

SWT Scrutiny Committee - 7 April 2021

Present: Councillor Gwil Wren (Chair)

Councillors Libby Lisgo, Ian Aldridge, Norman Cavill, Simon Coles, Dixie Darch, Habib Farbahi, Ed Firmin, Dave Mansell, Derek Perry, Phil Stone, Ray Tully, Nick Thwaites, John Hassall and Loretta Whetlor

Officers: Andrew Randell, Marcus Prouse, Alison North, Andrew Pritchard, Dawn Adey, James Barra, Chris Brown, Ian Candlish, Chris Hall, Sue Tomlinson, Simon Lewis and Rebecca Miller (Principal Planning Specialist)

Also Present: Councillors Richard Lees, Francesca Smith, Brenda Weston, Marcus Kravis, Chris Booth, Janet Lloyd, Peter Pilkington, Vivienne Stock-Williams, Anthony Trollope-Bellew, Sarah Wakefield and Alan Wedderkopp

(The meeting commenced at 6.15 pm)

155. **Apologies**

Apologies were received from Councillors Buller and Wheatley.

Councillors Whetlor and Hassall attended as substitutes.

156. **Minutes of the previous meetings of the Scrutiny Committee**

(Minutes of the meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held on 3 and 4 March 2021 circulated with the agenda)

Resolved that the minutes of the Scrutiny Committee held on 3 and 4 March be confirmed as a correct record.

157. **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 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 D Mansell | All Items | Wiveliscombe | Personal | Spoke and Voted |
| Cllr D Perry | All Items | Taunton Charter Trustee | Personal | Spoke and Voted |

| | | | | |
|-----------------|-----------|--------------|----------|-----------------|
| Cllr N Thwaites | All Items | Dulverton | Personal | Spoke and Voted |
| Cllr R Tully | All Items | West Monkton | Personal | Spoke and Voted |
| Cllr L Whetlor | All Items | Watchet | Personal | Spoke and Voted |
| | | | | |

An Additional personal interest was declared by Councillor Cavill as a Trustee of Taunton Heritage Trust.

158. **Public Participation**

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

159. **Scrutiny Committee Request/Recommendation Trackers**

(Copy of the Scrutiny Committee Action Plan, circulated with the agenda).

A progress report of the Climate Change Budget would be considered at the June meeting.

The public transport task and finish group would report to the committee within two months.

Resolved that the Scrutiny Committee Action Plan be noted.

160. **Scrutiny Committee Forward Plan**

(Copy of the Scrutiny Committee Forward Plan, circulated with the agenda).

Councillors were reminded that if they had an item they wanted to add to the agenda, that they should send their requests to the Governance Team.

Resolved that the Scrutiny Committee Forward Plan be noted.

161. **Executive Forward Plan**

(Copy of the Executive Forward Plan, circulated with the agenda).

Councillors were reminded that if they had an item they wanted to add to the agenda, that they should send their requests to the Governance Team.

Resolved that the Executive Forward Plan be noted.

162. **Full Council Forward Plan**

(Copy of the Full Council Forward Plan, circulated with the agenda).

Councillors were reminded that if they had an item they wanted to add to the agenda, that they should send their requests to the Governance Team.

Resolved that the Full Council Forward Plan be noted.

163. **Climate Change Delivery Partnership**

The Council had the opportunity to create a climate change delivery partnership with Sedgemoor District Council for the benefit of both organisations.

The Partnership if approved would be established with Somerset West and Taunton leading on its delivery. The employees from Sedgemoor District Council will be seconded to SWT with SDC continuing to pay the associated costs of these employees and their proportion of the projects delivered.

A Member Consultation Panel would be created to represent the needs of both councils.

Somerset West and Taunton Council (SWT) and Sedgemoor District Council (SDC) have been in discussion at an officer level as to the potential benefits of joining up their Climate Change delivery activity.

Both Councils have approved the Somerset wide Climate Emergency Strategy and have an adopted localised action plan.

Many of the delivery ambitions are the same for both Councils and by sharing the project delivery resource creates an environment to centralise knowledge and experience, minimise duplication, and potentially deliver ambitions more quickly with the benefits of economies of scale.

The joined up service would acknowledge the sovereignty and prioritisation of both Councils as well as their independent finances. The attached governance diagram and section 5 of the report provides more detail on this.

The proposal considered the ways of achieving financial transparency. Through this process officers have excluded the option of the seconded resourced from Sedgemoor District Council only working on SDC project delivery. This option has only limited benefits to both organisations as there would remain a segregation of the works rather than combination and removal of duplication.

