

## SWT Corporate Scrutiny Committee - 6 July 2022

Present: Councillor Sue Buller (Chair)

Councillors Nick Thwaites (Vice Chair), Ian Aldridge, Norman Cavill, Simon Coles, Habib Farbahi, Ed Firmin, John Hassall, Libby Lisgo, Loretta Whetlor and Gwil Wren

Officers: Amy Tregellas, Sam Murrell, Chris Hall, Paul Fitzgerald, Kerry Prisco, Malcolm Riches, Graeme Thompson

James Barrahan and Alison North (via zoom)

Also

Present: Councillors Federica Smith Roberts (6.55pm) Dixie Darch (7.11pm)

(The meeting commenced at 6.15 pm)

### 12. Apologies

Apologies were received from councillors Marcus Kravis and Nicole Hawkins, Portfolio Holder for Resources, Cllr Benet Allen.

### 13. Minutes of the previous Corporate Scrutiny Committee

The Committee resolved to approve the minutes of the previous meeting held on Wednesday 1 June 2022.

### 14. 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 I Aldridge	All Items	Williton	Personal	Spoke and voted
Cllr N Cavill	All Items	SCC & West Monkton	Personal	Spoke and voted
Cllr S Coles	All Items	SCC & Taunton Charter Trustee	Personal	Spoke and voted
Cllr H Farbahi	All Items	SCC	Personal	Spoked and voted
Cllr L Lisgo	All Items	Taunton Charter Trustee	Personal	Spoke and voted
Cllr N Thwaites	All Items	Dulverton	Personal	Spoke and voted
Cllr L Whetlor	All Items	Watchet	Personal	Spoke and voted
Cllr G Wren	All Items	SCC & Clerk to	Personal	Spoke and voted

15. **Public Participation**

There were no requests for public participation.

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

The Chair was pleased that the trackers had been brought up to date for the new municipal year and were clearer to understand. She had concerns however about the number of questions that had not elicited a written response from officers despite repeated reminders.

Due to the number of items still outstanding on the 21/22 written answer tracker, it was voted unanimously by the Committee for those officers to attend the August Corporate Scrutiny meeting to provide a verbal update on their work. Some of these questions were asked back in December 2021 and despite repeated reminders had not been responded to.

17. **Corporate Scrutiny Committee Forward Plan**

“Business of Cities” report be brought forward to discuss. This was facilitated under the previous Portfolio Holder for Economic Regeneration; Cllr Marcus Kravis and it was requested that this be aired to the public to provide clarity. The Committee wants to know how the money which was used to fund the report has been spent. Reference made to the Innovation Report from Catapult that was recently circulated to members. Could this be brought to Scrutiny to follow up and debate the findings? A suggestion was made for August as the diary was empty.

*Chris Hall agreed to go away and follow this up with the team as it doesn't currently sit on any of the forward plans, and thus has missed the standard reporting cycle for August.*

*Prop: Farbahi / Sec: Firmin to bring forward the Catapult report to Corporate Scrutiny in August for the Committee to debate.*

It was suggested that a monthly report on progress on Local Government Reorganisation would be a beneficial item for the committee to review. It was asked that the PFH attend for a 10-minute slot so that members of the public could be informed. (The Chair is happy for this to be done as a standing item via zoom if the PFH, Sarah Wakefield can accommodate).

*The Committee was informed that the monthly LGR briefings are due to be reconvened and this would provide timely updates to members.*

Flood prevention and finance – Can officers provide an update on what work is currently being done and how funds are being spent regarding flood prevention work? This is specifically in the Taunton Deane area, and not coastal defence. An

overview of current SWT strategic schemes and projects was suggested, with officers requested to attend in October 2022.

Garden Town Status – Following the £2m funding received from central government how is this project progressing? Can an overview be provided again at the August meeting to show how the money is being spent?

*Chris Hall advised that subject to annual leave commitments a show and tell type format could be used to update Committee on the project at the August meeting. There would not be enough time to produce a full written report.*

The Committee noted the Corporate Scrutiny forward plan.

## 18. **Executive and Full Council Forward Plan**

It was asked what was meant by “placeholder” on the Forward Plans?

*This term is used to identify that an item of a confidential nature will be coming forward to that Committee in the future. It acts as a reservation so that the agenda allows for it and doesn't become too full. The two items listed on the forward plan as “placeholder” will be discussed with the relevant Chairs outside of the meeting.*

*Cllr Aldridge raised the point that the term “placeholder” was misleading and appears to hide the business of the Council, rather than being open and transparent. The Monitoring officer agreed to follow this up with colleagues and stated that as soon as appropriate report titles were available, they would be added on all the Forward Plans. These will be updated to ensure they follow the correct democratic pathway and reporting cycles and would be re-circulated to Members.*

Constitutional items are going to Audit and Standards, and then on to Full Council. Two reports are regularising Constitutional and Code of Conduct matters across all 5 councils prior to the move to Unitary. This should make the transitional arrangements much more transparent.

