

Minutes of a Meeting of the Scrutiny Committee - Climate and Place held in the Luttrell Room - County Hall, Taunton TA1 4DY, on Wednesday, 17 May 2023 at 10.00 am

Present:

Cllr Martin Dimery (Chair)

Cllr Adam Boyden (Vice-Chair)

Cllr Alan Bradford

Cllr Henry Hobhouse

Cllr Dave Mansell

Cllr Harry Munt

Cllr Tom Power

Cllr Bente Height

Cllr Marcus Kravis

Cllr Matthew Martin

Cllr Connor Payne

Cllr Alex Wiltshire

1 Apologies for Absence - Agenda Item 1

Apologies were received from Councillor Edric Hobbs.

2 Declarations of Interest - Agenda Item 2

There were no additional declarations of interest.

3 Public Question Time - Agenda Item 3

Dr A Clegg and Mr D Orr had both submitted statements to the Committee in respect of agenda item 5 – Economy, Employment and Planning: Phosphates Update and are detailed under minute no. 5.

4 Approach to Climate and Place Scrutiny Committee - Agenda Item 4

Members received a presentation on the principles of scrutiny and the approach being taken regarding scrutiny within the new Somerset Council, which would be reviewed after a year.

There would be 5 scrutiny committees, one for each of service directorates, each with their own functional areas of responsibility.

They noted that this Committee's remit covered:

Climate, Environment and Sustainability:

- Carbon Neutrality
- Climate Resilience and Adaptation
- Renewable Energy
- Country Parks, Local Nature Recovery Strategy, Local Nature Reserves, AONB Partnerships (Countryside Services)
- Biodiversity (and net gain) and Ecology
- Sustainability
- Waste Service
- Emergency Planning and Business Continuity
- Water Management
- Flooding Response
- Coastal Protection Authority
- Somerset Rivers Authority

Infrastructure & Transport:

- Highways Authority
- Public Rights of Way
- Parking
- Active Travel
- Traffic Management
- Transport
- Public Transport
- Fleet Management
- Contracted Transport
- Strategic Transport Planning
- Road Safety
- Infrastructure Commissioning

Economy, Employment & Planning:

- Economic Development and Tourism
- Planning (conservation, enforcement, DM, local plan, waste and minerals, s106 allocations/CIL, Phosphates)
- Affordable Housing and Enabling
- City/Town Centre Management
- Trading Standards (Devon partnership)
- Skills
- Education Business Partnership
- Economic infrastructure, services and Innovation Centres
- Regeneration (non-housing)

- Major Projects
- Nuclear Power
- Scientific Services

Additionally, they would have the responsibility of providing a check and challenge function for decisions and policies made by the Executive, as well as contributing towards policy development and developing its own forward plan.

It was hoped that, with the use of member workshops and task & finish groups, which the Scrutiny Officer was now able to support, the wide remit of the Committee could be addressed.

Mickey Green the Executive Director for Climate & Place introduced himself and his 3 service Directors who gave a quick outline of their service areas:

- Kirsty Larkins – Service Director, Climate, Sustainability and Environment
- David Carter – Service Director, Infrastructure and Transport
- Paul Hickson – Service Director, Economy, Employment and Planning

The Executive Director's intention was to have a thematic approach to meeting e.g. a watery theme for July's meeting and invite people like Wessex Water in. Additionally, bringing in items at an early stage in order to get a steer from members.

The following points were raised by members;

- Concerns over managing the caseload with meeting now bi-monthly instead of monthly as in the past.
- The use of task & finish groups would be helpful
- It would be helpful to get the opportunity to be involved with policies at an early stage and have a councillor led process
- Action trackers on written questions and committee recommendations could become a standard part of the agenda

The following items were also suggested as potential future scrutiny items:

- Waste, with the new business plan being implemented
- Transport – active travel and public transport (bus service improvement plan)
- Items from the forward plan of the previous Scrutiny for Policies and Place Committee
- Planning and Section 106 agreements in respect of the management of open spaces
- Climate emergency strategy governance and how this was going to work in relation to the new partnership board and Executive Sub-Committee
- New local plan – having announced climate and ecological emergencies being able to influence its development at an early stage

The Chair encouraged members to make suggestions of topics for future meetings and suggested that they could be emailed to himself, Vice-Chair, Mr Jackson or Mr Green.

