

Full Council Meeting – 28 March 2023

Portfolio Holder Report for Climate Change – Cllr Dixie Darch.

Annual Report.

A brief look back

Although this report focuses on the last year, I can't help reflecting on the significant progress made in addressing the climate emergency since 2019. Intensive work on developing the CNCR plan took place in the first year of this council, while the last three years have involved implementation of many of the CNCR actions with a great deal of learning on the way. The extent to which this council has put climate change as a key priority is reflected in the way in which its impacts are embedded in every policy decision and the frequency with which it comes up as point of discussion in almost every meeting.

Every elected member and council employee has come on this journey, (as shown in the take up for Carbon Literacy training, for example) and it's been a real privilege to be the Portfolio Holder for the last three years working with that ethos and level of support right across the council. Particular thanks to Shadow Portfolio holder Cllr Dave Mansell whose sustained interest, commitment and expertise has been welcome. I'm not sure I can express my thanks to the staff Climate Change team without getting seriously soppy so suffice it to say they have been simply amazing.

The last year of SWT

This last year of SWT has brought us closer to the other Somerset councils as we move towards a unitary authority. A Climate and Ecological Emergency workstream has been created as part of the Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) programme. This workstream comprises of staff from the 5 Somerset authorities and some of the work undertaken within this workstream is included in the updates in the annual report. This collaborative approach has built on our existing partnership with Sedgemoor District Council, through which we have shared resources and jointly produced the Ecological Emergency Vision and Action Plan, approved by Full Council in July 2022

The plan is divided into 8 workstreams: built environment, energy, industry, farming and food, natural environment, waste, water, and transport.

Nature recovery actions within the CNCR were moved across to the Council's Ecological Vision and Action Plan but progress on this area is included in this annual report.

Delivery of the CNCR Plan is split into 4 timescales: 'immediate' year one actions, short term year two and three actions, medium term year four to six actions and long-term year seven to ten actions.

Immediate actions were identified as those that could be carried out either in whole or may commence within 12 months of the plan's approval by Council. Short term actions are those that were expected to be carried out either in whole or commence within years 2-3 of the plan. This report concentrates on the Immediate and Short-Term actions only.

A summary of SWT's progress within each of the different workstreams is as follows.

Built Environment

Planning Services

In April 2022, the Council updated its interim planning guidance with regards to consideration for the Climate and Ecological emergencies.

Originally approved and published in February 2021, the *Climate Positive Planning: Interim Guidance Statement on Planning for the Climate and Ecological Emergency* supports the Council's CNCR plan and the countywide approved Somerset Climate Emergency Strategy by ensuring that consideration for climate and ecological factors have been applied when submitting and approving development proposals.

Intended as a temporary measure, it seeks to clarify related policies adopted within the Council's existing Local Plans until successive policies can be implemented by the new unitary authority for Somerset, following its formation in April 2023.

SWT were commended at the 2022 RTPi SW Awards for Climate Positive Planning document.

Included in the April 2022 updates was the approval of a Net Zero Carbon Toolkit intended for building professionals and homeowners, which sets out best practice approaches in designing, specifying, constructing, and fitting out a Net Zero compliant new build or retrofit project.

The Toolkit complements Climate Positive Planning and provides additional guidance to help articulate how some of the design processes within the Districtwide Design Guide supplementary planning document (SPD) might be executed in order to deliver Net Zero buildings.

However, it should be noted that this is aspirational and a guidance and communication tool, rather than a planning or corporate policy position. Whilst the Council does not have planning policies which explicitly require zero carbon buildings at present, the Toolkit can provide a useful resource for officers and members in understanding whether development proposals are being ambitious enough in responding to relevant existing planning policy requirements, and in responding to the Climate Emergency as a material consideration.

It is also worth noting that LAs remain bound by the National planning Policy Framework (NPPF). Whilst the National Planning Policy Framework does stipulate standards for sustainability and promote the use of low carbon energy and heat, LAs are also required to ensure that policy requirements do not put the viable

development of the area and the Local Plan at risk, i.e. that sufficient level of housing is planned for and delivered. This is measured through demonstration of a 'five-year housing land supply' and compliance with the Housing Delivery Test.

Asset Management

Building decarbonisation surveys on all main Council building are now complete. This has identified what is required to decarbonise each property, and can be used to inform future years capital programmes and applications to external funding sources such as the Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme.

The Council has been successful in securing £1.5 million from the latest round of PSDS funding to decarbonise Wellington Sports Centre and Alcombe Children's Centre. Officers are working with colleagues at SCC to build these works into next year's programme.

A project to install solar PV panels and battery storage at the Westpark Depot is underway and will be completed by the summer.

Social Housing

The Low Carbon Retrofit Strategy and Delivery Plan was approved by Full Council in December 2022. The strategy sets out the baseline position of the Council's housing stock and sets targets which will help SWT towards achieving zero carbon for its homes.

