

MENDIP DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of the Scrutiny Board held on Monday, 16 May 2016 in the Council Chamber at Mendip District Council, Shepton Mallet commencing at 6.30 pm.

COUNCILLORS PRESENT:

Councillor Damon Hooton (Chair), Steve Henderson (Vice Chair) and Councillors Eve Berry, Roy Mackenzie, Graham Noel, John North

SUBSTITUTES:

Councillor Edward Drewe for Councillor Dick Skidmore

OTHER COUNCILLORS PRESENT:

Councillors Peter Bradshaw, Mike Pullin, John Carter, Tom Killen, Harvey Siggs and Nigel Taylor, Danny Unwin

OFFICERS:

Stuart Brown	Chief Executive
Stuart Cave	Corporate Manager, Regulatory Services and Lead Officer of the Scrutiny Board
David Clark	Interim Team Manager
Paul Deal	Section 151 Officer
Keith Pennyfather	Strategic Assets Manager
Ben Sugg	Committee Officer

ALSO PRESENT:

Agenda Item	Subject	Actioned By
1	<p>Chair's Announcements</p> <p>The Chair explained the procedures in the case of an emergency and asked that all mobile devices be switched to silent. Hearing aid users were asked to switch their devices to position 'T'.</p> <p>He further announced that the meeting was being recorded. The Council was a Data Controller under the Data Protection Act and data collected during the recording would be retained in accordance with the Council's policy. By entering the Council Chamber and speaking during Public Participation, members of the public were consenting to being recorded and to the possible use of the sound recording for access via the website or for training purposes.</p>	
2	<p>Apologies for Absence</p> <p>Councillors Shane Collins and Terry Napper Councillor Dick Skidmore was substituted by Councillor Edward Drewe</p>	

3	<p>Declarations of Interest</p> <p>None.</p>	
4	<p>Public Participation</p> <p>Items on the agenda: None</p> <p>Items not on the agenda: None.</p>	
5	<p>Previous Minutes</p> <p>The minutes of the Scrutiny Board meeting held on 25 April 2016 were accepted as an accurate record.</p>	Ben Sugg
6	<p>Cabinet Minutes</p> <p>The minutes of the Cabinet meeting held on 11 April 2016 were accepted as an accurate record.</p>	Ben Sugg
7	<p>Forward Plans</p> <p>The Council Forward Plan was noted.</p> <p>The Scrutiny Forward Plan was noted with the addition of an update on the Five Councils Plan to be completed in September or October, and the dates of the items on page 2 of the Forward Plan to be confirmed by Officers.</p>	Ben Sugg
8	<p>A Council Structure for the Future</p> <p>The Chief Executive presented a verbal report.</p> <p>This Report recognised that there had been, and would continue to be, a number of ‘drivers’ that necessitate a change to the way that the Council operates and therefore, by implication, the Council’s management structure. These ranged from the Government’s housing and economic growth agenda, to the more local impact of recent Council decisions made in respect of the shared procurement of services, and evolving shared services arrangements i.e. number of areas. It was equally recognised that these ‘drivers’ must also be balanced with the need for the Council to continually drive performance and maintain services that achieve high levels of customer satisfaction.</p>	Stuart Brown

The Report recommended a new management structure for the Council that would enable the Council to best address the above 'drivers', whilst at the same time achieving financial savings. This would enable the Council to be both fit for the future and be supported by a financially sustainable management structure.

During the discussion that followed, Members had the opportunity to address questions to the Chief Executive. Members asked how Department Managers would effectively manage the multiple work streams under the new structure.

In response, the Chief Executive explained that some work streams were more substantial than others, and that managers would have an opportunity when appointed to work out how the different services would come together efficiently. The Chief Executive noted that the Council already managed a diverse range of services.

Members asked when the proposed Cabinet Assistant positions would be introduced. The Chief Executive explained that after the decision at the Cabinet meeting, this would be delegated to him to arrange. He noted that the intention of the Leader of the Council was to move forward with the changes immediately.

Members noted the increase in the number of services that had been outsourced as part of the business support contract and asked who would be responsible for monitoring the outsourced contracts, considering the reduced numbers of senior managers.

The Chief Executive explained that this vary from contract to contract. Contracts for services operated by the Five Councils would be managed by a Virtual Client, to which Officers would be appointed as necessary. The Chief Executive remarked on the intention to shift operational management down to the third tier of the new structure, and noted that the Virtual Client would have to strict reporting line into the council but would report to the Council Leader.

Members asked whether there was a potential to go beyond the current model of sharing services between the Five Councils, and share Officer time and expertise directly.

The Chief Executive explained that yes, this was possible – however geography was an issue as the travel time involved may not be practical for Officers. However he noted that this was technically possible and that the Council was well positioned, with its options open in the future.

