



Notice of Meeting of

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - CLIMATE AND PLACE

Monday, 23 September 2024 at 10.00 am

John Meikle Room, The Deane House, Belvedere Road, Taunton TA1 1HE

To: The members of the Scrutiny Committee - Climate and Place

Chair: Councillor Martin Dimery
Vice-chair: Councillor Henry Hobhouse

Councillor Suria Aujla	Councillor Adam Boyden
Councillor Alan Bradford	Councillor Bente Height
Councillor Edric Hobbs	Councillor Marcus Kravis
Councillor Dave Mansell	Councillor Matthew Martin
Councillor Harry Munt	Councillor Tom Power
Councillor Rob Reed	

For further information about the meeting, including how to join the meeting virtually, please contact Democratic Services democraticservicesteam@somerset.gov.uk.

All members of the public are welcome to attend our meetings and ask questions or make a statement **by giving advance notice** in writing or by e-mail to the Monitoring Officer at email: democraticservicesteam@somerset.gov.uk by **5pm on Tuesday, 17 September 2024**.

This meeting will be open to the public and press, subject to the passing of any resolution under the Local Government Act 1972, Schedule 12A: Access to Information.

The meeting will be webcast and an audio recording made.

Issued by (the Proper Officer) on Friday, 13 September 2024

AGENDA

**Scrutiny Committee - Climate and Place - 10.00 am Monday, 23 September
2024**

3 Minutes from the Previous Meeting (Pages 5 - 10)

To approve the minutes from the previous meeting.

4 Public Question Time (Pages 11 - 12)

The Chair to advise the Committee of any items on which members of the public have requested to speak and advise those members of the public present of the details of the Council's public participation scheme.

For those members of the public who have submitted any questions or statements, please note, a three minute time limit applies to each speaker and you will be asked to speak before Councillors debate the issue.

We are now live webcasting most of our committee meetings and you are welcome to view and listen to the discussion. The link to each webcast will be available on the meeting webpage, please see details under 'click here to join online meeting'.

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Agenda Item 3

Draft minutes of a meeting of the Scrutiny Committee - Climate and Place held at 10am on Wednesday 25th July 2024 in the John Meikle Room, Deane House, Taunton, Somerset TA1 1HE.

1. Apologies for Absence - Agenda item 1

Apologies for absence were received from Cllr Bente Height and Cllr Matt Martin (sub Cllr Simon Coles), Cllr Adam Boyden (sub Cllr Mike Rigby), Cllr Suria Aujla and Cllr Tom Power were in attendance online.

2. Declarations of Interest - Agenda item 2

There were no declarations of interest received

3. Minutes of the previous meetings - Agenda item 3

Resolved

That the minutes of the meeting held on 6th June 2024 be approved as a correct record.

4. Public Question Time - Agenda item 4

There were no members of the public registered to speak.

5. Work programme – Agenda item 5

The Chair asked Jennie Murphy, Governance Specialist to present the committee Forward work plan and Outcome tracker. She invited comments and questions from members and the following points were discussed:-

- The committee are still awaiting a response on the recommendations made by the Task and Finish group for the Somerset Energy Plan. It would also be helpful if the recommendations from the group be recorded in the outcome tracker.

- Regarding the forward plan, there was a request for an update on the progress of the Local Plan, and for this committee to be given the opportunity input into its development.
- The Task and Finish group for Water Quality in Somerset has not yet been established. A working group of officers and members are looking at the scope and a Terms of Reference for this, and it will be brought to a future meeting for approval by the wider committee. There was a suggestion that all Council members should be invited to participate.
- The Somerset Rivers Authority now sits under the remit of this Scrutiny committee, and there was a request for an annual review to be added to the forward plan.
- Regarding Executive forward plan item 60: Delegation of Highways maintenance to city, town and parish councils for volunteer workers, is this something that should be added to the Scrutiny forward plan.
- Regarding the complexities of the legal situation with the Connecting Devon and Somerset Airband contracts, acknowledging that an information sheet has been published in this agenda, will members receive more detailed information i.e an all member briefing as the situation progresses.