The strategy and delivery plan sets out a pathway to achieving EPC by 2030 for all SWT homes, or have an alternative investment option identified, as well as reducing heat demand by 30% by 2040.

The plan also details what is required to replace fossil fuel in SWT homes with electric based heat and power by 2050 at a pace to ensure affordable energy for tenants and in line with available funds.

The delivery plan proposes a number of schemes over the next 10 years, and these are currently contained within the proposed HRAs 10Year Capital Programme and 30 Year Business Plan assumptions from 2022/23. The delivery plan has highlighted a number of grant opportunities 2023-2026 which are as yet unconfirmed and therefore at risk of not being achieved.

The retrofit strategy does not achieve Net Zero until 2050, and successful delivery of this strategy will be highly dependent on additional and external grant funding.

SWT was successful during 2022/23 in securing £385k of funding from the Government's Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund, as part of a bid with the West of England Combined Authority (WECA). A second bid has been submitted to the latest round of funding, and we await the outcome.

Phase A of SWT's North Taunton Woolaway Project (NTWP) is underway and will deliver 47 of the project's 227 new homes. Each home will be highly energy efficient, with a range of measures being installed to each property including PV panels, triple

glazing and air source heat pumps.

A further ten Woolaway homes in Oake are to be refurbished during 2023. The refurb will include installation of air source heat pumps (ASHP) and photovoltaic panels (PV). These homes will be 2050 zero carbon ready and require no additional retrofit work.

The Council's Seaward Way development in Minehead has also begun and is due to be completed next Autumn. The 54 new homes will be zero carbon and incorporate comprehensive data gathering to benchmark energy and carbon use.

Transport

During 2021/22, SWT secured a government grant worth £136,000 to boost the roll-out of on street Electric Vehicle (EV) charge points in council-owned car parks. This programme of works has now been completed, with 22kW fast EV charge points now installed in Minehead, Porlock, Taunton, Watchet, Wellington, Williton, and Wiveliscombe. A charge point in Dunster was initially deemed prohibitively expensive, but that has been revisited this year and there are now plans to install 2x 22kw chargers at Dunster Steep car park via the ESPO framework.

We relaunched our EVCP Grant Fund scheme for parish and town councils and community groups and received 4 new applications which have been all been approved and are now progressing to the installation stage.

EVCPs were also installed on Council premises at Deane House, the Wellington Depot and at Kilkenny House in readiness for Council's transition to an electric fleet. This has begun with the Council's pool and supervisor fleet with orders placed for a further 23 EVs on top of the two that are already in use. By the end of 2023, all small SWT vehicles will be EVs.

Previously, technological limitations have prevented vans and towing vehicles being replaced with EV equivalents, but now the technology is advancing SWT will explore the available options.

SWT has extended its existing e-scooter trials until 31 May 2024, to enable the Department for Transport (DfT) to gather further evidence where gaps are identified and to build on the findings of the current evaluation. The trials have been running since 2020, and we are now beginning to see good returns on data.

Since launching in October 2020, Taunton's e-scooter trial has seen 134,397 rides by over 15,650 riders travelling over 246,180 miles, removing an estimated 35.2 tonnes of atmospheric carbon compared with fossil fuel powered vehicles. Minehead's trial has seen over 31,700 rides by over 13,000 riders travelling over 45,000 miles, removing an equivalent 6.4 tonnes of carbon since launching in June 2021

SWT provided match for funding the Taunton Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan (LCWIP) which has now been completed by Somerset County Council. SWT has also provided match funding for a LCWIP in Wellington which is now underway and has committed the same funding for a LCWIP in Minehead.

SWT is delivering elements of the 'Red' route, identified within the Taunton LCWIP, from the railway station to Vivary Park, as part of the Future High Streets Fund. Schemes to be delivered in summer 2023 include a new cycle and pedestrian bridge over the River Tone, cycle hubs, and two town centre crossings to enable safer cycling, walking, and wheeling.

SWT was awarded £15,900 from the SCC public health fund specifically for Active Travel projects, and we are using this money for the installation of additional cycle parking within Taunton.

Steam Coast Trail projects continue to move forward, with two new connections in varying stages of discussion with landowners and key stakeholders.

£50k has been allocated from SCC's Public Health Fund for Active Travel to produce a Strategic Outline Business Case for sustainable transport options between Wellington and Taunton, required to evidence a case for investment. This work will be carried out in the first half of 2023.

The Connecting our Garden Communities (CoGCs) Plan has taken consideration of LCWIP routes and supplemented with additional routes designed to meet the needs of the Garden Community developments in Taunton. The majority of routes included in CoGCs have been subject to audit and scoping out of potential interventions, with some progressed to initial concept planning.

