SWT Community Scrutiny Committee - 27 January 2022

Present: Councillor Libby Lisgo (Chair)

Councillors Dave Mansell, Ian Aldridge (In place of Andy Pritchard), Tom Deakin, Steve Griffiths, John Hassall (In place of Richard Lees), Dawn Johnson, Mark Lithgow, Andy Milne, Vivienne Stock-Williams, Ray Tully, Sarah Wakefield and Loretta Whetlor (In place of Janet Lloyd)

Officers: James Barrah, Chris Brown, Marcus Prouse, Jonathan Stevens, Sue Tomlinson, Jessica Kemmish and Sam Murrell

Also Present: Councillors Dixie Darch and Brenda Weston

(The meeting commenced at 6.17 pm)

The Chair reflected that it was Holocaust Memorial Day and that they had been thinking on the horror of the Holocaust throughout the day.

The Chair thanked staff who were involved in achieving Somerset West and Taunton Council being ranked top nationally in the Climate Emergency Scorecard and congratulations were given for that achievement by the committee.

69. **Apologies**

Apologies were given by the following committee members, Cllrs S Coles who attended the meeting via Zoom, Cllr R Lees who was substituted by Cllr J Hassall, Cllr A Pritchard who attended via Zoom and was substituted by Cllr I Aldridge and Cllr J Lloyd who was substituted by Cllr Whetlor.

The Portfolio Holder for Housing, Cllr Fran Smith, also gave their apologies.

70. **Minutes of the previous meeting of the Community Scrutiny Committee**

The committee resolved to approve the minutes of the previous meeting held on 6th January 2022.

71. **Declarations of Interest**

Members present at the meeting declared the following personal interests in their capacity as a Councillor or Clerk of a County, Town or Parish Council or any other Local Authority:-

Name	Minute No.	Description of Interest	Reason	Action Taken
Cllr S Coles	All Items	SCC & Taunton Charter Trustee	Personal	Spoke and Voted

Cllr T Deakin	All Items	Taunton Charter Trustee	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr D Johnson	All Items	SCC	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr L Lisgo	All Items	Taunton Charter Trustee	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr M Lithgow	All Items	Wellington	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr D Mansell	All Items	Wiveliscombe	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr A Milne	All Items	Porlock	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr V Stock-Williams	All Items	Wellington	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr R Tully	All Items	West Monkton	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr B Weston	All Items	Taunton Charter Trustee	Personal	Spoke
Cllr L Whetlor	All Items	Watchet	Personal	Spoke and Voted

72. **Public Participation**

There was no public participation.

73. **Community Scrutiny Request/Recommendation Trackers**

The committee noted the Request and Recommendation trackers.

74. **Community Scrutiny Forward Plan**

The Committee noted the Community Scrutiny Forward Plan.

75. **Executive and Full Council Forward Plans**

The Committee noted the forward plans.

76. **Report of the Task and Finish Group on Council Housing Zero Carbon Retrofit**

Cllr Mansell gave a presentation on the work of the Zero Carbon Retrofit Task and Finish Group:

- The Task and Finish Group was set up by the Scrutiny Committee before it was spilt into two separate Scrutiny Committees.
- Membership of the Task and Finish Group was Cllr David Mansell, Cllr Norman Cavill, Cllr Ian Aldridge, Cllr Alan Wedderkopp and Cllr John Hassall. The group was supported by officers.
- Eight online meetings were held. Presentations were given by officers as well as from representatives of external organisations such as Sanctuary Housing.

