

# Report of the Scrutiny for Policies, Environment Scrutiny Committee

Chair: Cllr Martin Dimery

Division and Local Member: All

Lead Officer: Jamie Jackson – Service Manager Governance, Scrutiny

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## 1. Summary

**1.1** The Scrutiny for Policies, Environment Committee is required by the Constitution to provide Full Council with a summary progress report and outcomes of scrutiny. This report covers the work of the Scrutiny Committee from the start of this Municipal Year to November 2022.

**1.2** The Committee focusses on monitoring and scrutinising the progress and outcomes/deliverables of the Somerset Climate Emergency Strategy, adopted in November 2020 following the Councils declaration of a Climate Emergency in 2019.

The 2022-2023 Scrutiny work programme looks to cover the following areas of work –

- Business, industry, and supply chains
- Waste and Resources
- Energy
- Transport
- Farming and Food
- Water
- Built Environment
- Natural Environment
- Communications

More information on the Climate Emergency workstreams can be found here:  
[Climate Emergency \(somerset.gov.uk\)](https://www.somerset.gov.uk/climate-emergency)

**1.3** Members of the Council are reminded that:

- all Members have been invited to attend meetings of the Scrutiny Committees and to contribute freely on any agenda item.
- any Member can propose a topic for inclusion on the Scrutiny Work Programmes.
- any Member can be asked by the Committee to contribute information and evidence and to participate in specific scrutiny reviews.

**1.4** The Committee has 13 elected Members, appointed in political balance.

## **2. Background**

### **2.1 Meeting held 28<sup>th</sup> September 2022**

This was the first meeting of the committee and the following items were discussed in detail:

#### **Scrutiny Environment Work programme.**

The Governance Manager, Scrutiny presented the Scrutiny for Policies, Environment work programme, alongside the Scrutiny for Policies, Place work programme and The Executive Forward Plan. He explained that, although the work programme is quite full, there is scope for members to feed in any items of business that they wish the Scrutiny for Policies, Environment committee to consider.

#### **Local aggregates assessment 2017-2019 Consultation Update.**

Colin Arnold, Service Manager Development and Planning and Ellie Maxwell Planning Policy Officer shared a brief slideshow to summarise the Local Aggregate assessment (LLA) as part of the evidence base for the forthcoming Minerals Plan. The officer explained that this LLA is late, but the team are catching up, and the 2020-2022 LLA will begin soon. Members were asked to note that this update report is part of a wider piece of work on the Somerset Local Aggregate Assessment.

The following questions and comments were from received from members.

- Request for a copy of the slides to be shared with the committee.
- Can the officer give any comment on the re-opening of Bartletts Quarry, Westdown, with regards to the report that has been presented? We understand this quarry was closed for environmental reasons. Why is it being re-opened? The Service Manager for Development and Planning explained that this proposal was still under consideration and that he was unable to comment until such times as a report goes forward to the Regulation committee.
- Has there been any work done on carbon emissions from the aggregates industry in Somerset? The Service Manager for Development and Planning agreed that this was something that team could take away to investigate further.
- Will this committee be looking at solid rock and building stone as well as aggregate? The Planning Policy Officer advised that the report on building stone will be included in the next Annual Monitoring Statement.

- Two rail heads in Somerset – on the 15-Year Plan what are we doing to either, increase rail heads or ensure that the 15-year stone supply is tied into the rail heads? The Service Manager Development and Planning advised that this would be dealt with on an individual planning application basis.
- Can we have more information on the environmental benefits of aggregates? We need to remember the importance of a balance between the environment and the economy here. The Service Manager for Development and Planning advised that any future reports on this will include an Environmental Impact report.
- Should we be seeing an Environmental Impact Assessment on every report that is taken through The Council? The Chair requested that the democratic services officer look into this.
- A request for this committee to have sight of other similar reports such as the Local Plan Review and Minerals Plan Review to consider and comment further in terms of environmental and planning implications. The Service Manager Development and Planning advised members that these reports usually go to the Regulation committee, but that they could be put forward to Scrutiny Environment committee if required.

### **Economic futures**

Paul Hickson, Strategic Manager Economy and Planning and Julie Wooler, Senior Economic Development Officer provided an overview of the report illustrated with a slideshow to highlight the key points. Members were asked to note that this is not a full report, or a strategy, but that it is a building block towards a new Economic Strategy for Somerset.

The following comments and questions were received from members.

- Energy: There are two main utility industries that have a major impact on Somerset's economic future, water, and electricity. How can we lobby these companies to do more in terms of meeting higher demand for electricity and for more sustainability in the energy sector? The Strategic Manager Economy and Planning acknowledged that the points raised are very valid and these can be incorporated into the SWOT analysis.
- Agriculture: The solution is not about just planting trees. This is about how you produce food. Ploughing through land results in high carbon output. Farming in a different way can maintain more carbon in the soil. Slow farming i.e. The Newt is tying in a lot of carbon on the land. What's written on the slides does not currently meet climate change. The Strategic Manager Economy and Planning advised that he will look to discuss with consultants and experts to incorporate this detail into the SWOT analysis.