5 Economy, Employment and Planning: Phosphates update - Agenda Item 5

The follow statement was read out to the Committee:

From Dr Andrew Clegg

Statement for Item 5 of the Scrutiny Committee meeting on 17th May 2023

I am a former research chemist who has lived in Martock–on the Parrett–for over 30 years. I was responsible for guiding Martock Neighbourhood Plan to fruition two years ago, only to find that all new development had been put on phosphate hold rendering the South Somerset Local Plan, and ours with it, 'out of date'.

When I looked into the Ramsar phosphate issue it was immediately clear that there was a dearth of local data and remediating policy was therefore being built on extrapolations from a national modelling system. As the classical standard phosphate test is a simple and reliable one, I set about, with a small group from several Parrett parishes, planning a detailed mapping of phosphate flow in the Parrett, the Yeo and many of their tributaries.

Our work is supported and funded by the Parish Councils of Haselbury Plucknett, Merriott, Martock, and Huish Episcopi, and by Langport Town Council. It covers the Parrett and its tributaries from South Perrott to West Sedgemoor and includes the Yeo downstream from Wetmoor. We regularly share and discuss data with scientists from Natural England and the RSPB (who own much of the West Sedgemoor SSSI) and seek advice from staff of two universities involved in the field.

Conclusions from two years of surveys are now emerging and a number are significantly at odds with some assumptions on which recent Somerset policy is being built. This gives rise to some concerns, one of which is that the current Somerset policy outlined in this agenda item tends to focus on only one aspect of this complex issue to the detriment of others.

A second concern is that while Parrett catchment nutrient neutrality is, per se, desirable, it is likely to have minimal impact on the Ramsar Moors and distracts attention from the main problem. The real issue is the very high concentration of phosphate already in the river sediments deposited over the years mainly by our 11 sewage plants not one of which removes phosphate.

We are now publishing our data as it is collected on www.SomersetLevelsPhosphate.org.uk and through periodic short single-topic reports which we will circulate to the new Councillors, many of whom we are already in contact with. We look forward to regular future exchanges as the new authority takes on the task of addressing the deteriorating state of the Levels.

In response to these statements officers stated that understanding the evidence was really important in a complex technical field like this and that the Council was working with expert universities in the field as part of that need for objective evidence. They believed that everyone's insight, data and evidence was welcomed and that they would be requesting a meeting with Doctor Clegg's so that they could discuss his research, look at the evidence with him and see what insight that could bring.

The second statement received was then read out:

Statement to Scrutiny for Climate and Place by David Orr 17th May Item 5 phosphate pollution V2

I welcome this new Scrutiny Committee for Climate and Place in our new Somerset Council.

The phosphate and sewage pollution issues are very high up the public agenda and rightly commands public attention and media scrutiny.

Somerset West & Taunton Council have been robust in setting up an innovative model for generating phosphate credits. That "can do" approach now needs to be spread across all the impacted areas in Somerset.

In his statement, Dr Clegg has raised concerns that the computer modelling driving phosphate policy across Somerset may be flawed in some areas specific to river basins in Somerset. More publicly funded research with real world measurements should be commissioned.

Somerset shouldn't be closed to new homes because "the computer says No".

On "the polluter pays" basis, are Wessex Water sharing enough of the remediation burden and the costs of phosphate credits? Not just for current pollution, but also for the many years of historic pollution, which has played a significant role in where we find ourselves today.

Somerset, from Saxon times, is the Land of the Summer People. We are known nationally and internationally for our beautiful landscapes of tidal rivers, drains,

world-class wetlands and lush pastures, punctuated by hills and ancient isles. Right now, that lovely, watery landscape is degraded by phosphate and sewage pollution.

There is a backlog of 18,000 new homes and other developments including farms and tourist facilities across Somerset.

We rely on private sector housing developments to provide social housing with little council-owned new housing being built. So, phosphate pollution isn't just stopping 1st time buyers getting on the housing ladder, but it is limiting social housing and affordable homes. It impacts directly on Somerset's economy and the key construction sector and all of the ancillary services around that activity.

With this massive backlog for new homes and added housing needs from Hinkley Point C and the coming Gravity development, private rents are soaring. We need to get the new homes backlog falling quickly by removing phosphates from our waterways with urgency and ambition.

This is a perfect opportunity for the new Somerset (super) Council to show community leadership and demonstrate that the costly merger of five councils into one unitary council, can deal with the issues of phosphate and sewage pollution assertively and at pace.

The people of Somerset want to see strong leadership from their new Council.

A Somerset where much-needed new housing is carefully planned for, approved and then actually gets built (!); a Somerset where rivers have safe bathing spots; a Somerset where our precious rivers, drains and wetlands are back in a pristine condition and long before 2050.