- The group sought to look at ways to undertake zero carbon retrofits and looked at what would be needed to achieve zero carbon and carbon neutrality.
- The group looked at whole house retrofit which involved retrofitting the whole house. This could be beneficial as only insulating one area, such as the loft, could lead to damp in certain areas of a house.
- The group considered Enegiesprong which looked like a good method for retrofit. Also looked at what other councils were doing and other retrofit approaches.
- Near the end of the group's work a guide called the LETI retrofit guide was published.
- The group looked at a comparison between the cost of gas and electricity. There were levies on electricity which made it more expensive even though it was the cleaner fuel. A comparison of heat pumps and gas boilers was also undertaken.
- Announcements about government policy and funding had been made recently.
- Energiesprong used a wrapping layer around the outside of a house to insulate it. This was both more beneficial than interior insulation and was also designed to be more cost effective. There were a number of local authorities working with and using Energiesprong and Energiesprong had government support, however, the cost of Energiesprong was currently still relatively high.
- An explanation of the recommendations in the report of the Task and Finish Group were given.
- The following was highlighted from the recommendations the Task and Finish Group put forward; a need for a guide for the net zero retrofit of the council's housing stock, the potential for work to be done in stages based on a whole house approach, a target date needed for gas boilers to cease being fitted in the Council's housing stock, solar and thermal panels being provided where there was a business need for it, a report being produced on what would be needed to achieve a net zero retrofit programme and funding being sought for carbon retrofit.
- It was raised that there was greater use of electricity planned, for example to power cars and for heating. Greater energy efficiency was therefore needed, as well as more zero carbon electricity and more renewable energy production.
- The use of the LETI guide for retrofit was encouraged.

The Chair thanked Cllr Mansell for his presentation.

The Portfolio Holder for Climate Change introduced the report:

- Thanked Cllr Mansell and the others on the Task and Finish Group for all their work. The level of detail in the report was commendable.
- Raised that it was a complicated situation without an easy solution. We were in a transition period during which we would have to decide what to prioritise as part of the transition process.

The Assistant Director for Housing and Communities introduced the report:

- There was significant consensus between the Task and Finish Group and officers.
- Officers were working hard to deliver a strategy and a delivery plan. These would consider the variables such as different property types and provide fully costed options.
- It was raised that there would be a balance to be struck between speed of transition and cost.
- It was raised that the Council sought to keep people out of fuel poverty, the lower power consumption that could be achieved the better for the customer, regardless of fuel type. The strategy coming forward would consider that.
- Officers welcomed the work of the Task and Finish Group. There were still some aspects to work through in terms of costings which would be looked at as part of the strategy being produced.

During the debate the following points were raised:

- It was asked about fuel poverty and whether any work had been done elsewhere in the country to identify the fuel poverty tipping point. Officers responded that fuel poverty had been an issue in social housing for a long time. Officers would look to measure the impact of retrofit in terms of fuel poverty as part of the assessment of various options.
- It was asked what impact Unitary would have upon any decisions the Council may make in relation to this subject. Officers responded that the HRA would still face the same issues when the new authority was formed. The money in the HRA was ringfenced, there was a 30-year business plan and business would have to continue. The HRA would combine with Sedgemoor's when the new authority formed and partnership working with Sedgemoor had already begun. Financial decisions which bound the new authority would have to be made in accordance with the legislation. However, the ringfencing of the HRA funds and the 30-year business plan would enable some work to continue.
- It was asked about the kilo watt hours per year per square meter measurement and whether this was based floor area or footprint of the area. Officers responded that the measurements tended to be based on square meterage, so a volume of air that needs to be heated. There would be a need to understand the energy usage for different archetypes, for example a bungalow or a terraced house.
- It was raised that the cost of a fuel did not relate to the amount of energy in it. Even with gas prices rising, electricity was still around three times more expensive.
- It was asked if funds could be borrowed from the Public Loans Board for investment in retrofit. It was responded by officers that money could be borrowed but generally in the business plan the revenue set aside against depreciation of the housing stock was generally what funded the capital replacement programme. Ultimately action would be determined by affordability and what could be achieved alongside all the other costs the HRA faced. A range of treasury options for funding any work was always considered.
- Support was expressed for insulating homes.