- Agriculture: A 'Farm Carbon Toolkit' is being used at Mendip District Council, it is a good resource and may be useful here.
- Agriculture: How can we work with farmers to drive carbon neutrality across the industry? I.e., working with NFU to put more pressures on farmers unions? The Strategic Manager Economy and Planning advised that they would be looking to involve those stakeholders in all focus sessions.
- Agriculture: Could we use 'County Farms' as case studies for more sustainable farming? The Strategic Manager Economy and Planning confirmed that he would take this away for further investigation.
- Agriculture: Food supply issues due to the war in Ukraine and diversification in food supply. Can we ensure that we can grow the core produce, before diversifying into alternative produce.
- This work emphasises the importance of working in partnership with stakeholders to meet climate objectives – we can't do this on our own.
- Hinkley point: 'Anchor for clean growth' What does this mean? The Strategic Manager Economy and Planning advised that this is about the development of supply chains and maximising their local and regional strength. The supply chain strengths that come from this project can be applied to future renewable projects. i.e., offshore wind farms.
- Covid 19: Will the Economic Strategy include impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, in terms of its social and economic impacts on the Economic Future for Somerset? The Strategic Manager Economy and Planning advised that this has been raised within the team and that in terms of economic development, Covid-19 recovery is still in its early days and very difficult to assess and plan for in the longer term.
- Non-committee member online: There are some gaps in this economic futures work in terms, how can we move forward and fill some of these gaps? How do we do more work with stakeholders to put this research into action. i.e. business networking, innovation forums, opening up new markets in Somerset to make it a great place to live and work. The Strategic Manager Economy and Planning reassured members that this is piece of work looking at the longer term to inform the Economic Strategy. Alongside that the economic development team are commissioning support services, driving innovation, and procuring a business support service to enable growth in our business communities, particularly SME's. The Strategic Manager Economy and Planning suggested that the team could bring a more detailed report on this in the future.
- Non-committee member online: Economic Growth is very unpredictable. How can we support businesses to achieve carbon neutrality in such difficult economic circumstances. i.e., more permitted developments rights for solar projects. Can we make sure this is considered in the forthcoming Local Plan for the new unitary authority. The Strategic

Manager Economy and Planning advised that elements of this would be reported back to the committee within a report on the outcomes of the Climate Business Summit next month.

- Discovery sessions: What are these, how have they been advertised, and what are the main objectives of these sessions? The Strategic Manager Economy and Planning advised that these sessions are looking to involve all wider stakeholders.
- Will this piece of work feed into the work of the Heart of the Southwest LEP and is this work being undertaken by other councils across the region? A joined-up approach is important here. The Strategic Manager Economy and Planning confirmed that this was the case and that the LEP is a part of the steering group on this work.

### **Connecting Devon and Somerset progress update**

Katriona Lovelock, Service Manager Economy, talked members through the progress update report as published.

The following questions and comments were received from members:

- It was noted by the committee that there is not a requirement for officers to read the entirety of their report. The committee agreed that there is an expectation that all members will have read the report before the meeting.
- When is fast 5G coming to Somerset? The Service Manager Economy advised that 5G networks are managed by the commercial sector.
- Non-committee member online: The Airband contract with Somerset West and Taunton District Council – what reassurance can be given that the premises under the contract will be connected? Are there issues that need to be addressed here? The Service Manager Economy advised that this was difficult to answer until a detailed design process had been done.
- Non-committee member online: Delays in roll out phasing of fibre broadband – The published timetable shows that completion is expected in Q4 2024. Are these targets realistic? The Service Manager Economy confirmed that there are delays, and this does lead to backloading in the programme, but CDS are looking to bring in extra resource to catch up and prevent further delays in completion of the programme by Q4 2024.
- Non-committee member online: Voucher scheme and looking after those customers. There have been delays and poor communication with customers who have been awarded vouchers. How is this being managed? The Service Manager Economy advised that the voucher schemes are not managed by CDS and therefore it was difficult to comment on this.

- Non-committee member online: How are we managing Openreach in terms of reaching the most isolated properties i.e., far rural areas.
- Non-committee member online: History of the CDS contracts and failure of Gigaclear which left a hiatus whilst new contracts were awarded. This has resulted in some gaps in coverage and areas not being covered. How are we managing this?

The Service Manager Economy acknowledged that the detail on the above two questions was complex and that it would be beneficial to discuss the specifics of these with the Councillor after the meeting.

## **2.2 Meeting held on 26<sup>th</sup> October 2022**

Please note, on the date of publication of this report the detailed minutes for the meeting of 26<sup>th</sup> October '22 have not yet been completed and signed off by the Committee. The following narrative is presented to members as a brief bullet point summary of the discussion that took place.

