

**MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF SCRUTINY  
HELD AT FOLLATON HOUSE, TOTNES ON THURSDAY 22 OCTOBER 2009**

**MEMBERS**

\* Cllr C M Pannell - Chairman

\* Cllr K J Baldry - Vice-Chairman

\* Cllr J H Baverstock

\* Cllr P H Cook

\* Cllr G J Fielden

\* Cllr R D Gilbert

∅ Cllr J W Squire

\* Cllr J A Westacott MBE

\* Denotes attendance

∅ Denotes apology for absence

**Also in attendance and participating:**

Cllrs H D Bastone, J I G Blackler, M J Hicks, P W Hitchins, J T Pennington,  
R J Tucker and A Ward

**Officers in attendance:**

For all items: Strategic Director (Resources), Member Support Services Manager,  
Member Support Officer and Communications Manager;

Item 7: (Minute SC.27/09 below refers) Strategic Director (Community);

Item 8: (Minute SC.28/09 below refers) Head of Financial Services.

**SC.24/09 MINUTES**

The minutes of the meeting of Scrutiny held on 24 September 2009 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

**SC.25/09 URGENT BUSINESS**

The Member Support Officer informed the Group that the Council had been awarded £5,000 in funding from SWRIEP to undertake an Overview and Scrutiny Peer Review using the CfPS evaluation framework. It was noted that the number of bid applications submitted had exceeded the monies available and there was also potential to share the subsequent findings of this review with other authorities, in line with the Shared Services agenda.

The key aim of the review would be to provide an independent and objective evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of the Council's Overview and Scrutiny function and it would most likely be undertaken in the New Year.

**SC.26/09 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

Members were invited to declare any interests in the items of business to be considered during the course of the meeting but none were made.

**SC.27/09      EFFECTIVENESS OF THE SOUTH HAMS STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP (SHSP)**

The Strategic Director (Community) presented a report that updated Members on the activities of the Partnership and the progress made on the initial Action Plan 2006-08 which was adopted by the Partnership in September 2006 and by the Council in November 2006.

Members were also made aware of the revised Sustainable Community Strategy Action Plan for 2009 -11. The Officer stated the benefits of the Partnership was in being able to tackle cross cutting themes, such as a 'competitive economy' more effectively than the Council could achieve on its own. In terms of Governance, the Partnership consisted of three layers, the steering group, the Community Partnership Forum, which consisted of representatives from over 200 organisations and theme delivery groups which focused on projects. The Officer highlighted one key future consideration for the Partnership was the merits of forming a joint Strategic Partnership with West Devon as part of the broader shared services agenda. This was because West Devon faced many of the key challenges to be addressed by the South Hams Strategic Partnership. However, the concern as to whether local delivery and ownership would be lost under such an arrangement would have to be considered.

During discussion, the following points were made:-

- a) The Leader of the Council, who was also a Council representative on the SHSP, expressed the usefulness of the networking opportunities provided by the Partnership and cited some examples where this had been productive. However, the Leader proceeded to state that he had an issue with the funding arrangements, which largely fell on the Council and he felt that partners should contribute a nominal sum;
- b) Several Members had concerns about the effectiveness of the Partnership and felt that in light of serious budgetary constraints, hard decisions would have to be made and that they would like more precise figures about how much the Partnership cost the Council. In reply, the Officer stated that the Partnership was supported in terms of officer time, rather than financially, and emphasised that national guidance required a Council to take on the lead partner role;
- c) Several Members spoke in support of the work of the Partnership, agreeing with the Leader's comments on the benefits of the networking opportunities and cited how impressed they had been from their own experiences when attending meetings of the Partnership;
- d) Support was also expressed for the suggestion of investigating joint working opportunities with the equivalent Partnership at West Devon Borough Council;

- e) An SHSP Council representative, and Non Group Member, was critical of the lack of effective use of the Community Action Database which had been set up by Devon County Council. A lot of effort had been made by Town and Parish Councils in order to produce the plans, but the Member felt that inadequate use had been made of them. She also made the point that more engagement with local communities would have been advantageous at the outset of the compilation of the database;
- f) A number of Members wished to add their support for the continuation in the role of the current Chairman of the Partnership stating that they had been very impressed by his professionalism and felt that he brought a lot of business acumen to the role.

