

Draft minutes of the meeting of Scrutiny for Policies, Environment committee held on 29th March 2023 at 10am in the Wyndham Room, County Hall, Taunton, TA1 4DY.

Committee members present: Cllr Martin Dimery (Chair), Cllr Marcus Kravis, Cllr Alex Wiltshire, Cllr Steve Ashton, Cllr Harry Munt, Cllr Tom Power, Cllr Leigh Redman (sub) Cllr Norman Cavill (sub) Cllr Simon Coles (sub) Cllr Mike Stanton (sub), Cllr Sue Osborne (sub)

Non-committee members present: Cllr Sarah Dyke, Lead Member for Environment, Cllr Dave Mansell (virtual) Cllr Martin Lovell (virtual), Cllr Dixie Darch (virtual), Cllr Sarah Wakefield (virtual), Cllr Connor Payne.

Officers present:

Mickey Green	Managing Director, Somerset Waste Partnership
Jamie Jackson	Governance Manager Scrutiny, Somerset County Council SCC
Jacob Hall	Climate Change and Resilience Officer, Mendip District Council
Rosie Walker	External Affairs Southwest, The Woodland Trust
Mark Fortune	Programme Manager Climate Emergency, SCC
Jonathon Doyle	Strategic Manager ECI Climate and Flood Management, SCC
Stephanie Gold	Senior Democratic Services Officer, SCC
Lee Willment	Democratic Services Officer, SCC

Agenda item 1: Apologies for absence

Apologies for absence were received from Cllr Alan Bradford (Cllr Sue Osborne as sub), Cllr Jo Roundell-Greene (Cllr Mike Stanton as sub) and Cllr Barry Clarke (Cllr Norman Cavill as sub), Cllr Adam Boyden (virtual), Cllr Henry Hobhouse (Cllr Simon Coles as sub), Cllr Kathy Pearce (Cllr Leigh Redman as sub)

Agenda item 2: Declarations of interest

Cllr Harry Munt advised the committee of his employment with an Urban Forestry Consultancy company, but added that this had already been recorded in members' Register of Interests.

Agenda item 3: Minutes from the previous meeting

Members approved the minutes of the previous meeting held on 28th February 2023

Agenda item 4: Public Question Time

There were no public questions received.

Agenda item 5: Somerset Tree Strategy

Cllr Sarah Dyke introduced The Somerset Tree Strategy and advised that it had been developed over the last 9 months with a huge range of key stakeholders and many passionate members of the public. Unfortunately, a bid for funding had been unsuccessful,

however all five Somerset Councils agreed to honour their Environmental commitments and fund the strategy. Cllr Dyke thanked the whole team for bringing together a brilliant piece of work and then introduced Jacob Hall, Climate Change and Resilience officer, Mendip District Council to the committee who talked members through the following key points.

- Collaboration was the key to this strategy. There were over 750 responses received in the public consultation, and very wide engagement through the steering group.
- This strategy is very unique to Somerset.
- We are hopeful that there will be three officers coming into post to support this strategy in May.
- In response to a query, he had received from members before the meeting; the strategy is not just about trees, but rural and urban treescapes including hedgerows and mistletoe.
- More work needs to be done with Specialists on Tree Replacement Policies.

The committee were then introduced to Rosie Walker, External Affairs Officer from The Woodland Trust who outlined to members some of the national context surrounding this strategy such as -

- We are in a Natural and Biological Crisis
- Somersets canopy cover is 8%, but the national average is currently 13%.
- There is a long history of low planting rates in the UK.
- We need to work together with all key stakeholders and the public to reach the national average of 13% as a minimum, but aim for an even higher rate of 17%, and this strategy enables us to do this by breaking down the actions into manageable steps over the next 7 years.

The following comments and questions were received and discussed –

- Regarding Tree replacement policies vary across the county and district councils from 5 – 20 years. Can we harmonise these policies to 10 years, and that the correct species of trees are planted? The External Affairs Officer from the Woodland Trust advised that the team are currently working with Devon Council and other stakeholders on a model policy that we are very keen to push for at Somerset Council.
- Regarding engaging communities, how are we going to empower communities to start tree planting schemes locally.
- Regarding funding, are we looking at all potential funding streams? The Climate Change Resilience Officer advised that the detail of this will come through once the mandate for the tree strategy is accepted by Somerset Council. The Woodland Trust officer added that whilst there is tree planting funding available, this strategy involves a lot of work and so the people element of this strategy is key.
- This policy will need to be enforced by the Council's four Planning committees.
- Hedgerows and wildlife corridors are incredibly important.
- Somerset Council is a significant landowner, so it is so important that the Council leads by example i.e by starting community pilots as soon as possible.