### **Climate Change and the Economy**

Laura Jensen, Economic Development provided members with a slideshow to illustrate the key points from the report including

- There are strong overlapping themes in energy, transport, and waste
- Industry/commercial sector is responsible for 25% of the overall emissions in Somerset.
- The BISC workstream activities taking place including business engagement and financial support.
- Many SME's lack knowledge and resource to achieve net zero without support. In consultation, 41% business unsure of their role in transition to net zero.
- The team are measuring the impacts of this work by undertaking surveys and research, networking, and evaluation of direct interventions.

The following comments and questions were received from members

- Businesses, particularly SME's that may be struggling in current economic climates require more practical advice. i.e., insulation and energy usage. How do we engage with them?
- Can we have more detail on the effectiveness of the Somerset Growth Accelerator Fund.
- Do we have any Case Studies to promote best practice to businesses?
- How can we ensure more businesses attend the workshops being held across the county?

- How can we use existing networks to improve engagement with businesses across the county?
- Is the work of the district councils being integrated into this piece of work?
- What is being done in terms of driving retrofitting schemes on older business premises?
- Many businesses do not own their own premises, how can we engage with landlords with regards to practical energy efficiency advice?

## **EV strategy and roll-out impacts and implications**

Mickey Green, Managing Director at Somerset Waste Partnership provided members with a slideshow to highlight key points from the update report including:

- The context of the climate emergency
- The national picture of EV infrastructure
- This work is part of the Council's wider Local Transport Plan
- Research has shown that 'Capacity to charge' has replaced 'range anxiety' as the biggest barrier for EV users.
- In benchmarking exercises Somerset is slightly behind compared to other counties in terms of EV infrastructure, this is likely due to Somerset being a rural area.
- There is a need to continue to work with private sector to identify market failings and fill in gaps in EV infrastructure, to reach all areas of the county including its most isolated rural communities.
- There are many complexities around EV infrastructure including use of cabling and gullies, streetlighting, parking.
- Big challenges for the future include Planning policy, The MTFP budget gap, impacts of LGR, rapidly evolving technology, governance and the need to provide solutions at a more localised level.

The following comments and questions were received from members:

- The importance of working with private sector electricity providers on this.
- There will need to be different solutions for different types of EV user.
- What impact is the current energy crisis having on this strategy?
- Why are cable protectors an issue for EV infrastructure?
- How are the District councils' EV infrastructure projects being incorporated into this strategy?
- How can we lobby government regarding financial support for councils and greater legislative powers regarding EV infrastructure in place planning?
- Can we manage demand on EV chargers at tourism hot spots across the county?

- More details around protocols/compliance of EV charging networks.
- Will Somerset County Council be offering its employees a salary sacrifice scheme or similar, to purchase EV vehicles?

### **Approach to Fleet decarbonisation**

Mickey Green, Managing Director at Somerset Waste Partnership presented members with a brief set of slides to highlight the key points from the report.

These key points included:

- This work is focused on SCC fleet only, of which there are currently 243 vehicles.
- Somerset Council fleet will be more than 700 vehicles.
- This work will lead to a full fleet replacement timetable.
- Carbon footprint of SCC fleet is coming down from previous years.
- Potential to reduce fleet size by making other arrangements for low-mileage users. i.e., pool cars

The following comments and questions were received from members.

- Have we looked at carbon footprint of taxis used for school contracts?
- Concerns that the pace of SCC fleet decarbonisation is being driven by financial pressures, and not environmental.
- What research has been done into use of HVO's? (Biofuel vehicles)

### **Scrutiny at Somerset Council**

Jamie Jackson, Service Manager for Governance, Scrutiny introduced the report which was essentially a request for three members of the Scrutiny, Policies Environment committee to volunteer to sit on a task and finish group looking at how the Scrutiny Function will operate in the new Somerset Council. He advised that the group would be required to meet once or twice before making recommendations to the Constitution and Governance committee at the end of January '23.

Three committee members expressed an interest in assisting with this work, and the Service Manager Scrutiny and Governance thanked those members and informed them that he would contact them again outside of the meeting.

### **3. Consultations Undertaken**

The Committee invites all County Councillors to attend and contribute to its meetings. The Committee Chair and Vice Chair invite prospective report authors to attend their pre-meetings and Lead Officers are engaged in this process.

### **4. Implications**



The Committee considers carefully and often asks for further information about the implications as outlined in the reports considered at its meetings.

For further details about the reports considered by the Committee, please contact the author of this report.

## **5. Background Papers**

Further information about the Committee including dates of meetings and agendas and reports from previous meetings, are available via the Council's website - [www.somerset.gov.uk/agendasandpapers](http://www.somerset.gov.uk/agendasandpapers)

**Note:** For sight of individual background papers please contact the report author.