- It was raised that properties in higher exposure zones, namely zones 4 and 3, were not best suited to have things such as cavity wall insulation or ground source heat pumps. Instead, retrofit solutions in these zones would be more expensive. It was asked if this had been considered. Officers responded that the comments were noted and when a strategy was brought forward these aspects would be considered.
- It was raised that there were government grants available for insulation being fitted in homes. Officers responded that there were a range of government grants available, some of which were open to the Council as a Landlord, such as subsidies for heat pumps which the Council had received, and others were not.
- It was suggested that it would be worthwhile making a commitment to when properties should be insulated by in addition to when gas boilers should cease to be installed. The Chair of the Task and Finish Group agreed that deadlines for installing insulation as well as deadlines for gas boilers ceasing to be installed would be important.
- It was asked if any research had been done into tenants' reception to improvement works for the purpose of achieving net zero. A representative of the Task and Finish Group suggested it would be best to work with tenants who were supportive first and then expand from there. There would be disruption during installation but there would be benefits in terms of reductions to energy bills.
- It was asked if the installation of electric vehicle charging points would be included in this work. The Chair of the Task and Finish Group expressed support for this being included.
- It was asked how practical converting the Council's housing stock would be, for example in relation to radiators. It was suggested that looking into central heating systems for groups of houses may be worthwhile as these could use existing radiators. The Chair of the Task and Finish Group responded that each property would have to be looked at individually for what the best solution was. Central Heating Systems and Heat Networks had been looked at by the group. They could be beneficial but could also be expensive although there was some government support.
- The Chair of the Task and Finish Group noted that gas in gas boilers and electricity in heat pumps had been compared by the group. At the current time electricity and gas were quite close to each other in terms of how clean they were as an energy source, but electricity would continue to become cleaner. A heat pump halved the carbon used compared to gas. Heat pumps were more expensive to buy and install currently but there were government grants and costs should decrease over time.
- It was raised that plans and information on retrofit should be publicised to the public and it was suggested it would be beneficial to look beyond the Council's own housing stock as the Council's own housing stock was only a small percentage of the homes in the district.
- Concerns were raised about fuel poverty.
- It was asked how much had already been done to retrofit the Council's housing stock and what was left to be done and what the costings for retrofit would be. The Chair of the Task and Finish Group responded that the group had looked at the costs of retrofit and included some examples but that no

precise costings had been done. It would however be a sizeable sum to undertake a complete retrofit of the Council's housing stock.

- The Chair of the Working Group expressed that they hoped their work had helped to inform what the Housing Directorate would bring forward in their strategy. The group intended the recommendations to act as a steer for officers.
- The Chair of the Task and Finish Group proposed that the report proceed to the Executive and then to the Full Council

The Committee resolved to approve recommendation 2.2 of the report:

2.2 To note the report of the Task and Finish Group on Council Housing Zero Carbon Retrofit.

- The Chair suggested that the Committee pass the report in its entirety to the Executive and the Leader. This would exclude the committee recommending the report to Full Council, with this decision left to the Executive.
- Officers responded that ahead of the report going to the Executive they would add further officer commentary and detail and that they would look at the wording of the recommendations to ensure it would not bind the Council to anything which would not be achievable financially.
- The Chair of the Task and Finish report agreed support for the report going to the Executive.

The Committee resolved to submit the entirety of the report of the Task and Finish Group to the Executive and the Leader of Council for review.

James Barrah and Marcus Prouse left the meeting at this point.

77. **Annual Update of CNCR Progress**

The Portfolio Holder for Climate Change introduced the report:

- The Council's CNCR Plan was approved in October 2020 and built into that plan was an annual review report to be produced to review progress.
- The report focused on the 180 immediate actions in the CNCR Plan.

The Assistant Director for Climate Change raised the following points:

- This was the first update on the CNCR plan. There were 180 actions included in the report. The main successes were highlighted.
- Work against the plan was progressing quickly and there were some updates since the report was published. Such as the fact that all the Council's fleet cars would be electric by the end of the year and extensive woodland creation projects having been progressed.
- The Council was today named highest scoring district council in the UK by Climate Emergency UK who have scored all council action plans.