SWT facilitated the DfT Connected and Automated Vehicle trial in Taunton working with Britain Thinks, an independent research agency in partnership with University College London and Aurrigo. We hope to be involved in future DfT trials.



Natural Environment

The Council approved the adoption of an Ecological Emergency Vision and Action Plan in July 2022. This was a joint piece of work developed with the SWT and Sedgemoor District Council. The Vision sets out our ambitions to address the ecological deterioration within our districts and to lessen our global impact on the natural world. It is accompanied by a comprehensive action plan that provides the practical steps to deliver ecological recovery. It builds on previous work to address the Climate Emergency, but with a specific focus on wildlife and habitats.

The EEVAP includes a number of actions from the CNCR Plan and is the Council's direct response to its Ecological Emergency declaration from September 2020. The plan includes 21 high level actions, a number of which are already being implemented.

These include the Council's new grassland management strategy, produced by the Somerset Wildlife Trust. The strategy seeks to support wildlife and habitat within its existing open spaces, whilst ensuring continued amenity access for all. Officers estimate that the grass cutting teams are now cutting 25% less grass than before the Ecological Emergency declaration.

SWT have also funded a new Treescapes Officer in partnership with Exmoor National Park Authority. The post will work directly with landowners including the ENPA themselves to create large scale woodland projects within the boundaries of ENP and SWT. ENPA currently have approximately 110ha of planting on course to be completed this winter and next.

The Treescapes Officer has also produced planting plans for SWT's open spaces, using right-tree-right-place principles. 500 trees have been planted on SWT open



spaces this season.

SWT supported national tree planting week again this year by offering free trees, this was our third consecutive year and most successful with 580 trees provided to 27 parish and town councils and community groups.

Energy

Working in partnership with the other Somerset authorities, a tender for a Local Area Energy Plan (LAEP) was published in December 2022. This is a key piece of work for the county to meet renewable energy generation targets within the CNCR.

The plan will include a high-level assessment of renewable energy generation opportunities, identifying suitable sites to support the development of the new Somerset wide Local Plan and outlining how to work alongside community energy organisations, the private sector and various other stakeholders to invest and grow renewable energy generation in Somerset. This will ensure the necessary evidence is in place to allow the new Somerset Council to take opportunities forward directly or in partnership and have the evidence available to bid for potential future funding.

Technologies assessed will focus on Solar PV and thermal, wind, run of river hydro, heat pumps, geothermal, heat recovery, storage batteries, hydrogen, and anaerobic digestion. A general overview of tidal & wave and the potential overlap this may have with terrestrial land use and planning is included.

Although this work will provide a planning evidence base, it will also enable the proliferation of renewable energy in Somerset more generally. The energy system in the county requires holistic consideration to facilitate electrification of transport and heat. Although beyond the traditional remit of local authorities, it is important that we act as an enabler for bringing the different bodies together to meet renewable energy targets.

SWT has also been investigating potential heat networks within Taunton following a successful grant application to the Government's Heat Network Delivery Unit. The project looks at energy demands, heat supply opportunities, energy centre locations, and initial techno-economic feasibility and has identified potential for an energy centre within Firepool. This has been included in the Draft Firepool Masterplan identifying potential for an energy centre within the site and we await a final report from consultants.

Water

SWT continues to progress 3 key flood alleviation schemes within Taunton, following the Council making £6 million available from a Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) fund in February 2020.

The raising levels of the lockgates at Firepool (TTC10) will prevent flows entering the canal and reduces flood risk for Priorswood and Crown Industrial Estates and Bathpool. This remains on course for completion in 2023/24.

A combination of repair, replacement or new flood defences between Frieze Hill and Town Bridge (TTC5) will provide reduced flood risk to key transport routes including the A3027 bridge street, A3027 Staplegrove road and the A3087 station road, and the North Town and Firepool areas of Taunton. This also remains on course for 2023/24 completion.

Optimisation of the existing flood storage area at Longrun Meadow (LRM) aims to reduce flood risk in Taunton town centre and further downstream including areas of North Town, Firepool, Priorswood and Crown Industrial Estates, Bathpool. This has been in the SWT project pipeline but has now been assigned a project manager and is in the project initiation stages.

This scheme focusses more on soft infrastructure and natural flood management and offers wider environmental benefits. We are working with key stakeholders such as Friends of Longrun to try and achieve this.

Working with Wessex Water all three of our water refill stations (Taunton, Wellington and Minehead) have gone live during the last 12 months.

Waste

The CNCR plan includes several actions to help facilitate the ease with which people can recycle. This includes supporting the Somerset Waste Partnership (SWP) with the implementation of the Recycle More programme, which was successfully rolled out in West Somerset in February. This completed the implementation across the SWT district.

