

SWT Corporate Scrutiny Committee - 3 November 2021

Present: Councillor Gwil Wren (Chair)

Councillors Ian Aldridge, Benet Allen, Sue Buller, Norman Cavill, Simon Coles, Ed Firmin, Barrie Hall, Libby Lisgo, Loretta Whetlor and Sarah Wakefield (In place of Habib Farbahi)

Officers: Paul Fitzgerald, Marcus Prouse, Lisa Tuck, Alison Blom-Cooper, Chris Hall, Jessica Kemmish and Sam Murrell

Also Present: Councillors Mark Blaker, Habib Farbahi, John Hassall, Marcus Kravis, Janet Lloyd, Federica Smith-Roberts and Mark Wathen

(The meeting commenced at 6.15 pm)

54. **Apologies**

An apology was received from Councillor Nick Thwaites.

Cllr Sarah Wakefield was added as a substitute for Cllr Farbahi.

55. **Minutes of the previous Corporate Scrutiny Committee**

The minutes of the meeting held on 1st September 2021 were approved.

56. **Declarations of Interest**

Members present at the meeting declared the following personal interests in their capacity as a Councillor or Clerk of a County, Town or Parish Council or any other Local Authority:-

| Name | Minute No. | Description of Interest | Reason | Action Taken |
|----------------------|------------|-------------------------------|----------|-----------------|
| Cllr M Blaker | All Items | Wiveliscombe | Personal | Spoke |
| Cllr N Cavill | All Items | West Monkton | Personal | Spoke and Voted |
| Cllr S Coles | All Items | SCC & Taunton Charter Trustee | Personal | Spoke and Voted |
| Cllr L Lisgo | All Items | Taunton Charter Trustee | Personal | Spoke and Voted |
| Cllr J Lloyd | All Items | Wellington & Sampford Arundel | Personal | Spoke |
| Cllr F Smith-Roberts | All Items | Taunton Charter Trustee | Personal | Spoke |
| Cllr L Whetlor | All Items | Watchet | Personal | Spoke and Voted |
| Cllr G Wren | All Items | Clerk to Milverton PC | Personal | Spoke and Voted |

Cllr Wren further declared that he had a friend who was one of the partners of Cushman & Wakefield following the Portfolio Holder for Asset Management and Economic Development having mentioned Cushman and Wakefield in his introduction.

57. **Public Participation**

There was no Public Participation.

58. **Corporate Scrutiny Request/Recommendation Trackers**

Regarding the Outturn Report which was discussed by the Corporate Scrutiny Committee on 7th July 2021, information in relation to appendix B was requested but had not yet been provided to members. Officers responded that the information had been requested and would be provided once received.

A further response and update on extensions to planning applications as a result of the phosphates issue was requested. Alison Blom-Cooper who was in attendance at the meeting provided an update on progress with resolving the planning backlog as a result of the phosphates issue.

Three requests for information from 1st September 2021 meeting were still outstanding. The Chair asked officers to request that this information be provided.

The Corporate Scrutiny Request and Recommendation Trackers were noted.

59. **Corporate Scrutiny Committee Forward Plan**

Officers advised that the Tower Street Report and the Public Transport Task and Finish Report may both be delayed until the new year.

The Corporate Scrutiny Committee forward plan was noted.

60. **Executive and Full Council Forward Plan**

The Corporate Scrutiny Committee noted the Executive and Full Council forward plans.

61. **To consider reports from Executive Councillors - Cllr Federica Smith Roberts**

The Chair advised that the agenda order had been revised so that item 9, to consider reports from Executive Councillors – Federica Smith-Roberts was discussed ahead of item 8, the Innovation District Update.

