

Minutes of the meeting of Scrutiny for Policies, Environment committee held on 14th December 2022 at 2pm in the Luttrell Room, County Hall, Taunton, TA1 4DY.

Committee members present: Cllr Martin Dimery (Chair) Cllr Adam Boyden (vice-chair) Cllr Jo Roundell-Greene, Cllr Steve Ashton, Cllr Tom Power, Cllr Marcus Kravis, Cllr Henry Hobhouse, Cllr Martin Lovell (as sub), Cllr Barry Clarke, Cllr Alex Wiltshire, Cllr Kathy Pearce, Cllr Matt Martin.

Agenda item 1: Apologies for absence

Apologies for absence were received from Cllr Harry Munt (Cllr Martin Lovell as sub) and Cllr Alan Bradford.

Agenda item 2: Declarations of interest

There were no declarations of interest received from members.

Agenda item 3: Minutes from the previous meeting

Members were advised that due to staff sickness the approval of the minutes of 24th October 2022 and 30th November 2022 will be deferred to the next meeting.

Agenda item 4: Public Question Time

There were no public questions received.

Agenda item 5: Scrutiny for Policies, Environment committee work programme.

The Governance Manager, Scrutiny asked members to consider the Scrutiny Environment work programme as published, along with the Executive forward plan of decisions, and invited comments and questions from all present.

There were no further questions or comments from members.

Agenda item 6: 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 which highlighted the following key issues -

- Changing weather patterns - more extreme weather and high-risk flooding
- Nature Based Solutions use natural methods to mitigate flooding, as opposed to more man-made methods i.e., concrete.
- Nature based solutions can be applied to many different aspects of flood water management i.e. soil and land management, leaky dams, river restoration.
- Headlines, key findings and achievements of the Interreg 2 Seas Triple C project.
- Headlines, key findings and achievements of the Interreg 2 Seas Co-Adapt project.

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 a number of ways including schemes like Phosphate credits.
- 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 only recently have become much more involved with the projects.
- 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.

The Scrutiny for Policies, Environment committee members noted the progress report.

Agenda item 7: 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 Principal Planner gave members a presentation to accompany the report and asked members to consider some of the key points from the report including -

- The benefits of peatlands
- Review of permitted peat extraction in Somerset

The following comments and questions were received from members-

- The Chair felt that this subject was in some ways quite controversial. 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 peat.
- 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, as an example of employment benefits of the 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 industry.
- We must remember that peat is used in domestic and commercial soil production and that there will always be a need for. What peat alternatives are we aware of? The Lead Member Environment took this question away for further consideration by the team.

The Scrutiny for Policies, Environment committee noted the recommendations at paragraph 2.1 of the report:

2.1. An Officers Non-Key decision has been undertaken where the Director of ECI Commissioning has approved authorised officers to engage with owners/operators of peat extraction sites in Somerset and explore the possibilities of them voluntarily ending peat extraction on their sites in exchange for financial compensation from the Council.

2.2. Therefore, the main key issue relating to this report is calling for Members support in reducing the extent of extraction of peat on the Somerset Levels and Moors.

Agenda item 8: Estates decarbonisation - our programme and progress

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.

Oliver Woodhams, Estates Manager 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, and the Estates Manager talked members through a series of slides highlighting key findings, objectives, measures and monitoring around energy consumption and carbon reduction measures across the councils' own estate. The officers provided members with an overview of key achievements and the councils current position in terms of the achieving net zero and 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 the ongoing or future planned works.

In conclusion the Estates Manager explained that there is a key link between property rationalisation and decarbonisation as we move into the unitary authority from March '23.

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 Can we have some 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?

The Scrutiny for Policies, Environment committee noted the presentation.

Agenda item 9: 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 of headline information on the Mendip Hills AONB including -

- The strategy and delivery work of the AONB in the Mendip Hills
- Findings from the Annual Forum held on 26th November 2022.
- Framing all the work under 4 key priorities, and used by DEFRA
 - Nature
 - Climate
 - Place
 - People
- The Farming in protected landscapes programme and associated funding
- An overview of the activities of the Mendip Hills Nature Recovery Plan, which will work alongside the Council's Local Nature Recovery Strategy when it is adopted, including the recruitment of the first Nature Recovery Ranger, species management, nature task volunteers, tree planting, grassland restoration.
- Working alongside development management/planning consultees and lobbying for AONB's to be a statutory consultee.
- Measurement of light pollution and working with the largest consumers to reduce this locally.

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.

Members of the Scrutiny for Policies, Environment committee noted the update.

Agenda item 10: Any other items of business

There were no other items of business raised by the Chair.

[MEETING CLOSED 4.36PM]