6. Equality due regard – Agenda item 6

The Chair welcomed Tom Rutland, Public Health Promotion Manager, who explained that in October 2023 Somerset Council underwent a Local Government peer challenge around the equality framework for local government and how this council carries out due regard to equalities legislation, and that the report serves as a reminder that it is part of the requirement of this Scrutiny committee to ensure that all the decisions in Climate and Place give due consideration to equality and diversity. He invited comments and questions from members and the following points were discussed:-

- Regarding membership of committees and an imbalance of males and females, is this something that should be given more consideration
- Regarding harassment the legislation is very clear, and this council deals with it in a number of ways i.e training and support to staff, processes in place for people to access the Council, and a route for individuals to be able to feedback through the Complaints process.
- Regarding the delivery of due regard in the current financial situation, due regard legislation is always valid and does not diminish in these circumstances.

7. Bus Service Improvement Plan – Agenda item 7

The Chair welcomed Sunita Mills (Sam), Strategic Manager Highways and Transport who was in attendance online to the meeting to introduce a high level look at the Bus Improvement Plan (BSIP) which sits in parallel with the Local transport Plan. She explained that in January this year the Government asked that the BSIP was refreshed to release the final tranche of the £11.9m funding that was allocated when the original plan was adopted in 2021. She invited comments and questions from members and the following points were discussed:-

- Several members asked questions concerning specific services, i.e Slinky, and 'Ring and Ride' and the Strategic Manager Highways and Transport advised that she was unable to answer those accurately in the meeting but would take them away and seek a written response.
- It is concerning that bus services in rural areas are in decline which leaves many people stranded without transport.
- How we achieve 'best value' for bus services which are funded by the Council but under utilised.
- It is too early to tell if the Council will look at franchising as an alternative to the enhanced partnership route that this council is currently taking for provision of bus services.
- The model, and technology for Demand Responsive Transport is evolving and there is potential to look at this in the future.
- There was a suggestion that this Council investigates how buses may be used by cyclists and this included in the '2025 and Beyond' section of the BSIP.
- There is a clear need for additional government funding to make improvements to rural bus services and bring down the high levels of car ownership in Somerset.

8. Waste Services - Agenda item 8

The Chair welcomed Mike Cowdell, Head of Waste who presented the update on a non-key decision that had been taken regarding the Expansion of Flex Plastics trial..

The Head of Waste explained that Phase 1 of the flex plastics trial had been very successful and would therefore move into Phase 2. He invited comments and question from members and the following points were discussed:-

- It is very pleasing to see how successful this trial has been, and it is very promising that contamination levels are reducing.
- Do we have any data that looks deeper into the levels of participation amongst the trial sample. Are there any trends amongst a particular type of household i.e. young, elderly, small/large families etc.....

The Service Director, Climate Change then referred members to the Executive decision regarding the SUEZ negotiations and explained that the appendices are marked as confidential and as such members were advised that any questions or comments about that document will need to be taken in confidential session. She presented a series of slides, which included the background to the contract renegotiation, an options analysis, risks of alternatives and settlement, and the officer recommendations that were agreed by the Executive. She invited comments and questions about the Executive decision report and the following points were raised:-

- Members felt that a 40% uplift on the contract, which the council has had to accept, is unsatisfactory, and that this Council should have a plan B, perhaps consider bringing this contract in-house in 2030 to prevent a situation like this occurring again.

9. Climate and Place budget outturn report - Agenda item 9

The Chair asked Mickey Green, the Executive Director for Climate and Place to present the latest budget outturn position to members. The Executive Director explained that whilst formal scrutiny of all the Council budgets goes through Scrutiny Corporate & Resources committee, the Chair and Vice Chair felt it would be useful for this committee to consider the latest financial position for the Climate and Place directorate. He invited comments and questions from members and the following points were discussed:-

- It would be helpful if all appendices were headed clearly.
- Regarding the detail around the gainshare funds from the CDS programme that were used to help balance the budgets, more detail is needed and would be shared with members as soon as possible.
- More detail is needed regarding the underspend on Planning Policy, and it should be noted that the committee had previously been advised that due to limited resources the Planning Policy recommendations from this committee had not been actioned. This needs further investigation.

