

## **Scrutiny Annual Report**

### **Highlights**

It has been a busy year, with policy review and Committee recommendations that have made a real impact to the Council and the District, including:

- 11 hybrid meetings enabling (non-Committee member) participants to join remotely if required;
- Two in depth reviews published: Planning Enforcement – looking at the operation and utilisation of enforcement powers and planning conditions, and identifying issues to inform service improvement; and a review on ‘Does Local Government Work for Women’ - to look at what practices and protocols could be introduced to encourage more women to be involved in local government;
- Ongoing review and monitoring of previous recommendations from working groups on: Customer Experience; the Menopause; and Planning Enforcement;
- Presentations on broadband from Connecting Devon and Somerset and Airband, leading to in depth work with Members of the Council to identify hard to reach areas in the District; and
- 23 public questions.

### **Recommendations on Planning Enforcement**

A Working Group of the Committee carried out an in depth review of the operation and utilisation of enforcement powers and planning conditions and aimed to identify issues to inform service improvement. In September, the Committee published a report that made 12 recommendations. In March, the committee discussed the progress of these recommendations and has asked for a further update in six months’ time.

### **Spotlight Review – Does Local Government Work for Women**

In April 2021 the Committee agreed to hold a Spotlight Review to look at the practices and protocols that could be introduced to encourage women to be involved in local government and to address the findings in the 2017 Fawcett Society report ‘Does Local Government Work for Women’. The review considered the Councils existing policies and practices, good practice elsewhere and made recommendations to support potential and existing councillors who are women, parents and carers. The report, published in March 2022, will go to Full Council where the eight recommendations will be considered for approval.

### **Monitoring of recommendations from Working Groups**

The Committee has received six monthly updates on the progress of the recommendations made by the previous Customer Experience Working Group and the Menopause Working Group.

Members heard from Officers how not as much progress had been made as anticipated on the *Customer Experience* recommendations due to the pandemic and the lack of resources. Members heard how the implementation of the recommendations will be included in a wider Customer Service Improvement Program. Members have urged officers to quickly bring forward the project proposal for a CRM and stressed that ensuring customers are dealt with efficiently and effectively is a top priority. The Committee will continue to monitor the progress of the CRM project proposal.

Members received updates on the *menopause recommendations*, and heard how the menopause will be included within the Wellbeing and Reasonable adjustments policy. Wellbeing Ambassadors have been progressed and a package of learning and development is being taken forward to be accessed by both line managers and staff.

### **Action on broadband**

In November the Committee heard from Connecting Devon and Somerset (CDS) on the rollout of broadband across the District. CDS updated Members on the overall funding and phases of the programme, the percentage of properties already reached and that were planned. Members heard that 4% of properties would be 'very hard to reach' and the process and options around those properties.

Following the presentation from CDS, Members were concerned about the 'hard to reach' properties and invited Airband to present to the Committee. Airband gave an overview of 'in contract' and 'out of contract' premises and explained the different solutions available for remote properties. The Airband representatives explained to Committee that they wanted to encourage individual Members, Parish Councils' and the public to be involved in the roll out and to highlight properties that had not been earmarked for connection in the CDS contract.

As such, Members agreed that Airband work directly with Members to understand where the hard to reach areas are in the District. Officers are now in the process of setting up individual meetings with members and Airband to discuss each Ward in detail, and to identify the 'hard to reach' areas and the options available to them.

### **Updates from Cabinet Members**

The Committee has had updates from the Cabinet. Notably, with the Cabinet Member for Finance, the Committee discussed the budget deficit for 2022-23 and contributed to the budget setting process and the reductions needed within the Council to meet the deficit. Members have reviewed performance against the corporate plan and gave consideration to climate change targets and housing performance, and the impact of the pandemic.

Members heard from the Cabinet Member for Continuous Improvement about the new role and how it will drive business and process improvement in services across the council. Members were interested to hear how the Cabinet Member is looking to bring continuous lessons learned culture into the Council so that key issues and challenges of public concerns could be addressed and practices improved. Members of the Scrutiny Committee will be keen to keep closely engaging with the Cabinet Member to see how the role is progressing and any areas for Scrutiny to monitor.

The Committee also received an annual update from the Leader. Members questioned the Leader on a wide range of the Council's activities and performance. The Committee has tried to reduce the number of reports to be 'noted' to give more time to review process and procedure to enhance the performance of the Council.

### **Policy review and briefings**

The Committee reviewed a number of policies throughout the year, including the *Draft Litter Strategy* and the *Draft Housing Strategy*.