The proposal is for the team to work as a whole on the delivery of the agreed actions. This enables a crossover of knowledge and skills and prevents duplication. The proposed funding mechanism would see the contribution from SDC considered as a proportion of the new total and the work across the agreed priorities is delivered with that proportion back to SDC. The proposed contribution from SDC would be for two Project Delivery employees, this combined with SWT's three would produce an allocation of 60% to SWT and 40% to SDC. This allows all resources to be shared and the benefit of the activities increase.

The proposal would see Sedgemoor District Council resources seconded to SWT and fit within the existing organisational structure for Climate Change shown at Appendix A1. This allows the benefits of working together to be established early, and bring forward the connectivity of our priorities preventing duplication.

Officers from both councils recognised the importance of Member engagement within this delivery partnership. The proposal being put forward is that the Somerset West and

Taunton establish a joint Member Consultation Panel with appropriate cross party representation from each Authority.

The Panel is proposed to provide a means of engaging with each authority on a more detailed level, Appendix A2 shows a diagram of the proposed governance structure both for officers and Members.

The proposed make-up of the cross party Consultation Panel would consist of the Climate Change and relevant portfolio holder from SDC and SWT and two other Member nominations as approved by Full Council of each authority.

During the discussion the following comments and questions were raised:-

- Both partners had the same levels of ambition in the partnership. More urgency was encouraged in addressing the climate change priorities.
- 4.13 of the report set out funding opportunities and bid writing was considered. The Committee emphasised on exploring and succeeding in bid opportunities, this was important to the future success in tackling climate change.
- More information was requested around the Somerset wide implementation board alongside multi district project management.
- More emphasis was requested in relation to how councillors were engaged and welcomed to form and be part of climate change projects.
- The criteria of bids differed, some were open and some required a larger amount of detail.
- The joint consultation panel was linked to the proposed partnership. This was represented by two Councillors and a portfolio holder in each partnership.
- It was questioned what was required of the ecological strategist. This post would keep the Council focused on the Climate Change Strategy, making the biggest impacts on tackling climate change through projects ecologically.
- It was questioned if the job description and role could be circulated to the committee.
- Both Councils had a CNCR plan which had a crossover, both Councils had similar ambitions in their CNCR plan. The anticipated benefits was in shared resources for both Councils.
- Individual Councils sovereignty remained and could therefore prioritise and make decisions on this basis. The arrangement didn't prevent specific geographical work where needed.
- Concerns were expressed that setting up new structures could slow progress down. The funding bid writer and ecological strategist roles were welcomed.
- It was questioned why Mendip and South Somerset Councils were not involved in the arrangement.
- Sedgemoor were looking at cross funding the Ecology Strategist post.
- Two posts were proposed to be transferred from Sedgemoor, these were project officer and manager roles.
- The proposed model didn't prejudice any potential Unitary outcomes.

Recommendations

1. The Committee recommended that Scrutiny supported Executive in Somerset West and Taunton leading the creation and operation of a Joint Climate Change Delivery Partnership.

2. That impacted employees of Sedgemoor District Council will be seconded from Sedgemoor District Council to Somerset West and Taunton Council.

3. That a legal agreement is created for the partnership setting out cost and resource allocations, with delegated authority to the Director of External Operations and Climate Change, the Assistant Director for Climate Change, Regulatory Services and Asset Management, in consultation with the Climate Change portfolio holder to negotiate the final detail.

4. The creation of the Joint Consultation Panel with delegated authority to the Director of External Operations and Climate Change, the Assistant Director for Climate Change, Regulatory Services and Asset Management, in consultation with the Climate Change portfolio holder to create the Terms of Reference.

164. **Phosphates Update (Verbal Update)**

A Powerpoint presentation was provided alongside an update in relation to Phosphates by the Principle Planning Specialist. This set out the impact of the levels of phosphates on the levels along with the ongoing work conducted to mitigate phosphates as part of the Planning application process.

During the debate the following comments and questions were raised:-

- The length of delays in the planning process questioned
- The phosphates calculator had been successful as a mitigation tool, there had been positive feedback from applicants and developers. The calculator was being reviewed as part of a strategic piece of work.
- 75 hectares per year were required to be successful in offsetting phosphates.
- A clearer view and strategy to address this would be worked through once the work had been completed in the autumn.
- It was questioned if allotments could be included at Cotford St Luke as part of phosphate offsetting.
- It was considered if Housing Developers could offset phosphate related costs onto social housing. Concerns were expressed over the impacts on the cost of affordable housing.
- The estimated loss of projected income was estimated at £1.3 million for SSDC and SWT. So far both Councils had not experienced a reduction in Planning income.
- Natural England and Somerset County Council had agreed mitigation and phosphate calculations.
- The committee encouraged developers to sign up to mitigation measures through a section 106 agreement to ensure this is put in place.