The Chair noted that there had already been some discussion regarding the availability of telepresence technology. He noted that conference calling was already used to facilitate the Chairman's briefing for Scrutiny Board, but remarked that there would be cost implications of any new facility that would need to be carefully

	<p>considered.</p> <p>Members noted the similarity between the shared services model introduced by the Five Councils Plan and the procurement consortium operated by the Educational Authority 45 years ago. Members asked how the new model would differ from what the Educational Authority had put into place.</p> <p>The Chief Executive replied that he was not familiar with the consortium but that it sounded purely procurement related. He explained that the purpose of shared services was to share Officer time and pool skills across authorities, avoiding consultancy fees incurred by the use of outside experts.</p> <p>Members asked whether a list of Officer contact information would be produced for Members to contact Officers directly rather than going through the Contact Centre.</p> <p>The Chief Executive explained that a structure chart would be produced for Client Units which would allow Members to contact Officers directly.</p> <p>RESOLVED</p> <p>That the Scrutiny Board note and endorse the report.</p>	
9	<p>Fee Revisions to the Local Land Charges Services 2016-17</p> <p>The corporate fees and charges report that came before Scrutiny Board in March 2016 recommended that due to a number of proposed national changes Local Land Charges Fees were held until 1st July 2016. Those changes are now confirmed so this report sets out the proposed Local Land Charges fees and charges for 2016/17 from 4th July onwards.</p> <p>During the discussion that followed, Members raised questions regarding the delays experienced by customers requesting Land Charge Searches, noting that such delays could cause stress and financial impact. Members asked what was being done to address the issue.</p> <p>The Officer acknowledged that there were issues with the service which had arisen as a result of staff changes. He explained that a number of experienced Officers had left or moved to different posts within the Authority. The Officer explained that it took experience to process Land Charges Searches and it was not a simple administration exercise. Recruitment had been difficult as there was no security of tenure as a result of the Five Councils plan. Land Charges Officers that had moved within the Authority had been pulled back on a part time basis, however this was not a long term solution. The Officer explained that support had been</p>	David Clark

received from another Local Authority in the form of provision of two experienced Officers, who were due back in two weeks for a further one week of service – an arrangement that was intended to continue. He noted the introduction of new forms for Land Charges Search requests which would require clearing all Searches on the system based on the old forms, to this end it was proposed that a temporary hold be put on Searches around mid June, to allow a fresh start for 4 July.

The Chair thanked the Officer for his honest and frank answer.

Members noted that Searches were carried out by both County and District Councils, and asked whether the fee was combined or only related to the District's costs.

The Officer replied that the fee was combined as the District collected on behalf of the County, and that there was a table in the report showing the breakdown.

Members asked whether the fees from different Authorities would vary with the introduction of the new forms, or whether fees would be set at the same level.

The Officer explained that levels of fees would differ, as they were based on costs which varied between Authorities. He noted that some Authorities had digitised their records, which made their service cheaper to operate and consequently lowered their fees.

Members asked whether the two week hold on new Searches had been advertised.

The Officer replied that a press release would be produced along with a post on the Council web site, as well as a letter that would be sent out to the service's most regular customers. He explained that Officers had considered continuing to accept Personal Searches during the two week period, however it was determined that this would increase the number of Personal Searches received and consequently have a knock on effect.

Members asked why the level of fees had been reduced.

The Officer explained that due to the Environmental Regulations Directive; a European Court judgement, a certain level of information had to be provided free of charge. The Authority was only able to charge for Officer time to retrieve the information, and could not include costs of maintaining the database in its fees.

Members noted that the Authority did not have a good reputation for provision of the Land Charge Search service, remarking that Searches carried out by private companies had been completed in much less time.

The Officer replied that the longest period for a Search carried out

	<p>by the Authority had been 50 days. He noted that problems with the service had been well publicised, but commented that certain solicitors had been blaming the Authority for their own ineffective performance.</p> <p>Members remarked that the new arrangement would provide resilience, and asked whether there was flexibility to vary the level of charges in certain cases.</p> <p>The Officer replied that the level of charges was fixed, as they were based on the cost of the service.</p> <p>RESOLVED</p> <p>That the Scrutiny Board note and endorse the proposed fee changes from 4 July 2016 onwards.</p>	
<p>10</p>	<p>Council Tax Support Grant Funding to Town and Parish Councils</p> <p>Councillor Harvey Siggs spoke on behalf of Councillor John Parham. He noted that most people were aware of the changes to the Council Tax Support Grant, although the changes had been made after most parishes had set their 2013/14 precept. Central Government had intended for the cost to be passed on to Parish Councils, to which the District agreed despite most parishes factoring the grant into their precepts. The Councillor noted that Mendip District Council's grant had been reduced by 40%, and the District had been honouring its commitment while not receiving funding from Central Government.</p> <p>The introduction of the Council Tax Support Scheme in 2013/14 had a significant impact on the tax base as it has to be applied as a discount and therefore reduced the tax base for each parish.</p> <p>Town and Parish Councils have been compensated through a grant which is distributed through Mendip District Council. Although allocation of the grant is not mandatory Mendip have distributed the full 2013/14 level of grant totalling £242k despite the significant reductions in Government funding to date and outlined for the future. Continuing this grant therefore is not sustainable.</p> <p>During the discussion that followed Members remarked that in general people didn't notice how much of their Council Tax bill went to the Police or the Council, never mind smaller amounts. Members noted that Parish Councils were able to increase their rates as they saw fit.</p> <p>Members remarked that Parish Councils may perceive that something had been taken away from them, however the grant had been a bonus. It was noted that Mendip District Council had experienced cuts for some time, and this had not been passed on to Parish Councils.</p>	<p>Paul Deal</p>

