

# 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 December 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 on 30th November 2022**

At the meeting held on the 30th of November 2022 the following items were considered by the committee, and comments and questions were received from members as follows -

#### **2022/23 Budget Monitoring Report – Month 6**

Cllr Liz Leyshon, Lead Member for Finance advised that she had asked for Month 6 Budget Monitoring Report to come to this committee to help members understand the unprecedented financial pressures the council is facing; pressures that have never been seen before.

The Chief Accountant then walked members through the figures and the following comments and questions were received from members –

- Will this affect the likelihood of being able to follow through with environmental policies? Cllr Liz Leyshon, Lead member Finance advised that there are many projects being carried out across the council and that the environmental thread must be considered on each of those. This committee has the responsibility to continue to pressurise the executive to continue to consider all environmental aspects of every project that the council undertakes.
- The 40% increase of costs in farming is quite shocking.
- Cllr Liz Leyshon, Lead Member Finance suggested that members look at the external auditor's audit findings report for 21/22, which provides more detail on the environmental impacts of the budget gap.
- Regarding the opening of Comeytrow School as this Council's first PassivHaus designed school, is this Council going to be doing more of this in the future? Cllr Tessa Munt advised that the council will indeed be building schools that are equivalent to PassivHaus standards in the future.

#### **Phosphates issues: Overview and actions agreed from the phosphates summit**

The Service Manager for Development and Planning provided members with a presentation to accompany the written report as published, regarding the Phosphates Summit held on the 1<sup>st</sup> November 2022, and the following comments and questions were received from members -

- This report does not mention lowering phosphates at Ramsar sites. Fallowing does not fix the problem. We need to install waterways around

Ramsar sights to solve the problems. Hysteresis (mud at the bottom of rivers that is full of phosphates) isn't going to go away with the measures outlined in this report.

- Wessex Water (sewage works and processing plants) add phosphates to water systems. This is not mentioned in this report.
- Cllr Ros Wyke advised that this is a wide spectrum issue, which is why this member/officer working group will be so important. The government has announced some measures, but there is a need for more localised solutions and to work as 'one voice' in Somerset to tackle the issue.
- There is a conflict between financial and environmental pressures here, and this needs to be considered very quickly, adding that this is a very serious situation for Somerset. The Director ECI advised that the working group would include officers from both Economic and Environmental service areas.
- SAGIS is not an eco-system, it's an ICT system. There is a paper that reports that 90% of phosphates is from human sources, farming and agriculture is only 10%.
- Regarding holding Wessex Water to account, Cllr Tessa Munt advised that the working group would be taking this forward with Wessex Water as 'one voice' for Somerset.
- We are stuck between a rock and hard place and it's a very difficult subject. This has slowed down housing and this is causing major social issues such as homelessness and overpopulation of less affected areas like Frome. Cllr Ros Wyke agreed that this is such a complex issue and agreed with the Director ECI regarding the timing of communications between the member/office working group, Wessex water, and this Scrutiny committee. She would be happy to come back and update this committee when the timing is right.
- There is a House of Commons sub-committee questioning water companies to understand how much sewage is coming out of septic plants. The councillor questioned the validity of the responses from Wessex Water to the House of Commons on this.
- Membership of the working group – how will this work? The Director ECI is working on a list of members and officers with suitable knowledge and experience to progress this work.

### **Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty Quantock Hills**

Iain Porter, Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Manager Quantock Hills gave members an overview of the published report with a series of slides and the following comments and questions were received from members –

- The apprenticeship scheme is very impressive.

- Cllr Dixie Darch, Associate Lead Member for Environment commented that this is a great example of an integrated approach between the environment, skills and training, arts and culture, leisure, and tourism etc...
- There are unseen benefits in that landscapes are protected from unwanted development. What are the prospects of getting this AONB expanded? The AONB Manager advised that historically these boundary reviews take 20 years to complete, but there is hope that this will be progressed more quickly as part of the Government's Landscapes Review 2019.
- How can landscape management contribute to lowering carbon emissions in this county? What is the best land management approach for this area?
- One member paid tribute to the late Cllr Anthony Trollope who knew every inch of the Quantock Hills and felt that these areas are so important and must be protected.
- Cllr Sarah Dyke, Executive Leader Member commended the presentation and added that she is very excited about the work that is going on at The Quantock Hills and all AONB's in Somerset.
- Does this council fund the AONB's? The AONB Manager confirmed that for the Quantocks the Council contribution is £44k per annum, adding that a large chunk of funding comes from DEFRA.
- Is there a push from neighbouring communities for any boundary changes on the Quantock Hills? The AONB advised that consideration is given to neighbouring communities looking to be included in an AONB boundary.

