

SWT Community Scrutiny Committee - 3 June 2021

Present: Councillor

Councillors Simon Coles, John Hunt, Richard Lees, Mark Lithgow, Janet Lloyd, Dave Mansell, Hazel Prior-Sankey, Andy Pritchard, Vivienne Stock-Williams and Ray Tully

Officers: Andrew Randell, Marcus Prouse and Chris Hall

Also Present: Councillors John Hassall and Loretta Whetlor

(The meeting commenced at 6.15 pm)

1. Appointment of Vice-Chair

Councillor Mansell was nominated as Vice-Chair by Councillor Lithgow, which was seconded by Councillor Pritchard.

Councillor Mansell was duly appointed as the Vice-Chair for the municipal year.

2. Apologies

Apologies were received by Councillors Johnson and Milne.

Councillor Farbahi attended as a substitute for Councillor Johnson.

3. Declarations of Interest

There were no new declarations of Interest.

4. Public Participation

Alan Debenham provided the following statement to the Committee:-

Ever since the Earth summit of 1992 and its subsequent Local Agenda 21, 3Rs and new thrust for Sustainability there has been decades of talk and action to save life on this planet from a fate worse than death and yet here we are again repeating ourselves only with the hell on earth now much closer and its severity now much more devastating. Then and now (very much substantiated by the recent War-on-Want's Minerals Transition Report) the biggest essential to save us has been and still is reduction in consumption and economic activity especially in the UK's first world wealth status, so why is there so little in your expenditure and plans which relate to this only real life saver and why it's so important for us all to continue the present lockdown - or a lesser version - as long as possible and no real plans seem to have been made to set-up ward and street-led committees to deal with this enormous permanent change in lifestyle?

The Climate Change Portfolio Holder provided a response thanking Mr Debenham for his question and setting out the mineral transition report and the transition to renewables, reducing energy consumption and the impact. The responsibility for planning and regeneration to increase housing in the town centre was recognised. There has been a change in attitudes towards consumption and the Council had changed attitudes around lifestyle and behaviour changes.

5. **Community Scrutiny Request/Recommendation Trackers (verbal update).**

A verbal update was provided and recommendations would be tracked and provided as a monthly update for members of the Committee.

The committee noted the update.

6. **Community Scrutiny Forward Plan**

The Chair encouraged requests for future items from members of the committee. The following items were requested to be added to the forward plan and considered at a future committee:-

- An item on pay and display car parks was requested to have a better understanding of the consultation process and the decisions as a result of this process.
- A future item on bus service provision was requested.

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

The Executive and Full Council Forward Plans were considered and noted by the Committee.

8. **Carbon Neutrality and Climate Resilience Finance Report**

The Portfolio Holder introduced the report which set out the (CNCR) Finance position. The report has been provided at the request of Scrutiny Committee.

Since approval of the Carbon Neutrality and Climate Resilience (CNCR) plan in October 2020, 24 actions were completed during 2020/21 at a cost of £73,939.

Many of the initial actions in the CNCR plan had little or no cost attached to them; budget expenditure is therefore not a direct measure of success in progressing climate achievements. This report focuses on expenditure rather than response activity for 2020/21. Funds allocated to Climate Change are ring fenced to that activity and have been carried forward across budget years.

The CNCR budget for 2021/22 is fully allocated against the activities already approved within the Directorate plan.

The CNCR plan was an extensive list of potential activities. It contains a number of cross cutting actions and open-ended commitments. To support delivery the team, led by the Portfolio Holder (PH), review the actions to form a prioritised list which features in the service plan for the External Operations and Climate Change Directorate. Without a prioritised list of activity, the team could become conflicted in trying to deliver in an unfocussed or uncoordinated way.

The commitments list within the service plan is challenging, there is a Considerable amount of work on this list. Any draw on the team outside the agreed business plan will impact delivery performance.

Somerset West and Taunton Council allocated £500,000 for the delivery of the CNCR plan in October 2020 with the following delegations for expenditure:

“A supplementary “Climate Change Fund” budget of £500,000 is approved within the General Fund 2020/21 Revenue Budget, funded from General Reserves, for the delivery of Somerset West and Taunton priority actions with delegated authority to the Director External Operations and Climate Change / Assistant Director Climate Change, Regulatory Services and Asset Management to agree those priority actions in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Climate Change. Council also be asked to approve the principle that any unspent balance of this Fund at the end of 2020/21 be carried forward to 2021/22 financial year.”

Expenditure and allocations are tracked by the Assistant Director and Portfolio Holder (PH) in their standing fortnightly meetings. This meeting Recorded any financial decisions.

Purchase orders, payments, and internal transfers are managed within the Council's finance system. The actual expenditure for the year 2020/21 was set out in the report and the underspend that was carried forward to 2021/22.

During the debate the following comments and questions were raised:-

- Allocation of the budget for the Climate Change Action plan and the Somerset wide budget was requested a number of months ago, allocating the budget was felt necessary to clarify further information for Councillors.
- Increasing charging points and tree planting were supported by the Committee.
- What was required to achieve carbon neutrality was requested to be set out to gain an understanding of the scale of the challenge to make a greater difference on carbon targets.
- The figure of £50k to transfer the fleet to electric pool cars was questioned, alongside how the saving of maintenance of the previous fleet would be used and what budget allocation was previously being used for this purpose.
- Funding for waterless urinals in Taunton and West Somerset didn't include public toilet provision made by Parish Councils.
- Competing for funding bids were considered a positive factor going forward in achieving funding to tackle Climate Change.
- Working closely with other organisations such as the Somerset wildlife trust was ongoing.
- The feasibility study for carbon neutrality for property assets such as The Deane House was recognised as important, it wasn't always the best solution to pursue the option of solar PV installation. The background of Unitary meant all decisions needed to be considered in detail with the uncertainty in mind.
- Implementing carbon neutrality options which had the greatest impact was emphasised to achieve the best effect for the value of improvement in meeting carbon targets alongside improvements in technology introduction.

- The principle of the CNCR budget allowed pump priming, reduced costs would be declared as underspends, as a result of any improvements that were procured by the CNCR budget.
- The CNCR plan was adopted in October, the Council was still at an early stage in the development of this. A joint function with Sedgemoor would be leading by a joint recruitment of posts split 50/50 for the roles. The CNCR budget was reviewed on a monthly basis.
- The Council had been unable to successfully recruit to the Ecology Strategist post.
- There would remain long term tenants in The Deane House paying commercial rates for the property even if the future remained uncertain for the location of the New Council after 2023.
- Contributions relating to refurbishing costs for local conveniences were encouraged in all areas of the district. Greater communication with town and parish councils was encouraged.
- There was no reported antisocial behaviour issues with the introduction of e-scooters but it was recognised that there had been instances of misuse.
- Those looking to charge their cars would pay to do this in Council car parks.
- The wider climate impact on communities were considered.
- It was recognised greater communications were required, under the risk assessment on page 13 it was set out that the need for prioritised risk for carbon reduction options in the CNCR plan. A response was provided that this was appended to the report with a statement of completed actions and action owners in External Operations.

The Community Scrutiny Committee noted the report.

9. **Discussion on Councillors to invite as Executive PFH Cllrs (verbal update)**

The Chair welcomed future requests from the Committee for items at future meetings and Port-Folio Holder attendance.

The Committee considered and noted the update.

(The Meeting ended at 7.42 pm)