	<p>Members also questioned how the removal of the grant would be conveyed in the press, commenting that a positive spin should be put on the news.</p> <p>Members remarked that they fully understood why this proposal was necessary, noting that Wells City Council was already fully prepared. Concerns were expressed about the ability of smaller Parishes to deal with the reduction in funding, and members suggested taking steps to assist in helping them plan for the changes.</p> <p>Members noted that the majority of Parishes could offset the reduction in funding with a less than 5% increase in Council Tax rates, should they choose to fund it in that manner.</p> <p>Members remarked that Ward Members should take the lead in informing Parish Councils of the changes and offering assistance to ensure they were fully prepared. The Chair noted that Parishes would have seven to nine months advance notice to prepare for the reduction in funding.</p> <p>Councillor Damon Hooton proposed that the Scrutiny Board endorse the report and recommend to Cabinet that the grant be ceased. This was seconded by Councillor Danny Unwin and carried unanimously.</p> <p>RESOLVED</p> <p>That the Scrutiny Board endorse the report and recommend to Cabinet to cease paying the grant to Town and Parish Councils from 2017/18.</p>	
<p>11</p>	<p>Urgent Business</p> <p>Members expressed concerns that the Asset Management Plan report was not given to Members ahead of time. The Chair explained that the report was published at the last minute and this could not be avoided.</p> <p>Asset Management Plan</p> <p>Since the previous Asset Management Plan ("AMP") was published in 2010 considerable progress has been made by the Council in improving Strategic Asset Management, and embedding robust processes for ensuring that the Council's property assets are deployed in a way that intensifies use and delivers Best Consideration: that is, the best financial returns, when balanced against important corporate priorities to promote economic, social, or environmental wellbeing.</p> <p>The Council's approach to strategic asset management continues</p>	<p>Keith Pennyfather</p>

to adapt in order to capitalise on the ongoing challenges and opportunities presented by changes in the economic and political climate. This version of the AMP sets out the Council's refreshed strategy for the use of its assets in the short, medium, and long term. The AMP also sets out the organisational arrangements for implementing and developing the policy; provides a strategy for ongoing disposals and acquisitions; and provides performance measures and indicators to assist in informing future strategies regarding the Council's land and property resources.

During the discussion that followed Members asked whether there were any significant changes from the previous Asset Management Plan. The Officer replied that there had been some fine tuning however there were no significant changes.

The Officer explained that there was no immediate plan to acquire any land, and that this would be considered at the time should this become necessary.

Members noted that there was no information on the historical valuations of Council assets, and that there had been significant valuation changes to Council properties. Members asked whether a process for considering historical valuations could be added in to the policy.

The Officer explained that this would be looked at when property reviews were carried out, and that the value of assets would be considered as part of ongoing judgements.

Members commented that book values should be corrected as differences in book values and market values could have a significant impact on the annual budget

The Officer replied that book values were based on financial accounting requirements, and that they did not always relate to market value.

Councillor Damon Hooton proposed that the Board note the report and agree to accept the Asset Management Plan and recommend it to Cabinet. This was seconded by Councillor John North and carried unanimously.

RESOLVED

That the Scrutiny Board note and endorse the report, and recommend the Asset Management Plan to Cabinet.

Scrutiny Task and Finish Group – Members' Emails Update

The Chair provided a brief update regarding the Task and Finish Group, explaining that the group would consist of Councillors Damon Hooton, John North, Clive Mockford, Bente Height and Lloyd Hughes, and that terms of reference had been agreed. An

	email would be sent out with a short survey to highlight specific problems, and the Group would meet on 28 or 29 June to discuss the results. In the medium term, the Group would consider whether the current system was fit for purpose, and would look at future solutions if they fit within the opportunities presented by the Five Councils business support contract and future IT strategy.	
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The meeting finished at approximately 7.50 pm.