Community Governance Review – Parishing of Taunton. Currently in the second phase of consultation with feedback and results due to go to Full Council in September. Full Council will also consider the Statutory Change Order at that time. This will then need to be passed onto Somerset County Council for official sign-off, due to the transitional arrangements. Following on from this will be the “implementation stage” which will involve getting the Council up and running prior to April 1, 2023. The report going to Full Council in September will outline how this will all happen in a safe and legal manner.

The Committee noted the Executive and Full Council forward plans.

Cllr Federica Smith Roberts joined the meeting at 6.55pm

## 19. **Connecting out Garden Communities - Public Consultation**

Graeme Thompson presented his consultation report to the Committee for consideration.

An email had been submitted from the Taunton Area Cycling Campaign in support of the Connecting Garden Communities Consultation. This was read out by Cllr Buller as follows: -

“We would like to express our general support for the work in this report. Whilst we may differ on some details, we believe that the work is extremely important in filling the many gaps in SCC's original Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan (LCWIP), which was not integrated with major development sites.

It is also important that the work is embodied in the thinking of the new unitary authority. A mechanism for doing this needs to be agreed. One option would be for it to be a supplement to the LCWIP, which is a DfT recognised document (although not statutory).

We are pleased that TACC's contribution in terms of volunteer time is recognised in the report. To date, we have found the officers' process for developing the active travel network to be open and professional. We would be grateful if this email could be circulated to the rest of the Committee.

Mike Ginger (for Taunton Area Cycling Campaign)”

During the debate the following points were raised:

- Officers were commended for the work and collaboration that had gone into the consultation report and the positive outcomes for everyone.
- Sustainable transport needs to start further out in the rural areas and needs to be more than just aspirational, it needs to be delivered! It should also include those communities such as Ruishton that are split by the A358 or the M5 motorway and would benefit from safe travel routes into town.
- How is the network of routes arrived at, when there appear to be some obvious omissions, such as the canal path? This is already a busy walker's route, but the pathways are exceedingly narrow. Could the towpath be widened to accommodate more users?
  - *The canal is an asset that is owned by the Land and Rivers Trust, so any work would need to be undertaken in partnership, with full consultation with all user groups. Whilst this doesn't prohibit the work from happening it does prevent challenges that make it unlikely.*
  - *Associated costs would also be considerable. For instance, widening of canal tow paths along the Bridgwater/Taunton canal would be extremely expensive and would have a detrimental impact on other areas of the environment and ecology.*

- How is demand determined, to understand who wants to travel where?
  - *The LCWIP is very data led with good historical information about the pathways of travel for usual routes to schools, employment and business. It also uses the existing Local Plan to determine where development will be in the future, and the likely impact this will have on existing routes and networks. This plan is used to negotiate with developers to ensure that they factor this information into their travel plans.*
- Cllr Lisgo expressed concern that the Equalities Impact Report indicated that the proposed changes would have a positive outlook for everyone, which may not be the case for those who are reliant on a car. This has been previously demonstrated during the road closures in East Street last year, when disabled vehicles were prohibited from parking in the town centre.
  - *The Equalities Impact Assessment is working on the premise that the networks will be accessible for all and will deliver on the Government's priorities, without any user group being disadvantaged.*
  - *This will include wide enough footpaths to accommodate two-way cycling, wheelchairs and pushchairs etc. This consultation report is not about the detail in the design but more about the overall network and connectivity.*

Cllr Darch joined the meeting at 7.11pm

- Overall, the impact of the report is good for all users as it will improve air quality for those people who suffer respiratory problems, will reduce congestion by limiting cars, and will make walking and cycling routes safer and more user friendly for those travellers. This will have a positive impact on those who are car reliant as there will be less traffic on the roads, and fewer hazards to negotiate.
- Cllr Darch also made the point that the strategy is enabling for those people who cannot afford to buy or run a motor vehicle as it allows for alternative methods of active travel.

Cllr Ed Firmin left the meeting at 7.15pm

- What work is being done to involve local landowners, promoters, stakeholders and developers etc in the early stages?
  - *There are different stages of progress dependent on the project, but they are all being approached when plans are submitted.*
- There is also a need to negotiate with existing landowners about how to make existing infrastructure safer. For instance, making better use of the underpass by Sainsburys which would assist with bicycle travel into the town centre. There is currently a stile on the footpath, but if the landowner

could be persuaded, perhaps a more accessible alternative could be considered?