Councillor Federica Smith-Roberts was welcomed to the Corporate Scrutiny Committee meeting. The Chair explained that this was an opportunity for councillors to ask questions to the Leader and then opened the debate. During the debate the following comments and questions were raised:

- An explanation of the makeup of the Local Government Reorganisation Joint Committee upon which Cllr Smith-Roberts sits was given. It was encouraged that the views of all councillors would be represented by the Leader on this Joint Committee. It was recognised that a two-way flow of information would be beneficial.
- It was highlighted that a letter from government regarding the draft Structural Change Order had been received and that it was currently with the Council's legal team and would be shared with councillors the next day.
- Concerns were expressed about how long councillors will have to comment upon the draft Structural Change Order. Councillors commenting upon the draft was encouraged.
- Continuing to progress the Council's initiatives and current projects where possible ahead of the new Unitary Authority being implemented was encouraged.
- Concerns were raised about the level of representation for the residents of Somerset West and Taunton and particularly representation for sparsely populated areas following the implementation of the new Unitary Authority.
- It was highlighted that both the Local Government Reform Joint Committee and Local Government Reform Advisory Board meetings are open to all.
- Concerns were raised about the capital and revenue provisions for Local Government Reorganisation, and it was questioned as to whether budgets had been agreed. The Leader responded that budgeting for the set-up costs of the new authority were still being discussed.
- Concerns were raised about the creation of Local Community Networks and the impact of their creation upon parish councils.
- It was questioned why the letter from government regarding the draft Structural Change Order had been circulated to the monitoring officers and legal first and had not yet been provided to councillors.
- It was questioned whether compensation was ever paid to Maggie's Centre. The Leader responded that no compensation had been paid to Maggie's Centre.
- Supporting local business through the impact of Covid-19 was encouraged. It was encouraged that the Leader should consider meeting with local businesses. The efforts of the Council in ensuring Covid grants were paid out promptly to businesses were praised.
- It was questioned what the net return and yield is from the commercial strategy and what the latest progress on the commercial strategy was.
- Concerns were raised about the procedure through which a motion was put forth and adopted at the last Full Council meeting and whether this had set a precedent.
- It was questioned whether the Council has a communications strategy and where information about this could be found. It was asked what resource the Council has to fund communications and what performance management process is in place to track progress against targets.

- It was suggested a survey of councillors to gather views on communications would be beneficial.
- Concerns were raised about the effectiveness of Firmstep in terms of processing enquiries and complaints.
- The Leader continuing to meet with town and parish councils was encouraged.

Councillor Firmin left the meeting at 7:17pm.

- It was encouraged that action be taken to bring about uniformity in terms of parking charges in car parks across the district.
- The process for appointing a new CEO of the Council was outlined.
- The Corporate Scrutiny Committee thanked Cllr Federica Smith-Roberts for attending the meeting.

62. **Innovation District Update**

The Portfolio Holder for Asset Management and Economic Development introduced the report to the Committee. The following points were made by the Portfolio Holder during the introduction.

- A study was commissioned in July 2020 as a commitment of the economic development strategy which was approved by Full Council and undertaken under the delegated authority of the portfolio holder.
- Research has shown that jobs in the technological, innovation or research and development sectors created more jobs in the wider economy and that those jobs tended to be better paid. Companies in those sectors also tended to get more involved in sponsoring things such as education.
- Innovation did not necessarily need to be structured around universities.
- Having a technological or innovation company based on Exmoor or in our coastal communities would have a greater positive impact on the communities around it.
- It was suggested that innovation was vital for the long-term transformation of our area.
- Through consultation we aim to strengthen our relationships with universities around Somerset and other research organisations.
- Seven key points were identified for achieving innovation in the district: the innovation ecosystem, growth of talent for innovation and enterprise, support for information exchange, getting the right infrastructure, establishing leadership and stewardship through an advisory board, having a distinctive brand and creating an attractive and vibrant place to live.
- It was raised that it was important to encourage creative industries and digital industries.
- Our consultants EIBC concluded that there was no case for Somerset West and Taunton Council to promote or invest in a new science park but that there was a case for the creation of an innovation district. There were about twenty

innovation districts currently but Somerset West and Taunton would be one of the first in a rural area.

- Following engagement with members, stakeholders and businesses the summary findings were published in March 2021. The findings were shared with members and the public.
- The next task of the Innovation Leadership Group would be to agree the areas of collaborative focus and address gaps in our innovation district support system. This would be concurrent with looking to create the proposed physical Innovation Centre.