- The CNCR was a live document and constantly updated. The appointment of officers to own updating the progress on actions was currently being undertaken.
- Some commitments were challenging but there were some which were easy steps. The plan was held by the Climate Team, but actions were taken by services across the Council. Some actions in the plan were reliant upon the action of external bodies but the Council would encourage those bodies to take action.
- There was difficulty in quantifying the amount to which these actions reduced the districts emissions, however, work on developing an approach to calculate this was being worked on.

During the debate the following points were raised:

- It was asked if the actions which proved the greatest challenges to complete were those where the Council did not have direct control and had to rely on external bodies. Officers responded that this interpretation was a fair assessment.

Cllr Deakin left the meeting at this point (20:14).

- It was expressed that there had been difficulty in persuading parish councils to install electric vehicle charging points even where funding was available. It was asked if more could be done to encourage parish councils to install charging points. Officers responded that the grants for electric vehicle charging points for parish councils were to be relaunched in the coming weeks and this would be communicated to parish councils.
- It was asked if grants for electric vehicle charging points were also available to the unparished area. Officers responded that they were. The Portfolio Holder for Climate Change added that those who had off road parking would likely install their own electric vehicle charging points and that those at places such as village halls would be used by those who did not have one at home.
- It was raised that some public water taps had been installed by town and parish councils and that their work should also be recognised. Officers responded that working with parish councils, community groups and other organisations would be vital to achieve net zero and agreed that their work should be recognised.
- It was raised that there was some reluctance on take up of waterless urinals.
- Thanks were expressed for the report.
- It was raised that electric vehicle charging points had been a success with usage increasing.
- Congratulations were given for coming first nationally in Climate Emergency UK’s rankings and for the work of officers and the Portfolio Holder on Climate Change.
- It was suggested that some of the higher impact areas for reducing emissions should be given greater focus.
- The marking of some items on the CNCR list as complete was questioned as the actions had not been fully achieved and more could be done to ensure those actions were completed. Officers responded that the plan to appoint

certain officers to monitor particular actions would hopefully resolve these issues with actions having been signed off as complete when not fully completed.

- The importance of achieving carbon neutrality as soon as possible was emphasised.
- It was asked if the Council was keeping up with the rise in electric car vehicle sales in terms of the installation of electric vehicle charging points.
- Acknowledging partner organisations in the report was encouraged. Officers responded that they would make changes to ensure partners were included and acknowledged for their efforts in the report.
- Suggestions were made as to ways in which the layout of the document could be improved.
- The portfolio holder thanked the committee for their comments and raised that partnership working was crucial. Showcasing examples of good work and engaging with communities on climate change was also important.
- The Chair thanked the portfolio holder and staff for all their hard work and for acknowledging and taking on board the comments of the committee.

78. **To Consider Reports from Executive Councillors - Councillor D Darch**

- The Portfolio Holder asked the Assistant Director for Climate Change to update on an application for funding for trees to DEFRA. The Assistant Director for Climate Change informed the committee that the Council was a partner in a bid that was submitted to DEFRA. The bid was for an exciting multi-year project and would be similar to the Forrest of Cornwall project. The project would span the whole of Somerset and all the other district councils in Somerset and Somerset County Council had been some of the partners involved as was Somerset Wildlife Trust in addition to other organisations.
- It was asked if the funding would provide money for the purchase of land for planting trees. Officers responded that some of the grant funding could be used to purchase land and that a full plan for the project would be put together if the bid was successful and grant funding received.
- It was asked whether there had been any accidents involving e-scooters and whether the Council could be held liable for any injury from accidents from e-scooter use. Officers responded that the operator's insurance covered any accidents, and that the Council did not have any liability. Statistic on incidents and accidents were not yet available but would be shared once they were available.
- The Chair raised that a report on e-scooters would be coming as an item to a future meeting of the Community Scrutiny Committee. Officers responded that this would be coming to the Community Scrutiny Committee meeting in March.

(The Meeting ended at 8.54 pm)