

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).