The Americans got the first manned mission to the moon in just 9 years. Surely, this Council can set stretching targets with Wessex Water and other stakeholders (including the farming community, Natural England and the water industry regulators) to significantly reduce phosphate pollution by 2025, with large-scale removal by 2035.

That is the challenge that this Committee, all Councillors and our new super Council needs to rise to and meet.

Thank you

The Committee then received a presentation from officers which gave a high-level overview of:

- Nutrient neutrality and the requirement for new developments to be phosphate neutral - 73 local authorities were affected
- The Somerset wide progress made to date
- The Leveling Up & Regeneration Bill which was proposing the upgrading of treatment works
- The Government's Nutrient Mitigation Fund
- A update on phosphate and that phosphates from farming were still an important issue
- Progress being made in the River Tone catchment area
- The River Tone Phosphate Credit Scheme
- The River Brue catchment area
- The River Parrett catchment area

Concerns

- That 85-90% of the phosphates in the rivers was actually from sewage and that it was the water treatment works that needed improving.
- The Dutch Case related to nitrogen and not to phosphates
- The focus of efforts appeared to be on mitigation rather than solving the problem.
- There was a need to create wetlands, where watercourses entered the sites of special scientific interest, in order to filter out the phosphates.
- The serious impact it was having upon development in the county.

Officers explained that whilst the planning system tried to mitigate the impact of development there was a need to solve the problem.

In response to question they confirmed:

- The number of properties that could be developed per phosphate credit varied. It all depended upon which water treatment plant(s) covered that particular site. As a rough guide, the average cost per property in Taunton was approximately £5,500.
- The problem was unlikely to go away until the Somerset Levels were back in a sustainable condition.
- A full briefing session on phosphates had been arranged for members later in the month phosphates.
- Whilst they were hopeful of receiving Government grant funding, they would continue to work with landowners and others to develop schemes.
- They were currently working with colleagues in East Devon and Dorset, because it also impacted upon the River Axe, as well as other councils more generally, to understand what solutions other people were bringing forward and what innovative ways of working there were.

Cllr C Payne left the meeting.

The Committee then adjourned at 11:46am and re-adjourned at 11:57am.

6 Infrastructure and Transport: Highways Service Responsiveness update - Agenda Item 6

The Committee considered a request to establish a task and finish group in order to improve the responsiveness of the Highways and Transport Service, a priority for the new Council, recognising that responsiveness to some enquiries had been a cause of concern for both the public and members.

Members agreed that this was a much needed piece of work and that there was also a need to consider the response time for councillors enquiries and they requested that a reminder of the members casework system be circulated to all members.

Resolved

To endorse the creation of a task and finish group to review the Highways and Transport Services communication interfaces and service responsiveness with the following membership:

- Cllr Bente Height
- Cllr Henry Hobhouse
- Cllr Marcus Kravis
- Cllr Dave Mansell
- Cllr Tom Power

7 Climate, Environment and Sustainability: EV charging update - Agenda Item 7

The Committee was advised that the Council was looking at applying for additional funding from the Electric Vehicle Infrastructure (LEVI) fund in order to run a small scale Egully trial. The Egully enables the on-street charging of residential vehicles, where people do not have their own driveways, without trailing wires across pavements etc. After the trial they would then report back and develop a strategy based upon their findings.

Members felt that whilst this was only a small part of the overall solution it was a worthwhile one.

The Committee also noted the update on the Electric Vehicle Charging Strategy which had been developed by the previous 4 district and county council.

In response to questions it was confirmed that they had already started the de-carbonising of their fleet of vehicles and were looking to introduce a requirement that any vehicle under 3.5 tonnes would have to be electric.

In developing the strategy, they would also be looking at things such as:

- The current variety of inherited charging schemes within the county.
- The provision of charging points within council owned car parks.

- The use of standard and quick chargers.
- Whether charging points were needed to encourage visitors to certain areas or to support the tourist trade.
- In house operation versus the use of operator concession schemes.
- The need to have control over the prices charged to the end user.

8 Date of the next meeting - Agenda Item 8

The date of the next meeting was confirmed as Wednesday 19 July 2023 at 10.00am.

9 Urgent item of business - Agenda Item 9

The Chair confirmed that there was an urgent item of business. To confirm the minutes from the final meetings of Somerset County Council's Scrutiny for Policies, Environment Committee and the and place an d

Resolved

To approve the minutes of the Scrutiny for Policies, Environment Committee meeting of the 29 March 2023 and the minutes of the Scrutiny for Policies and Place Committee Meeting of the 7 March 2023 as correct records.

(The meeting ended at 12.50 pm)

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CHAIR