- Regarding engaging communities, we should ensure that one of the actions of this strategy involves supporting Forrest School programmes in schools.
- Regarding Tree protection orders, it is concerning that there are many trees that are being felled due to pests and diseases.
- How are we going to be supporting landowners who are already buried under so much legislation when maintaining significant portions of land?
- Planting isn't always done properly. i.e. the wrong types of trees are being imported from overseas and bringing invasive pests and diseases and although trees are planted, they are not managed and maintained so many are lost.
- This Tree Strategy doesn't seem to give enough acknowledgement and support for all of the Tree planting projects being undertaken by community groups across Somerset. Particularly those projects that have faced complications and have been paused due to barriers around land ownership and planning legislation.
- Are we looking at Tree Asset Registers (i.e Highway tree assets) and Tree Health Plans as part of this strategy?
- Can we use a 'Call for Action' to launch this strategy and maximise engagement with as many people and groups as we possibly can.
- Regarding timescales, how are the measures and monitoring going to be done. The External Affairs Officer from The Woodland Trust advised that regarding performance monitoring, work was still being done on ownership of schemes.
- What is our policy on trees being felled by insurance companies? Can we use CAVAT to help value the trees' environmental value?
- We need to check that the Actions document captures all the actions fully (it appears that the SPD reference is incomplete in the Actions document)
- There are some grammatical errors in the document that will need correcting.
- Regarding tree canopy targets, this figure is net gain, which does take into account losses.

The Chair thanked the officers for their attendance and the Scrutiny for Policies, Environment committee endorsed the adoption of the Somerset Tree Strategy as set out in recommendation 2.1 of the Scrutiny report with the following amendment.

AMENDMENT: bullet point 3 and scrutiny further recommends that Somerset Council Executive takes the appropriate action to develop and adopt a council wide policy to implement and guide everyone on the objectives of the strategy and reports back to this scrutiny committee within 6 months. - *All in favour*

Agenda item 6: Climate Emergency Declaration progress update

Cllr Sarah Dyke, Lead member for Climate Change and Environment introduced the item and provided members with the high-level context of the Climate Emergency Strategy. She welcomed Mark Fortune, Programme Manager Climate Emergency and Jon Doyle, Strategic Manager ECI Climate Change who talked members through a PowerPoint presentation detailing the progress of the Climate Emergency Strategy. The presentation contained detailed slides for the following -

- Climate Change – national context and drivers
- Climate and Ecological Emergency Declarations
- Towards a Climate Resilient Somerset
- Governance
- Current Progress
- National, Local and Corporate Challenges

The following comments and questions were received and discussed -

- Regarding Somerset's 40 miles of coastline, how can we incorporate this into the strategy? The Strategic Manager ECI advised that the statutory duties on this had been held by the District Councils, but that this does now need to be incorporated into our current thinking as a unitary authority.
- How can we ensure we are measuring and monitoring all of the impacts of the decarbonisation work that Somerset Council is doing to achieve net zero by 2030? The Programme manager, Climate Change explained that the strategy includes pathways to net zero which help us measure and monitor the progress of the strategy. He added that one of the key priorities for this Council is to rewrite the Transport Plan for Somerset, and this will have a huge impact on the carbon reduction rates in the Transport sector.
- What are the top priorities for achieving net zero by 2030, what is the timeline for a refreshed climate and ecological strategy, and how can members be involved with this, e.g. Scrutiny Task and Finish groups? The Programme Manager advised that the strategy does need to be rewritten and refreshed, and that work will begin on this very soon, adding that the biggest priorities and challenges for Somerset are the Transport Plan and Retrofitting.
- Non-committee member online: How are we engaging with parishes on retrofitting? The Climate Change and Resilience Officer explained that there are various funding opportunities available, particularly for those in fuel poverty, and also advised that two retrofit co-ordinators have been recruited.
- Regarding decarbonisation and travel infrastructure, walkways, cycle routes and bus routes are a huge issue both locally and nationally.
- What funding is available for businesses to accelerate retrofitting in the commercial sector?
- Are there any plans for use of windmills in Somerset, as there are none currently?
- Are we engaging and aligning the strategy with local projects such as the Frome Green & Healthy Futures lottery funded project? The Climate Change and Resilience Officer confirmed that Somerset Council will continue to engage with that specific project as well as other community led projects.
- Regarding planning legislation, as a unitary authority we need to lobby central government for better environmental and ecological legislation in national planning policy and framework.
- Is there a changing attitude and behaviour towards consumer generation of electricity that is sold back into the National Grid?

The Chair thanked the officers for their attendance and concluded that around the room there is great deal of knowledge from all political persuasions, and that this is crucial to driving the environmental and ecological agenda forwards. The Scrutiny for Policies, Environment committee noted the update.

Agenda item 7: Any other items of business

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

[MEETING CLOSED 12:25PM]