

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of the Meeting held on 21 November 2011 at 4.30 pm

Present:

Councillor R P LillisChairman (for this meeting)
Councillor D D RossVice Chairman (for this meeting)

Councillor M O A Dewdney
Councillor J Freeman
Councillor G S Dowding
Councillor P N Grierson

Members in Attendance:

Councillor A F Knight
Councillor D J Sanders
Councillor K H Turner
Councillor K V Kravis
Councillor T Taylor
Councillor D J Westcott

Officers in Attendance:

Corporate Director (B Lang)
Scrutiny and Performance Officer (S Rawle)
Group Manager, Housing and Community (I Timms)
Group Manager, Environment and Services (S Watts)
Efficiencies and Performance Manager (K Batchelor)
Principal Accountant (S Plenty)
Administrative Support (H Dobson)

Also in Attendance:

Piers Feilden, Chairman of Magna West Somerset Board
Tony Murray, Magna West Somerset Director

SC51 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor A M Chick, M J Chilcott and K J Ross.

SC52 Minutes of the Meeting held on 10 October 2011

(Minutes of the Meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held on 10 October 2011 – circulated with the Agenda).

RESOLVED that the Minutes of the Scrutiny Committee held on 10 October 2011 be confirmed as a correct record.

SC53 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:

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Name	Minute No	Description of Interest	Personal or Prejudicial	Action Taken
Cllr P Grierson	All Items	Minehead	Personal	Spoke and voted
Cllr K H Turner	All Items	Brompton Ralph	Personal	Spoke
Cllr D J Westcott	All Items	Watchet	Personal	Spoke

SC54 Public Participation

No member of the public had requested to speak on any item on the agenda.

SC55 Notes of Key Cabinet Decisions/Action Points

(Copy of Key Cabinet Decisions/Action Points, circulated with the Agenda).

RESOLVED that the Key Cabinet Decisions/Action Points for 2 November 2011, be noted.

SC56 Cabinet Forward Plan

(Copy of Cabinet Forward Plan No. 6, December 2011 – December 2012, circulated with the Agenda).

RESOLVED that the Cabinet Forward Plan No. 6, December 2011 – December 2012, be noted.

SC57 Magna Annual Report

(Copy of Magna West Somerset Housing Association report for West Somerset Council's Scrutiny Committee, circulated prior to the meeting).

☐ The purpose of the report was to receive a half year review from Piers Feilden, Chairman and Tony Murray, Magna West Somerset Director, with regard to their activities in the last year and to provide information to the Scrutiny Committee in order to monitor the effectiveness of the Council's working arrangements with Magna.

Members noted the concerns regarding the change to the funding regime.

During the course of the discussion, Members noted the following main responses:

- Due to the adverse change in the funding regime MWS had decided to sell a small number of properties in order to help build more. They would be sold on the open market in the usual way. There were different arrangements for those properties subject to 106 agreements, mainly housing stock that was originally transferred from the Council in 1998.
- MWS did not have sufficient funding to start their own photovoltaic 'rent a roof' scheme. The charge in the feeding tariff had changed, which had adversely affected their ability to implement the scheme. At this moment in time, it was preferred to spend the capital money on new homes.
- The impending cuts relating to sheltered and supported housing services would create a difficult situation. MWS were looking at whether they could

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provide other services that could be charged. They did not have a figure from SCC yet, but were still working towards a solution through discussions.

- Nearly all MWS properties had been insulated. Air source heat pumps were being installed, which were beneficial for properties not connected to gas and therefore very beneficial for rural areas. Properties with the worst energy ratings were a priority. They were also looking to installing gas in suitable properties. Advice would be made available to tenants on how to make their homes cheaper to run, frontline staff would be briefed and help with benefits eg winter weather payments, would be made available.
- The financially difficult times meant that it was not currently the time to borrow as the rates were not advantageous, although some current variable rates were providing benefits. MWS were working hard to find new ways for funding development, which may involve partnership working.
- Members were assured that existing clients with tenancies would not be adversely affected by the possible implementation of fixed term tenancies.
- [As the newly proposed Universal Credit will be paid directly to tenants, this could adversely affect Magna's income streams, as currently Housing Benefit is paid directly to Magna.](#)
- A Housing Policy Advisory Group meeting would be arranged to discuss the charitable status adopted by Magna. The status reduced the tax payable. Magna WS would continue to operate the same way and retain the same purposes and objectives.

