

SWT Community Scrutiny Committee - 6 January 2022

Present: Councillor Libby Lisgo (Chair)

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

Officers: Paul Fitzgerald, Marcus Prouse, Ian Candlish, Simon Lewis, Andrew Pritchard (Chief Executive), Jessica Kemmish, Sam Murrell, Kerry Prisco, Vicky Lowman, Stuart Noyce, James Barra, Chris Hall and Lisa Tuck

Also Present: Councillors Francesca Smith, Andrew Sully, Habib Farbahi, Marcus Kravis, Hazel Prior-Sankey, Mike Rigby and Brenda Weston.

Guest Speakers Naomi Griffith, Sally Lowndes and Georgie Grant from the Onion Collective.

Officers from East Hampshire District Council, Michelle Green, Chris Bradley and Emma Matthews.

(The meeting commenced at 6:15 pm)

58. **Apologies**

Apologies were received from Cllr Steven Griffiths who was substituted by Cllr John Hassall, Cllr John Hunt who was substituted by Cllr Loretta Whetlor and Cllr Andy Pritchard (who attended by Zoom instead).

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

The committee resolved to approve the minutes of the previous meeting held on 24th November 2022.

60. **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 R Lees	All Items	Taunton Charter Trustee	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 J Lloyd	All Items	Wellington & Sampford Arundel	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 F Smith	All Items	Taunton Charter Trustee	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 L Whetlor	All Items	Watchet	Personal	Spoke and Voted

Cllr Whetlor declared that she knew the representatives of the Onion Collective who were attending the meeting to present to the Community Scrutiny Committee about the work of their organisation.

61. **Public Participation**

There was no public Participation.

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

The committee noted the trackers.

63. **Community Scrutiny Forward Plan**

The committee noted the forward plan.

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

The committee noted the forward plans.

65. **The Onion Collective CIC**

The Chair welcomed the representatives of the Onion Collective to the meeting. Chris Hall, the Director for Development and Place introduced the item and raised the below points:

- The Council and the Onion Collective have built a strong relationship and the Council was thankful to the Onion Collective for their support following the failure of the Splash Point wall at Watchet.
- Informed the Committee that the Onion Collective were here to present on their work and give an update to members both as a result of a request from the Committee and through their own wish to update members on their work.

- The Onion Collective's East Quay development is well respected nationally though there is some local division as is common with such projects as they undertake.

The representatives of the Onion Collective gave a presentation and raised the following points during their presentation:

- The representatives raised that they appreciated the opportunity to come and update members on their work.
- West Somerset was a lovely place but faced challenges. For example, there was a significant lack of cultural activities.
- Noted that West Somerset was an Opportunity Area and that young people in the area in particular faced challenges.
- Introduced the team involved in the Onion Collective and the range of skills and experience amongst the team.
- Explained that the Onion Collective was a social enterprise. Any profits the company made were reinvested into the community and the projects the Onion Collective did. The directors also took part in consultancy, helping other CICs and charities, to raise money to fund the work of the Onion Collective.
- The Onion Collective had received funding from a variety of organisations including the Lottery and the Arts Council.
- The Onion Collective's approach was centred around community, was ambitious and nimble, collaborative, involved consultative working with partners and looking to address market and social failures.
- Several of the Directors of the Onion Collective were involved in setting up the youth and community centre Minehead Eye in Minehead ahead of the Onion Collective being formed.
- The Onion Collective worked with partner organisations to set up a Visitor Centre and Boat Museum in Watchet. This was one of the first projects the Onion Collective was involved in.
- The Onion Collective began by running small social action projects which have grown. Their collaboration with the Coastal Communities Team had likewise grown. Watchet had received £350,000 for community projects.
- The Onion Collective were looking to establish a new Bio Mill industry in Watchet. This had been a challenge, particularly given the pandemic and Brexit. One partner had pulled out, but the Onion Collective still had funders for the project and were continuing with it.
- Another project the Onion Collective was working on was Understory, which was a community led tech project. It was a gaming platform that allowed users to explore community resilience. The project had received lottery funding and would continue to be developed over the next few years.
- Worked to set up art displays in Watchet to improve the cultural offer. Contains Art was set up which were containers based by the coast containing art displays.
- East Quay was an arts regeneration and social enterprise development. There are art galleries inside as well as companies including a Paper Mill company, a print studio and a restaurant.
- The West Somerset Full Council made the Onion Collective the preferred developer of the East Quay site in 2015, in 2017 full planning permission was

granted and in 2019 the lease was signed. The building was partly opened to the public in September 2021 and would be fully opened to the public in April 2022.

- The East Quay project was funded by various organisations, including Hinkley Point C, the Coastal Revival Fund and the Coastal Communities Fund.
- 37 new direct jobs were created by East Quay and 17 were safeguarded with more hopefully created indirectly as well as income to the area through visitors.
- Renowned national artists have exhibited their work at East Quay alongside works by local artists being displayed.
- Look to promote education and learning at East Quay as well as provide events and activities and enhance the cultural offering for the community.