Members also received a briefing on *S106 funding* and raised questions around the need for Ward Members and Parishes to be involved with the funding requirements at an early stage and the procedure for the delegation of affordable housing offsite monies.

In September the Committee reviewed a paper from the S151 Officer on the Council's repaid unutilised Right to Buy receipts. Members heard how at that time, as the Council had no plans to build social housing because of the risk of Right to Buy, the money was returned. Members noted the issues and considered how the decision was made and whether members should have been informed with regard to the mechanism.

Members also received presentation from the new *Director of Place* as to his role and vision.

### **Budget reviews**

In July members considered the Revenue and Capital Outturn figures for the financial year.

At its meeting in October the Committee reviewed information with regards to the contract dispute settlement made by the Council's Housing Revenue Account (HRA) of £600k to a third party. The Committee considered the information provided and were satisfied that the matter had been correctly dealt with at the time.

In January the Committee received the revised draft budget changes and discussed further changes required in order for the Council to move towards a balanced budget for 2022/23. Members discussed the increase in Capital Projects, 3RDL and expressed support for the Committee to look into a more inclusive budget setting process which included ideas from local community groups.

### **Establishment updates**

The Committee receives six monthly updates on the establishment. The effects of Covid, staff turnover rates and use of agency staff were discussed. Members asked that the Staff Survey Action Plan be brought to a future meeting.

### **3RDL Business Plan and views on the possible creation of a Teckal compliant company**

Members reviewed the *3 Rivers Developments Limited Business Plan* and noted that the financial risk of the company would be considered by the Audit Committee.

The Committee subsequently provided views with regard to the possible creation of a Teckal compliant company.

### **Proposal for an inter-District review of the bio-energy industry**

The Committee had a member proposal to establish an inter authority inquiry, led by local authority Scrutiny Committees, into the business structure, funding, history and impacts of the Bio Energy Industry in Devon including the history of planning applications. After discussion, members agreed that this work be progressed, and be jointly commissioned by the Scrutiny Committees of those Devon Planning

Authorities that are willing to take part as the problems crossed district boundaries. We are still awaiting to hear from some partners about their involvement in this review before considering how this work will be taken forward.

### **Conduct of a Cabinet Meeting**

In February the Committee heard a proposal from some members to review the management of a recent Cabinet meeting. Notably, the proposers: considered that the agenda was too long; felt that the meeting was chaired in a way that was perceived to be disrespectful towards non-cabinet members; believed that a question from a member of the public was not put to the meeting without giving reason; and that a question was submitted from a non-Cabinet member, and that this was not put or answered.

The Leader of the Council acknowledged that the Cabinet meeting had a very long agenda and presented management difficulties which led to the concerns. After discussion the Committee agreed to ask Cabinet to review the concerns raised, and that any further issues could be picked up within the Standards Committee's established Task & Finish Group review of the Council's Procedure Rules.

### **Committee Programming**

The Committee recognise the importance of work programming, and the need to create a strong organisational culture that supports scrutiny work. As such a number of sessions have been held throughout the year to help ensure the Committee is effective and has maximum possible impact.

The Committee held a Work Programming session last year to plan and prioritise agenda items and issues. We have also introduced a standing item on the agenda so that members can bring forward items for future meetings in a proposal form. Additionally, the Scrutiny Chairman instigated and chaired a meeting of the Programming Panel. The Panel consists of the Chairs of each of the Committees and PDGs, the Leader and Chief Executive, to ensure efficiency of the scrutiny and policy development process and that work programmes are aligned.

To build on a desire for a good scrutiny/executive relationship, and the recognition that there is a shared responsibility for ensuring that scrutiny works well, the Scrutiny Chairman and Vice Chairman met with the Leadership Team to strengthen the relationship and discuss potential areas for review. A similar meeting with the Cabinet was also requested but not accepted. We hope that there will a suitable opportunity to meet in the near future.

### **Chairman's words**

On a personal note may I thank our Scrutiny Officer and our Committee Clerks for their sterling work in supporting myself and other members of the Committee. I thank all officers who have contributed to the positive work of the Committee and are tasked with taking some of our recommendations forward. I thank the members for their work and support through some difficult pathways. Particular thanks go to Councillor Frank Letch, the former Chair of the Committee, who has remained a member of the Committee and been a willing sounding board and advisor to me. I hope that the Committee are able to provide sound scrutiny and overview of the work of the Council as we move forward.