

Consultation Approach for the Somerset wide Framework

Introduction

As discussed at the last Task and Finish Group meeting a draft Framework Document has been developed by officers, and partners, from across the county. The document outlines the areas of focus that have been identified as part of the research to understand how Somerset can achieve its intention to be carbon neutral by 2030.

This paper gives a broad overview of the consultation that will be taking place during November and December to obtain feedback from our communities on the direction of travel being taken and ensure that we are moving in the direction our communities expect.

Public consultation events

Somerset Climate Action Network has been commissioned to run four public consultation events where residents can learn about the councils' draft framework and have their say on the proposed areas of focus for the strategy. There will be one event in each district area on the following dates:

- 16th November – Somerset West and Taunton
- 23rd November – Mendip
- 30th November – South Somerset
- 7th December – Sedgemoor

Each event will run from 10am – 4pm. It is intended that events will be welcoming for all, lively and positive with something for all the family to do. When residents enter the event, they will be invited to place themselves on a 'ladder' in terms of their attitude to climate change (ranging from extremely concerned / taking action to don't believe in climate change). A pop-up café offering tea, coffee, and biscuits etc. will provide a venue for informal talks and conversations with volunteers.

The core content for the consultation would be displayed on self-standing infographic boards. Each board will highlight the area of focus, quick wins, and direction of travel. Alongside each infographic will be a 'HAVE YOUR SAY' board for residents to share their views.

At regular intervals throughout the day (e.g. every hour on the hour) there would be a short talk in the café followed by a Q&A. We are inviting local school / college students and youth group members (via Young Somerset) to give talks. They will not only attract a younger demographic but also speak passionately and knowledgeably about the importance of taking action to mitigate climate change.

Other speakers will include workstream stakeholders, local U3A or WI. Talks will link to workstream themes. They will be in 'conversation with' for example Mike Dilger (One Show presenter and wildlife broadcaster), Stephen Moss (writer, naturalist and broadcaster) or Emma Howard Boyd (Chair of the Environment Agency).

As the events will take place in the run up to Christmas, we are offering decoration and card making from natural and recycled materials. In addition, residents will be invited to contribute to one big

shared collage depicting a positive vision of the district in 2030. This activity will be facilitated by a local artist.

When attendees arrive at the events, we will seek to obtain their view at a number of points, including a measure of their feelings towards climate change on arrival. While they move around the event their views will be gauged through a variety of methods with a final contact just prior to departure to cover their satisfaction with the ideas, what they would change, and how they consider they can make change happen.

Residents' survey

Given that not all of our residents will be able, or wish, to attend the four events a much larger and wider (online) consultation will also take place online. This will run for six weeks and the Somerset councils will all promote its completion via our communications channels. Questions on participant demographics will be included so the sample can be weighted to match the population as a whole (based on the 2011 census).

Young people consultation

Given the importance of climate change for future generations, a key part of this consultation is to obtain opinions from young people living in Somerset. The councils have defined young people as aged 11-25 to take account of the fact that the 18-25 group is often overlooked.

This consultation will run for the same period as the main one. We know that many schools are active in teaching issues around climate change and we will be promoting the survey via the school. In addition, we will be using support of student ambassadors to promote the survey in their schools, through tutorial periods, related lessons or assemblies as well as on school websites where possible. We will also look to work through Young Somerset to promote the consultation.

Business consultation

It is recognised that there is a need to engage, encourage and support businesses in Somerset to recognise the impact of climate change and work to both address this and identify the opportunities for businesses. As a consequence a separate business summit will be held on 3rd December to discuss the framework and gauge their views.

Thoughts on other routes of consultation – Citizens Assemblies and Juries

There has been discussion in a number of councils about the suitability of having Citizens Assemblies or Citizens Juries (known loosely as 'mini publics') as a way of consulting with the public and getting their views as a way to create the strategy. A review of reports and conversations on these approaches indicate the following:

There has been positive use of Citizens Assemblies in a number of different countries, including Ireland and Canada.

The approach for both Juries and Assemblies is to use the views of the representatives involved as a map of the wider community. Breckon et al (2019) identify that the representatives act as proxies on behalf of the wider community. Bryant et al (2017) however note that this approach is always imperfect as databases are always incomplete, people are not under any obligation to take part and so the final group are therefore self selecting, and that as a consequence the participants tend to be more politically active and better educated than the initial sample identified.

A strength of this approach is that it allows a group of residents to spend a focused amount of time investigating the pros and cons of an issue to try to resolve a way forward. This was seen to be of particular value in Ireland where there appeared to be political deadlock regarding the issue of abortion (Palese, 2018). Allan (2019) notes that there are three types of issues where this approach is a real benefit; issues that are politically stuck (such as social care funding); moral issues (such as abortion) and constitutional reform. Pal (2012) shows that where there are political disagreements and the main political process cannot find a way due to incumbent self-interest then the approach is particularly good at finding a way through. In the case of Somerset it would be difficult, at this time, to argue that any of these apply.

Finders et al (2016) and Smith (2015) have pointed to the pressure that is placed upon those residents to take part, particularly where the subjects being investigated are technical or complex. Bryant et al (2017) note that research has indicated that the way that these events run has led to perpetuating the dominance of citizens with more skills in higher forms of communication thus disenfranchising less confident or educated attendees.

The research into these approaches acknowledge a high cost to them. The pilot assemblies on English devolution for example cost £200,000. Many of the reports point to the high costs of the approaches and question whether they are always of value where they are carried out (Flinders et al, Breckon et al), specifically where the issues at hand are resolvable through other routes. Given that there is consensus in tackling climate change and that all councils are working to very limited budgets it is possible that the limited existing resources might be better focused on delivering actions to address climate change.

Given that there is considerable public interest in the subject of Climate Change and people want to engage and share views, give support and feel they are contributing, the idea that a small number of 'proxies' have given views on their behalf, thus removing them from the process, is unlikely to be acceptable to the public at this time.

Finally the impact of these approaches is also something that is challenged in many of the reviews of juries and assemblies. Historically in many cases, it is argued, they have failed to move matters forward post the actual process. Wakeford notes that 'they have been employed to give the appearance of public legitimacy to political decisions that have already been made behind closed doors. (Wakeford et al 2015). With this in mind Smith (2019) notes that politicians have been rushing in to organising assemblies because they are in vogue rather than because it would be specifically beneficial and this is a question worth asking of Somerset at this point.

Conclusion - The Councils are in collective agreement that there is a climate emergency and are working collaboratively to deliver a strategy. As it stands there is strong agreement about ways forward and there is to be a comprehensive consultation process to enable a currently animated public to engage. The engagement of the public is vital if we are deliver on the commitments made and there could be a danger that by engaging with only a small section of our community via an assembly or jury we could lose buy in and active engagement from many. In addition to this the cost of delivering a 'mini public' properly is likely to be high and, in the current financially constrained local government environment, it is likely that councils will be criticised for investing in this approach when the resources could be spent tackling climate change.

While the county appears to currently be of one voice in acknowledging a climate emergency and is actively working to tackle this, the decisions that need to be made moving forward will not always be easy. As a consequence of this, it is of merit to recognise the ability that assemblies and juries (regardless of their flaws) have to find resolution where there are political or self-interests blocking decision making. It would therefore make good sense to return to the concept should the local authorities find they reach a position on future actions and priorities, that they are struggling to resolve.

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