During the debate the following comments and questions were raised:

- It was questioned whether there were strategic aims in place yet from the Innovation District for improving innovation and if so what the details of those aims were.
- It was raised that encouraging more young people to stay in or move to the area would be important in enabling innovation and development.
- Concerns were raised about poor broadband and digital infrastructure in the district hindering innovation and development.
- Setting up strategic partnerships was encouraged.
- The evidence and reasoning for not pursuing a science park in Somerset West and Taunton was questioned and discussed.
- Concerns were raised that the terms of reference for the study were not followed in the EIBC study, and it was questioned why this was the case.
- It was raised that in addition to the terms of reference there was also a scoping brief and a tender document.
- It was requested that the original terms of reference and the terms of reference used for the EIBC report be shared with the committee. Concerns were also raised about members having not been provided with the full report due to confidentiality and non-disclosure agreements. Officers informed the Committee that the release of the full report was not possible due to the confidentiality agreements originally made with businesses who participated in the study. However, the committee was informed by officers that a redacted version would be issued to members.
- It was questioned why the report mentioned an additional employment space review being undertaken for West Somerset to identify more employment land for industrial but then elsewhere in the report it mentioned 54,000 square feet of potential land.
- Concerns were raised about infrastructure being insufficient and this hindering innovation and development.
- It was raised that the district had a Digital Innovation Centre being built at Firepool and that the district also had a diagnostic centre, the Rutherford Diagnostic Centre, which had recently opened.
- The planned ratio between manufacturing and service industries as part of innovation and development was questioned and it was asked how sustainable employment opportunities would be created.
- Concerns were raised about EICB's suggestion that an Innovation Centre be built in Watchet given the poor transport links in West Somerset.

- It was questioned whether the aim was to create new employment or attract jobs from elsewhere into the area.
- It was discussed whether an innovation hub would be better than an innovation district.
- It was raised that many of the young people from the district who leave the area to go to university do not come back and that work needs to be done to make the district a desirable place for young people to return to after studying.
- It was questioned whether a different approach is needed in Somerset West and Taunton or whether instead lessons could be learned, and ideas taken from areas where innovation has been successful.
- Bids for grant funding where possible were encouraged.
- It was discussed about what is needed to attract talent and businesses to our area to encourage innovation. It was suggested that West Somerset is less attractive than Taunton to talent and businesses.
- It was raised that having an innovation hub in Taunton initially and then expanding innovation across the district afterwards may be better than immediately looking to establish an innovation district. It was suggested that businesses may be more attracted to Taunton than other parts of the district due to its proximity to the motorway.
- It was suggested that a feasibility study for an innovation hub in Taunton be undertaken.

A motion was moved by Councillor Coles and second by Councillor Wakefield to recommend to the Executive that; A feasibility study is undertaken for the provision of an innovation hub based in Taunton and that the Council brings the results of such a study back through the democratic path when completed. The funding for this proposal is to be found within existing 2021/22 budgets where possible. Proposed by Councillor S Coles and seconded by Councillor S Wakefield.

During the debate on the motion the following comments and questions were raised:

- It was raised that it could be too early to conduct a further feasibility study as the results of the first study were yet to be fully considered.
- It was suggested that the motion was too prescriptive and that this may lead to barriers. It was suggested that it would be better for the committee to make comments to the Executive of the benefits of having an innovation hub in Taunton.
- Concerns were raised that a further feasibility study could cover some of the same areas as the work already in progress.
- Concerns were raised that a feasibility study for an innovation hub in Taunton would not look at the whole district and that an innovation hub in Taunton would not lead to innovation being developed across the district.
- It was questioned whether having an innovation district would be too nebulous an idea and therefore having an innovation hub from which innovation can spread out into the rest of the district would be beneficial.
- It was raised that an innovation hub could potentially be based at Nexus 25.

- It was raised that Taunton is well located within the Southwest to act as a centre for businesses and business meetings.

Corporate Scrutiny Committee Recommended to the Executive that; A feasibility study is undertaken for the provision of an innovation hub based in Taunton and that the Council brings the results of such a study back through the democratic path when completed. The funding for this proposal is to be found within existing 2021/22 budgets where possible. Proposed by Councillor S Coles and seconded by Councillor S Wakefield.

(The Meeting ended at 9.06 pm)