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[Members were advised of the Neighbourhood Walkabouts that Magna have organised in the past and have been of great success. This is an opportunity for members to observe the work Magna carry out on the ground and has been especially beneficial to newly elected members. Should anyone be interested they are asked to contact Bruce Lang. Members noted the invitation, which may be especially helpful for newly elected members, to tour the MWS offices etc and that should anyone be interested to contact the Council's Corporate Director.](#)

RESOLVED that Piers Feilden, Chairman, and Tony Murray, Director of Magna West Somerset, be thanked for their informative report.

SC58 Corporate Performance & Budget Monitoring 2011-12 – Quarter 2

(Copy of Report No. WSC 145/11, circulated with the Agenda).

The purpose of the report was to provide Members with an update on progress in delivering the corporate Priorities, performance of council services including budgetary information and customer satisfaction covering the period from 1 April 2011 to 30 September 2011.

The Lead Member for Resources and Central Support presented the budget performance report and advised that the predicted overspend had been reduced and work was continuing to try to reduce it further.

Officers addressed the issues relating to the quarterly performance indicators that were currently off track.

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During the course of the debate and in response to questions the following points were raised:

- Somerset County Council were working towards trying to implement CPE at about 4 June 2012.
- Members noted that the Council had worked well to put empty properties back into use and further work was being conducted to reduce the figure again. However, the district did have a lot of properties that were second homes and therefore classed as empty; a classification which penalises funding available to the Council.
- Concern was raised that re-charging of elections to Parish/Town Councils could be a disincentive to Parish/Town Councils holding elections.
- Concerns were raised regarding the performance relating to fraud and the number of prosecutions and sanctions. In response the Corporate Director advised that the Council employed one part-time fraud officer and some limited part-time administrative staff. Capacity was a challenge, and partnership working with the DWP had proved to be helpful. The Lead Member for Resources and Central Support informed that, initially, conducting a fraud case appeared not to be cost effective, however, once a successful prosecution had been conducted it could be publicised and used as an example to deter fraud. Further, a system had been introduced whereby the Council was directly notified when changes were made that could affect benefits. Therefore, it was not as easy for fraudulent behaviour to go unnoticed.

During the course of the debate, the following questions were raised by Members:

- In relation to Council Tax:
 - 2010/11 – 97.70% how does this relate to the figure in Table 7 of the main performance report. Is the £304,133 outstanding 2.3%?
 - What is the % of people pay the full years liability at the start of the year and how much does this equate to?
 - What proportion of payers pay by direct debit?
- In relation to Fraud
 - What action is being taken by the Council to rectify the performance in this area, which has been under target for the last 6 months?
 - Is the work being undertaken by the fraud officer cost effective to the authority?
 - Are they being pro-active enough? i.e liaising with the police, other agencies
 - What is the procedure for feedback to Cllrs who have reported incidents of fraud?

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Officers will carry out the necessary research and respond with information to members on the issues raised.

RESOLVED (1) that progress in delivering the Corporate Priorities 2011/12 be noted.

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RESOLVED (2) that the performance against Group and Services Indicators, including the Budget Monitoring Indicators be, noted.

SC59 **Response from the Under Secretary of State for the Department of Communities and Local Government on the matter of Joint Scrutiny Arrangements**

(Copy of the response from the Under Secretary of State for the Department of Communities and Local Government, circulated with the Agenda).

Members noted that the response from the Under Secretary of State for the Department of Communities and Local Government had been disappointing.

RESOLVED that the response be noted.

SC60 **Scrutiny Committee Workplan**

(Scrutiny Committee Workplan, circulated with the Agenda).

The Scrutiny and Performance Officer informed of the requests to defer the reports regarding the Complaints Procedure and Redundancy Packages.

RESOLVED (1) that a review of the Complaints Procedure be deferred.

RESOLVED (2) that an update of the Redundancy Packages for all the Somerset authorities be deferred.

The meeting closed at 6.39 pm.