### **Local Nature Recovery Strategy update**

Jon Doyle ,Strategic Manager Community Infrastructure, Climate and Flood Management gave a presentation on the development of the Local Nature Recovery Strategy and the following comments and questions were received from members –

- Regarding planning policy, does the LRNS have any legal weight in this currently? The Strategic Manager Community Infrastructure, Climate and Flood Management advised that the Council is awaiting further planning policy guidance, but that currently the guidance states that developers should 'give regard' to LNRS's.
- Is this short list of priority projects dependant on funding, or just the guidance? Can some projects get started without the guidance, or is it all on hold pending the guidance? The Strategic Manager Community Infrastructure Climate and Flood Mgmt advised that this is very much a 'wait and see' at this time.

- The Director for Economic, Communities and Infrastructure advised that a lot of this work is about knitting together many of the existing networks to make the best nature recovery strategy for Somerset. SEED funding is very limited though, so we need to be realistic about what we can do.
- Regarding a suggestion for a member task and finish project on this, The Director ECI felt that there is a need to establish the parameters of what the council's role will be in this piece of work before it can be opened up in a member task and finish setting.

### **Draft S19 investigation reports for Chard and Ilminster**

Jon Doyle, Strategic Manager Community Infrastructure, Climate and Flood Management began by explaining that a former Service Manager in Flood Management presented the initial findings on these investigations to Scrutiny for Policies, Place committee last year. He advised that these reports are concerning two extreme weather events, 29<sup>th</sup> June 2021 Chard and 20<sup>th</sup> October Ilminster. There was a second incident in Chard, and a report on this will come to the committee in due course.

Regarding the 29<sup>th</sup> of June 2021 Chard incident, the following comments and questions were received from members –

- North Petherton had the same problem. When that amount of rain comes down there is very little we can do.
- West Camel and Queen Camel had the same and they have installed mitigation measures i.e., anti-flood devices for each house.
- We must accept that nature is stronger than anything we can do to mitigate it. Flood water will find a way and with climate change this is going to become more common.
- Communications with communities needs to be better and although we can't stop the flooding, we can make sure communities are better prepared.
- Wincanton also experiencing flooding. Highways have investigated and clarified that it's because drains can't cope with the rainfall. As councillors can we do something about this?

Regarding the 20<sup>th</sup> of October 2021 Ilminster incident the following comments and questions were received by members –

- Cllr Sue Osborne, County Councillor for the Ilminster division thanked the officers of this council for all of the work they are doing on this, and also thanked Ilminster Town Council for all of the work that they are doing on finding solutions for the residents of Ilminster and surrounding areas who feel at risk of future flooding.

- Regarding agriculture and the use of direct drilling as opposed to traditional ploughing to aerate the land and allow it to drain effectively. Is this having an impact on run-off from farmland?
- Regarding run-off from the built environment, should we be putting more pressure on developers to manage SUDS.
- We need to focus on installing appropriate drainage solutions to manage during periods of heavy rain. i.e., Hong Kong have drainage systems designed for tropical rainstorms.
- Under a government funded scheme, homeowners in West Camel are putting their own barriers in place to protect their properties. Can this funding be used in the areas identified in these reports?
- There's always an engineering solution to these things, but the problem is cost.
- This creates serious problems for people looking to buy homes in these areas. Mortgage applications may be declined as a result of the difficulty in finding insurance for these high-risk properties.

## **2.2 Meeting held on the 14<sup>th</sup> of December 2022**

At the meeting held on the 14<sup>th</sup> of December 2022 the following items were considered, and comments and questions were received from members as follows:

### **Interreg 2 Seas- End of Project Progress Report**

Cllr Sarah Dyke Lead Member Environment introduced Steve Dury, Senior Commissioning Officer in Environmental Services and added that this work is a real 'good news story' for Somerset.

Steve Dury gave members a presentation entitled Interreg 2 seas: Climate Change Adaptation in Somerset (this can be shared with members on request) and the following comments and question were received from members -

- Members commended the very impressive work being undertaken.
- How can we be assured that there will be sufficient funding opportunities available to enable this work to continue. The Officer assured the committee that all funding avenues would be explored.
- Regarding lack of participation from landowners – is this going to continue to improve if the funding is no longer available? The Officer advised that organisations like FWAG Southwest are doing great work, and this will lay the foundations for much better relationships with Landowners in the future. They have a good track record of bidding and being awarded funding to date.
- Regarding phosphates – To what extent do Wessex Water provide

funding for projects like this? He was advised that Wessex Water do contribute in several ways, including the Phosphate credits scheme.

- Regarding the most recent summer droughts – do this work mitigate this at all? The Officer advised that some measures can be taken which manage excess water in winter and release it during periods of drought.
- The Environment Agency do not appear to feature a lot in this work, why is this? The Officer advised that The Environment Agency had been consulted from the beginning but have only recently become more heavily involved with the projects.
- In terms of monitoring and measuring what is resulting from these projects – to what extent can nature-based solutions completely resolve the problems identified within this report? The officer advised that there needs to be a balance of nature-based solutions as well as hard engineering to achieve the desired outcomes.