SWT also implemented the Recycling on-the-Go pilot, installing 130 combined public litter and recycling bins across the district. The configuration of the new bins enables plastic bottles and aluminium or tin cans to be deposited separately, making recycling easier when out in rural and urban public spaces. The roll out coincided with a competition for schools to design posters to promote the scheme.



Challenges in Progressing CNCR Actions

The CNCR is an ambitious plan in that it targets a Net Zero transition for the whole of the district, rather than focussing purely on the Council's operations. Therefore, there are areas in which the Council has limited influence or is reliant on other organisations to deliver. Of the outcomes within the plan, only around 50% are within the Council's direct control.

This is a particular challenge within the Food and Farming and Industry workstreams, where opportunities around land use and circular economies are outside of the Council's usual remit. These are the workstreams where the least progress has been made against CNCR actions.

Small steps can be taken to support these sectors, such as the Council's new grant scheme in partnership with Sedgemoor District Council to help small and micro businesses become greener as part of their commitment to reaching net zero emissions by 2030. Using funds from the Hinkley Point C developer contributions,



carbon cutting grants worth up to £2,500 have been made available to businesses with up to nine employees to help fund energy reduction and net-zero transition projects.

Many of the shifts required for the county to meet its Net Zero target also require significant Government policy intervention. This is

happening, with examples including the Environment Act, and the phasing out of new internal combustion engine (ICE) cars by 2030 and gas boiler installations in new build homes by 2025, but clearly these are huge changes where SWT's only influence is that of lobbying together with other organisations.

Funding transition to Net Zero is also a significant challenge. The CNCR remains un-costed, but work is now underway via the Climate LGR workstream to integrate all district climate plans into the countywide Climate Emergency Strategy and produce a refreshed, costed plan for the new Somerset Council. This will likely equate to hundreds of millions in Somerset alone, and although the transition will be made over a number of years, there will be heavy reliance on external funding. The Council has proven itself excellent at producing high-quality bids to external funds, and the new Council will need to be sufficiently resourced to continue this in an increasingly competitive environment.

Partnership working will clearly be vital in Somerset's journey to Net Zero, especially given that so many of the CNCR outcomes require the support and cooperation of others. SWT recognises the importance of partnership working and has actively worked with the other authorities within Somerset this year, as well as organisations such as Exmoor National Park Authority, the Somerset Wildlife Trust, Zipp Mobility and the Environment Agency.

SWT/SDC Partnership

Following a successful first year working in partnership with SDC, we have extended the agreement taking us up to vesting day of the new council.

The main successes of the partnership have been the installation of EVCPs at the Northgate Development in Bridgwater, the development and subsequent approval the joint EEVAP and working together across both authorities to the gather the data required to calculate our carbon emissions for 2020/21, preparing the technical report and infographic for publication. Prior to this SWT contracted Exeter University to do this work on our behalf.

Local Government Reorganisation

The Climate and Water LGR workstream has brought the five authorities much closer together than before on climate, and this has resulted in some significant progress on key outcomes.

As well as the Local Area Energy Plan, joint activities such as producing a carbon baseline for the new authority by bringing together emissions data from the five existing Councils, and the development of a countywide tree strategy have been big steps forward.

A new carbon baseline is the foundation for understanding the carbon footprint for the new authority, where our efforts are best focussed, and building pathways to Net Zero in each area of operations.

The tree strategy has been funded by the five authorities and is being developed with partners from Exmoor National Park Authority, the Mendip Hills and Quantock Hills AONB services, Somerset Wildlife Trust, Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group,

Woodland Trust, Forestry England and others. It has been the foundation of a successful bid worth £300k to the DEFRA Woodland Accelerator Fund to help deliver the strategy.

Other areas of focus for the Climate and Water workstream include merging existing district activities into the countywide Climate Emergency Strategy, producing a comms plan for climate change within the new authority, creating a carbon impact assessment tool for Council decisions and projects and designing and implementing a new governance structure for the climate and nature recovery work.

Despite the challenges, SWT continues to recognise the role of leadership on Climate Change. Following the Council's success in ranking first nationally in the Climate Emergency UK council scorecard last year, SWT was awarded a score of A- (Leadership) for its 2022 disclosure to the Climate Disclosure Project (CDP).

CDP is a not-for-profit charity that runs a global disclosure system for investors, companies, cities, states, and regions to manage their environmental impacts. Achieving a score of A (Leadership) is a CNCR outcome to be delivered by 2023.

Conclusion

I am delighted that the opportunities for addressing climate change through LGR have been taken up through the collaborative approach of the 5 councils. We can be proud of what SWT has achieved but we know also that the challenges remain enormous and there is a very long way to go in the journey to Net Zero. We simply can't do it alone and I believe that the collaboration and partnership working that comes with a Somerset wide approach is the way forward.

Cllr Dixie Darch, Portfolio Holder for Climate Change