10. Items for information – Agenda item 10

The Chair asked members to note the information items and advised that any questions about the information reports should be emailed to Democratic Services.

At the conclusion of the meeting, the Chair asked for a show of hands for volunteers to sit on the Task and Finish group: Water Quality in Somerset.

Resolved

The membership of the Task and Finish group: Water Quality in Somerset was agreed as: Cllr Kravis, Cllr Coles, Cllr Rigby, Cllr Hobhouse, Cllr Bradford, and Cllr Norman Cavill and Cllr Steve Ashton (non-committee members in attendance).

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Scrutiny Climate and Place committee – Public Question Time

Monday 23rd September 2024

Statement from Mr David Orr:

"Dorset has a nutrient neutrality Get Out of Jail card, while Somerset is stuck in the slow lane?"

I recently made an Environmental Information request on Natural England which revealed an email where Natural England and Dorset Council were planning how to word a letter to the Defra Secretary of State to be let off all further Phosphorus (P) mitigation. The email speaks of "skeletons in the cupboard" with the P figures. I quote *"The point here is that using Natural England's advised long-term Nitrogen (N) target there is much more flexibility around the Phosphorus (P) target and uncertainty around whether Sewage Treatment Works alone achieve the required P reduction for the harbour to avoid P nutrient neutrality is pretty well avoided. We need to avoid protracted discussion with Environment Agency seeking to agree the reductions to be achieved by the Sewage Treatment Works to avoid P neutrality."*

Dorset has in 2024 been allowed to count as certain just 6 small wastewater treatment works, saving just 1.5 tonnes of P a year, despite an admission in the colluding email with Natural England (to agree on the approach for a joint letter to the Defra Sec of State) that the agricultural P exceeds that small 1.5 tonnes per year annual P saving.

The 6 small wastewater treatment works in Dorset are for a population equivalent 1,000 to 2,000 and won't be completed until 2031 (past the AMP8/LURA 2025-30 period). Dorset has managed, via the Environment Agency and Defra, to get for small villages extra wastewater treatment works investments from Wessex Water; lift all P restrictions NOW by avoiding agricultural P loads AND by making the 1.5 tonnes only of annual P removal from the 6 very small wastewater treatment works count as certain 7 years early and before the Wessex Water AMP8/LURA improvements occur.

Can we employ the Dorset Council, Strategic Planning Officer here in Somerset?

By comparison, Somerset Council has not persuaded via the Environment Agency and Defra, Wessex Water to invest in small village wastewater treatment works (for the population equivalent 1,000-2,000); is insisting that all agricultural legacy and current P is fully counted and making everyone wait until 2030 before counting 2025-30 Wessex Water AMP8/LURA improvements to lower P calculator costs.

Ironically, the Natural England Officer who is keeping Somerset "to the rules for the following of", is a trustee and director of the Dorset Wildlife Trust, where not a peep was heard when all P mitigation was lifted for Dorset this year.

Somerset water bill payers will be subsidising Dorset water bill payers, while we enable Dorset to get a real economic and social/affordable housing advantage over us.

A tale of two villages, both wanting to build starter and social housing to keep young people in the village and make the local primary school viable:

The village in Dorset can do that now without impediments, delays or extra costs. They control where development occurs as they now have a 5-year housing land supply.

The village in Somerset has planning delays, upfront costs, complex P mitigation bureaucratic requirements and an extra £22K per home mitigation cost. Control of where development goes is in the hands of speculative developers as there is no 5-year housing land supply.

Dorset can Go for Growth, while Somerset is stuck in the NoCanDo "rules for the following of" slow lane.....

I pay £2,900 a year in Council Tax and I hope that the large portion for Somerset Council goes towards defending and promoting Somerset's economic and social interests. On nutrient neutrality, it doesn't.