The Scrutiny Committee noted the update.

165. **Executive Councillor Portfolio Holder Session - Housing**

Since the last report in November the main focus continued to be COVID-19 and in particular since the New Year, re-adjusting services to respond to the latest lock down measures. The Portfolio Holder acknowledged the flexibility of the team, partner organisations and contractors who once again have made substantial changes to services; and also our tenants who have been so accommodating and understanding. The Council continued to monitor issues closely.

Since the New Year no significant impact had been experienced as a result of Brexit with supply chains holding up, however we are starting to hear accounts of price increases on some supplies such as timber.

Elsewhere our project to replace our main housing management IT system has kicked off, this is a major piece of work and will run for around 16 months.

Lastly it was pleasing to see improvements in our STAR survey results (Survey of Tenants and Residents); particularly that in the last two years we have been through major organisational changes and have experienced nearly a year of COVID-19 impacts.

Housing Development and Regeneration Team

Housing Strategy

- Single Homeless Accommodation Strategy - The service was producing an accommodation strategy to respond to the Government aspiration to maintain accommodation support to reduce or end rough sleeping by 2025. The strategy will help inform the Council's partnership and investment decisions.
- The Homelessness Reduction Board is progressing to commence its work during 2021.
- LHA Housing Advisors Programme – Somerset councils and ARK consultancy had submitted the draft report into Better Futures for Vulnerable People in Somerset.
- This sets out how Somerset authorities work to support the most vulnerable people, provides examples of good practice and sets out under six themes opportunities to delivery better outcomes.
- The report will support the
- Homeless Reduction Board set its priorities and action.
- A Delivery Officer is being recruited to the team to deliver and oversee the Hinckley point C Housing Action Plan, unfortunately our first recruitment process was unsuccessful.
- The revised Private Sector Renew Policy was considered and supported by full council in December.

Housing Enabling

- 2020/21 completions are currently estimated as: 128 affordable homes by 31st March 2021, 265 completions are forecast in 2021/22.
- Although completions are low, this year has seen significant start on sites across the Council area including: 42 affordable homes at Cornhill, Wellington; 60 affordable homes at Allers Mead, Williton and 19 affordable homes at Paddocks, Bishops Lydeard.
- SWT was recognised as a High Affordability Area by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) in December and is now eligible for social rent grant funding in addition to Affordable Rent and Shared Ownership tenures within the 2021 – 2026 Affordable Homes Programme.
- Viability and Self Build seminars have been hosted through the Enabling Team and had been well received by both Members and Officers.

During the debate the following comments and questions were raised:-

- More information had been requested in relation to lessons learned on modular housing. Visits had been made to factories of shortlisted organisations producing modular house, there were challenges with what modular housing was able to achieve and deliver standards to levels that is claimed. Air tightness challenge was a critical element for zero carbon credentials.
- Local connections were a recognised need across Homefinder in Somerset. Some needs were greater than others but it was acknowledged it could be taken into consideration in future and looked into.
- Addressing the backlog in Homefinder was ongoing with a weekly report on this produced, as a result numbers reducing with additional members of staff recruited to reduce the backlog.
- The Homeless reduction plan and board linked in with the health and wellbeing board and other organisations fed into this.
- Significant work had been undertaken in preventing antisocial behaviour which had been exacerbated as a result of neighbourhood disputes and increasing cases during lockdown. Environmental Health had been directing residents to a noise application, which would set out if it determined a statutory noise nuisance. Instances of approval had been sought for the use of community protection notices
- More information and data from housing would be circulated to all Councillors, to provide information around survey and satisfaction of tenants
- Community issues and the loss of the previous Community Scrutiny Committee was raised and requested to be addressed going forward.
- Homefinder was used in the whole of Somerset, although it was recognised that it was not without faults and certainly could be refined and the Council was in the process of procuring a new system
- SWT owning housing stock did not have an impact on homefinder. All were equal in relation to location as part of the bidding process.

Resolved that the Scrutiny Committee noted the update.

(The Meeting ended at 9.12 pm)

