be noted.

SC115 Cabinet Forward Plan

(Copy of the Cabinet Forward Plan published 7 October 2015, circulated with the agenda.)

RESOLVED that the Cabinet Forward Plan published on 7 October 2015, be noted.

SC116 Empty Homes Strategy.

Considered report, WSC 135/15 previously circulated.

The purpose of the report was to consider the issue of empty homes. Empty homes were a particular concern for West Somerset with some of the highest levels of long term empty homes in England. This report sought to quantify this problem and the reasons for it, introducing various initiatives seeking to address the problem of bringing empty homes back in to use. This included:

- Empty Homes Strategy (Draft) 2015 - 2018
- the financial benefits of bringing empty homes back into use
- projects that are currently being prepared / delivered to bring empty homes back in to use

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

- The figures of long term empty properties went from 235 on 1st September to 202.
- Empty homes were identified using the council tax database.
- There was still an ongoing review of the Strategic housing framework. Issues around empty homes largely involved private sector housing.

- The empty homes coordinator had been appointed for 12 months, it was confirmed that the current resource was sufficient to meet the existing workload.
- Members requested for work to be done to alleviate the number of empty homes and mitigate the impact of housing demand around Hinkley Point site.
- The first quarter's performance figures for empty homes were due out in December.

The Chair thanked the officers for their work in preparing such a comprehensive report.

Resolved that the draft Empty Homes Strategy be supported in principle.

SC117 Budget Strategy 2016/17.

Considered report, WSC 148/15 previously circulated.

The purpose of the report was to share the proposed Budget Strategy for the Council for 2016/17. The Budget Strategy sets out the framework and approach to delivering a balanced budget for the Council for the next financial year and over the medium term. This is fundamental to the future sustainability of the Council and the valuable services it delivers to the community of West Somerset.

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

- The draft community asset transfer policy was referred to. This was still under Review and ongoing. The policy had been discussed at PAG, members requested details for when it would go out to consultation. There were concerns that the communication process had stalled and clarification was sought.
- There were continuing conversations being held relating to compliance with Health and Safety.
- It was requested for conversations to be initiated with towns and parishes and to have a greater dialogue and input into how assets are managed.
- Members encouraged the asset management team to generate greater income from underperforming assets.
- It was currently being considered who would be consulted on in relation to the asset transfer policy – this would be going out to a wider circulation including community groups. The timetabled plan was for this to go through the democratic process between November and January following the consultation period.
- Councillors were unhappy in relation to uncertainty over parish grants on what they will receive from the district. Members were informed that it was not clear until it had been ascertained what was going to be received by local government. Parishes would be communicated within the next few weeks to inform them on the funding settlement.

- A recent announcement from central government on business rates would not come into effect until 2020. Further detail was being awaited from central government on the proposals

Resolved that Scrutiny noted and support the proposed Budget Strategy for 2016/17.

SC118 Licensing Staffing Arrangements.

Considered report, WSC 133/15 previously circulated.

The purpose of the report was to achieve a sustainable resolution to the resources needed in the licensing team by formalising the current temporary arrangements. By making permanent the current temporary additional resource of an additional Licensing Officer would ensure the sustainable delivery of this function on behalf of West Somerset Council.

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

- The fees from the service were set on the basis of the cost of delivering the service. There were seven out of nine posts that had not been filled on a permanent basis; additional costs were being incurred with the temporary function.
- Appendix one detailed the increase in workload. It was cited to members that 50 more licenses had been issued in the first five months of the year in comparison to last year.
- Councillors expressed concerns that taxi drivers were unhappy with the service and there had been difficulties experienced in contacting the licensing department.
- It was acknowledged that there had been resourcing issues experienced in the licensing department that were being addressed.
- Each council was required to operate separate trading accounts and set licensing fees independently.

Resolved that, subject to the report providing greater clarity in respect of the existing costs of providing the service between the two councils, the Scrutiny Committee support the principle of increasing the Licensing team resources by 1 FTE in order to provide an acceptable level of service delivery, with an associated increase in expenditure and income budgets of £33,000 in a full financial year.

SC119 Update on Scrutiny Task and Finish Asset Management Recommendations

The following update was given to Councillors:-

- Work had been moved on with Health and Safety compliance work undertaken.

- Further updates were given in relation to Watchet Boat Museum and Library. Value and marketing work in respect of land at Upton was ongoing.
- The priority was the focusing of the delivery of the service with further reports to be considered at Scrutiny in due course.

RESOLVED that the report be received

SC120 Scrutiny Committee Work Plan

(Copy of the Forward Plan for 2014/15, circulated with the agenda.)

During the discussion it was agreed to add items on the draft capital and revenues budgets to the January 2016 meeting and an Asset Management Update item to the April 2016 meeting

RESOLVED that the Scrutiny Forward Plan published with the agenda, as amended, be noted.

The meeting closed at 5.45 pm.