It was then:-

### **RESOLVED**

#### That Scrutiny:

1. has commented on the SHSP and the progress made;
2. wish for the issue of funding for the SHSP to be considered during the 2010-11 budget setting process;
3. concludes that there is merit in looking into the possibility of sharing a Strategic Partnership on a joint basis with West Devon Borough Council.

### **RECOMMENDED**

#### That the Executive be **RECOMMENDED**:

4. To approve Mr Vaughan Lindsay as the Chairman of the SHSP for the remainder of the three year period;
5. That the appointment of a Partnership Chairman should be on the basis of a three year term, which should be reviewed annually.

SC.28/09

## **FINANCIAL SERVICES – SERVICE REVIEW**

The Head of Financial Services presented a report that provided Members with a detailed budget analysis of the service. The Officer informed Members that the work of the service was undertaken by two teams and underpinned the operation of the whole Council, the 'Use of Resources' and the CAA Inspection regime. He noted that the teams were well regarded externally and the Council was regarded as being well run with sound finances.

During the discussion, the following points were raised:

- a) A Member asked about the possibilities of sharing the service with West Devon Borough Council (WDBC). In reply, the Group was informed that this would be problematic as the two Councils had separate Constitutions, Committee and budget structures, policies and VAT registers. WDBC and SHDC were also separate entities with regard to Sundry Debtors. On this point, Members were advised that WDBC had significantly less debts to collect as they did not collect trade waste or commercial rents;
- b) A Member asked if the Council was now at a disadvantage for having committed to a zero percent increase in Council Tax during the 2009/10 Budget setting process. In reply, the Officer stated that it was not sustainable for the Council to adopt this position year on year, particularly if the Government grants were decreased and that by foregoing an increment it was difficult to recoup that income. However, the Council had considered the risks and it was felt that on balance for one year, the Council could absorb the loss;
- c) A Member asked if there would be a cost benefit in contracting out financial services externally. In reply, the Officer informed the Group that it was conversely far more cost effective to employ accountancy staff internally than to contract out the work and that in effect the internal staff constituted a budget saving;
- d) In highlighting the potential for the Internal Audit service to take on responsibility for shared working with West Devon Borough Council, the Lead Executive Member for Financial Affairs and the Chairman of the Audit Committee both highlighted the work of the service and wished to express their thanks for the excellent job they undertook.

It was then:-

### **RESOLVED**

1. That the Group note the report and that the observations above be considered during the 2010/11 budget setting process; and
2. That Members wished to compliment the work of the Council's Internal Audit Team.

## **SC.29/09 ICT TOUR – MEMBER FEEDBACK**

Members reported that they had found the tour to be a very productive exercise and that it had been very informative, raising their awareness of issues particularly with regard to integrated systems and the potential serious impact of any system failure. The Members expressed that they had been very impressed with the service.

A Member did however express frustration at not being able to make informed decisions on the service through a lack of available comparative information with other similar organisations. The Member did note that the Lead Executive Member for Community Affairs had agreed that the way forward would be for Members to have at least three other organisations to make comparisons with where possible. In response, the Head of ICT Services stated that the Council had been the only district authority to participate in a benchmarking exercise, which meant that it was almost impossible to make comparisons and it was not appropriate to compare the service with that of a Unitary or Metropolitan authority. However, she stated that had the service been able to benchmark, she was sure the authority would have scored favourably in terms of its quality and cost effectiveness.

SC.30/09 **SCRUTINY SHADOWING ROLES**

The Members informed that they were kept fully briefed by their Executive colleagues, and continued to meet frequently.

SC.31/09 **AGENDA ITEMS FOR FUTURE MEETINGS OF SCRUTINY**

**Performance Indicators**

The Group endorsed the suggestion that the quarterly Performance Indicators be considered at the next Scrutiny meeting on 19 November 2009.

**Update on leak at Ivybridge Swimming Pool**

It was agreed that all Members would be provided with a written update from the Head of Property Services before any decision was taken on whether this matter required further consideration.

**ICT Budget Service Review**

Members requested that a report be re-presented to the meeting on 16 December, with reference included in the report to the ICT Strategy and Security Review.

**Tone / Tadpool Update Report**

The lead Executive Member for Financial Affairs advised that it was his intention to provide an update to the Scrutiny Group on this issue in due course.

**Telecommunications in the South Hams**

The Group advised of its wish to delete this item from its current work programme.

(Meeting commenced at 10.00 am and concluded at 12 noon).

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Chairman