### **Peat- Update on work with DEFRA on the future of Peat Workings**

CLlr Sarah Dyke, Lead Member for Environment introduced Colin Arnold, the Principal Planning Officer and advised that as Somerset is one of the biggest peat producers in the country, this work was a key manifesto pledge and a significant part of the ecological emergency declaration in Somerset. The following comments and questions were received from members -

- The Chair felt that this subject was in some ways quite controversial for peat producers. The Director ECI advised that 'wrap around' business support for peat producers is a key part of this work, including helping them with diversification into other markets.
- How does a peat bog absorb carbon? The officer explained how carbon absorption of peat bogs works in basic terms and advised that a video would be shared with the committee which explained this in more scientific detail.
- CLlr Dixie Darch, Associate Lead Member Environment advised that carbon absorption of peat is a growing science and that there are many things going on around managing water levels and reducing carbon emissions as a result of disturbed peatlands.
- What is the value to the local economy in terms of peat production? The Principal Planner advised that there are about 90 workers on peat sites in Somerset, and this is an example of the employment benefits of the Peat industry in Somerset.
- What are the timescales for the peat extraction review and what if, following consultation, there is a negative response from peat producers on this? The Director ECI assured members that this work was being moved forward very quickly. A ban on domestic peat is imminent and the

ban on commercial peat is expected later, so it is crucial that peat producers are supported through this period of significant change for the peat industry.

- We must remember that peat is used in domestic and commercial soil production and that there will always be a need for it. What peat alternatives are we aware of? The Lead Member Environment took this question away for further consideration by the team.

### **Estates decarbonisation - our programme and progress**

Prior to the meeting members had received an invitation to attend a guided tour of the newly refurbished B Block at County Hall, to be held immediately before the scheduled committee meeting on the 14<sup>th</sup> of December 2022, to observe the works that had recently been completed as part of this Council's Estates decarbonisation programme. Members were given the opportunity to comment and ask questions throughout the guided tour.

At the committee meeting, Cllr Sarah Dyke, Lead Member for Environment introduced the item on Estates Decarbonisation as a key objective of the climate emergency strategy and felt that this work was a crucial part of leading by example on carbon reduction in Somerset. She introduced Oliver Woodhams, Estates Manager, who began by introducing some of the key officers from the Corporate Property Team who had been leading on the decarbonisation work. Abigail Lambert, Energy Manager, Dave Dangerfield, Service Manager Building Services. They talked members through a series of slides highlighting key findings, objectives, measures and monitoring around energy consumption and carbon reduction measures across the councils' estate. The officers provided members with an overview of key achievements and the councils current position in terms of the achieving net zero and gave some explanation of some of the key approaches being taken, giving site specific details (both current and future planned projects) including the status of any funding opportunities being or due to be received as part of ongoing or future planned works. The following comments and questions were received from members –

- The Chair thanked the officer for the work being done in Frome, particularly Frome College and asked for some further detail on this. The Service Manager Building Services advised that boiler management was a key part of the work being undertaken at Frome College.
- There are some easy solutions such as solar panelling of roofs across the county, as well as huge projects such as the recent decarbonisation of B Block in its entirety. How are we prioritising which solutions needs to be funded first? The Officer informed the committee that in terms of prioritising, it is usually those buildings with the biggest need that are done as a priority. Age also plays a part in prioritisation, with end-of-life heating systems being addressed as a priority too.



- Are officers able to provide a financial column in this report which shows the financial savings achieved as a result of the decarbonisation of the estate, as a comparison against the overall costs and the payback. The officer gave Yeovil Library as an example of a 67% financial saving that had been achieved through overhaul of an aged heating system and advised that more of this sort of data will be coming through very soon,
- How far ahead do local authorities look ahead in terms of financial paybacks?
- Regarding the potential use of wind power, have we looked at the technology available to support this? The Estates Manager offered to take this question away for further consideration.
- The vice-chair asked for more detail of local projects and the Estates Manager assured members that more detail can be provided on request.
- What will happen to the various contracts held by District Councils and their stakeholders concerning estates decarbonisation projects. The Estates Manager assured members that much of this data was being reviewed as part of the property rationalisation workstream of the local government reorganisation programme.
- Page 51 - members asked for more detail regarding energy demand reduction.
- As a recommendation, there is an organisation called LETTI who have written guidance that could be very useful and informative here.
- Regarding costs associated with retrofitting, to what extent are these costs usually incurred under maintenance contracts anyway?

### **Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty overview**

Cllr Sarah Dyke, Lead Member Environment introduced Jim Hardcastle, AONB Manager of the Mendip Hills who gave members a presentation on the Mendip Hills AONB and the following comments and questions were received from members –

- Are there any thoughts about extending the AONB eastwards? The Officer advised that this would be considered as part of the National Landscapes Review, but that a specific Mendip Hills extension was not being considered at this time.

### **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.