Cllr John Hassall left the meeting at 7.30pm

- Visitors from outside Taunton need to use vehicles to get to the town centre but are not supported on arrival. Car users and persons with limited mobility still need to rely on the car for essential journeys and this needs to be recognised.
- Will this consultation and report align with strategic priorities from the Dept of Transport and other partners and stakeholders?
  - *This consultation is NOT a transport strategy as its primary focus is on connecting the garden communities, but it will influence future strategies in such areas as the town centre, leisure and tourism.*
  - *20mph restrictions and other traffic calming measures can be considered as part of the overall strategy but it would be down to partners such as SCC and the parishes to embed these measures. This falls outside the remit of this consultation.*
  - *Working with partners such as the SCC Highways Team and outlying parishes is very positive and there is a collaborative approach to delivering the strategy's aspirations.*
  - *The consultation is designed to tease out some of the community aspirations so that there is a focus on what the parishes prioritise when it comes to funding. The delivery on projects will be costly, so it is important when dealing with limited funds to determine which projects take centre stage, and which are considered less needed.*

Cllr Lisgo proposed a recommendation that an additional paragraph is added to the report prior to progress onto the Executive: *As routes are developed through the design stages, officers need to revisit the Equalities Impact Assessment and ensure that they are not disadvantaging some of the different groups.*

It was agreed by Graeme Thompson that this would be incorporated into the report before the onward path to the Executive.

## 20. **Corporate Performance report, Out-turn, and Quarter 4 2021/22**

Cllr Federica Smith Roberts introduced the report in the absence of the PFH Cllr Benet Allen.

Annual Plan: 31 commitments under the RAG status of the report. 23 were flagged as green and 8 are amber. There are none showing as red.

Key Performance Indicators: 22 are green, 1 is amber and 6 are red. The appendices provide the main commentary on these statuses and give an explanation and the reasons why performance has fallen below target.

During the debate the following points were raised:

- Concern was expressed over the high number of planning appeals that had been overturned by the planning inspectorate. Cllr Coles as chair of the planning committee did try to answer this query, but it was referred to the [Written Answer Tracker](#) for a fuller response.
- Page 264 Environment and Economy. Number 1 priority is high quality employment opportunities. Is it possible to provide examples of companies being attracted to SWT in the last year? [Written Answer Tracker.](#)
- Page 272 Homes and Communities – Why are these flagged green when communities and development has been adversely affected by the phosphates issue over the last 2 years.
  - *In excess of 100 applications are being held, which relates to approximately 2,300 properties being delayed.*
- Page 280 Concern was expressed about the delay in producing the Local Plan for 2023 due to Unitary.
  - *Evidence based work is ongoing and all five councils are currently working on their Local Plans, which will feed into collective unitary plans.*

Questions were asked around the delays in processing planning applications.

- *There is currently an issue around recruitment and retention in the planning roles and in planning administration. This is not unique to SWT but is being discussed across all 5 councils in this LGR workstream. The planning sections are stretched due to unfilled vacancies, sickness and planned annual leave. These pressures result in delays and backlogs.*

## 21. **Access to Information - Exclusion of Press and Public**

A vote was taken to move into confidential session if necessary.

*Prop: Whetlor / Sec: Coles – unanimous*

## 22. **General Fund Financial Monitoring - Out-turn position 2021/22**

Cllr Federica Smith Roberts introduced the report in the absence of the PFH Cllr Benet Allen.

It has been an immensely challenging year in financial terms due to the pressures from Covid, interest rates, inflation, supply chain issues, global conflicts as well as adjusting to Brexit. Despite being a relatively small local authority, SWT has successfully managed those risks, which is credit to the hardworking finance team. In year underspends have been used to absorb some of these financial pressures.

Planned spend of just over £2m has been rolled into 22/23 with budget carried forward so that SWT can continue to deliver its activities.

Hinkley B stayed open which contributed to a windfall fund at the end of the year.

During the debate the following points were raised:

- Page 319 – Economic Development Initiatives 769 – what is the outcome? Regeneration Project 2.9m - Where is this specifically?
- Employment Land Schemes 575 – Clarity on this.
  - *The answer was deemed confidential, so Committee moved into private session to discuss this. Recording and webcasting was suspended.*

Meeting was adjourned to go into private session at: 8.17pm

Meeting resumed at: 8:26pm

- How do we record payments to consultants?
  - *These are accounted for within the relevant budget heading and are not split out. Cllr Farbahi requested a list of consultants used, and this was agreed by Paul Fitzgerald. To be followed up in the [Written Answer Tracker](#).*
- Page 322 – Payments to Taunton Bus Station?
  - *16K was set aside for the Bus Station and this was to cover the security arrangements such as fencing whilst it was empty, and the compliance works to get it up to the required standard prior to renting to the NHS for vaccinations.*
- Phosphates 14K, 2 mil land acquisition for current year. What is happening with this? Land purchased over a year ago but because the money is still unspent does not appear to have progressed!
  - *More in-depth member briefing is being planned at the end of July to discuss phosphates in more detail.*
  - *Money will be spent in the current financial year, but this is commercially sensitive and not yet publicly available.*
  - *Schemes are currently being investigated to consider phosphates credit purchase to offset the calculator. There is currently a very small pilot project underway at Cotford St Luke to deliver a wetlands scheme, but SWT is looking at alternative methods of delivery.*
- What are Section 31 grants – Collection Fund?
  - *Government funding to cover deficits incurred during the financial year due to Covid.*

The Chair made closing comments on the impact of current issues on this year's budget, the first Quarter of which would be brought forward to Corporate Scrutiny in September.



(The Meeting ended at 8.36 pm)