During the Debate the following points were raised:

- Thanks were expressed to the Onion Collective for their presentation.
- It was asked if more information could be given about Understory. It was responded that Understory came from a need to map who was doing what in the community in order to be able to better interact with the community and organisations within it and mobilise the community to work together.
- It was asked about the pods in the East Quay building and what the impacts for the town could be if this development was really successful in the next 10 years. It suggested that some of the impacts could be positive but that the increased tourism could also cause a detrimental effect on the local community and if consideration and plans had been made to prevent any detrimental effects. It was responded that the impact had been considered as part of the build which was why the Onion Collective started with creating the Visitor's Centre. Scenarios such as the impact if West Somerset Railway had closed had also be considered. The Onion Collective would continue to manage the risk over time but there were also risks to the community if nothing was done and the development had brought opportunities to the town.
- It was asked how the engagement from the community with the Onion Collective had changed since the organisation started? It was responded that there are 140 community groups in Watchet and the Onion Collective sought and would continue to seek to work with all of them and engage with them. Engagement with the community is also achieved through encouraging locals to be involved in the creation of art to display in exhibitions.
- It was questioned what outcomes the Onion Collective were looking to achieve from the bio-based industry project? It was responded that when the mill closed in Watchet a few years ago the Onion Collective achieved funding to look at what a replacement industry could be, and a bio mill seemed like a really positive option following a feasibility study. The main desired outcomes were to retain industry on that site and create jobs within the bio industry.
- It was asked where the Onion Collective saw itself being in 12 months and how the local community could benefit from the art activities at East Quay. It was responded that the events that were run at East Quay and the exhibitions sought to make art accessible and interesting. Th Onion Collective also looked at how they could bring people from all different backgrounds in and make them feel comfortable to get involved. Also looked to create

opportunities for young people and enable social mobility not just through art but art was a good way to engage.

- It was asked why the name Onion Collective was chosen. It was responded that Collective was to describe the way of working. The structure of the company was not designed to be hierarchical. Onion was chosen because they had lots of layers and lots of recipes start with an onion. It was also a memorable name.
- It was asked if the funding from the Coastal Communities Fund and the Coastal Communities Team could be expanded upon. It was responded that the Coastal Communities Team and the Coastal Communities Fund were two separate but connected things which both arose from government looking to support coastal communities. The Coastal Communities funding the Onion Collective received was obtained with the support of the local Coastal Communities Team. The local Coastal Communities Team was a separate CIC. The Coastal Communities Fund was a capital funding pot that ran five rounds. The Onion Collective secured £5m of funding in the fifth round.
- It was questioned why products from social enterprises around the country were being sold in the shop at East Quay rather than local products. We believe supporting local is important however, the Onion Collective decided not to have local artists' products in the shop because they had artists working out of the studios in East Quay who sell their works out of their studios.
- It was suggested that publicising more about the work the Onion Collective does and how funding of staff works to inform local people would be beneficial. Further communication with the local community, possibly through meetings with presentations was encouraged.
- It was asked if the Onion Collective had all the funding it needed to complete East Quay. It was responded that all the funding was now in place.
- It was asked what the Onion Collective would do regarding the old mill site if planning permission was refused for a new business to be set up? It was responded that the bio mill project would be dependent upon planning, but the Onion Collective would continue to work with developers.
- It was asked if there were long term business and financial plans for running East Quay as opposed to relying on grant awards and whether the organisation had people with the skills to continue to run and develop the projects. It was responded that the directors intended to stay within the organisation and continue running the Onion Collective and East Quay. Staff within the Onion Collective already had expertise but training up more staff as well as employing more people with expertise was intended. East Quay was designed to be financially self-sustaining.
- It was asked how the Onion Collective intended to engage with its critics and change their minds. It was responded that this was something which needed to be done and that the Onion Collective was working on and that some people's minds had already been changed.
- It was asked whether it was intended for the Onion Collective to be a consultancy going forward. It was responded that the main purpose of the Onion Collective was doing work within Watchet and West Somerset but the consultancy work was done to raise funds to help fund projects in Watchet and West Somerset.
- It was asked how the Onion Collective represents the people of Watchet. It was responded that the Onion Collective could not represent all the people in

the community, but the directors and other staff lived within the community themselves and sought to engage with as many people in the community as possible.

- Further information about some of the consultancy work the Onion Collective did with Mid Devon Council and why that ended. It was responded that the contract was ended due to the projects which had been planned not going ahead so the Onion Collective did not actually undertake the consultancy work.
- It was asked how many of the Onion Collective's projects were financially sustainable. It was responded all were in different ways and that some relied on grant funding, but others did not. Work was done to make all projects as financially sustainable as they could be.
- It was asked how diverse the Onion Collective's senior management was. It was responded that it was not very diverse and could be more diverse. Diversity training was regularly given to staff and diversity was valued by the organisation.
- It was questioned about the way the directors were paid and what they were paid. It was responded that the directors were paid £35,000 per year which came from a range of different places across the Onion Collective's income.
- It was asked if the Onion Collective supported setting up a research and development hub in Watchet. It was responded that the Onion Collective did not necessarily want to be a research and development hub.
- It was asked if the Onion Collective were willing to take risks regarding finances. It was responded that only calculated risks were taken. In a rural economy thinking outside of the box was needed and the Onion Collective strove to be ambitious.
- It was asked if any tenants of East Quay were paying the Onion Collective business rates. It was responded that the tenants of East Quay paid their own separate business rates.
- It was asked whether Contains Art and the Onion Collective were the same company. It was responded that Contains Art was a Charitable Incorporated Organisation so was a charity and is a separate organisation but one of our directors does also work with Contains Art.
- The Chair thanked the representatives of the Onion Collective for attending the meeting.

Councillors Kravis and Farbahi left the meeting at this point.

66. **Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Revenue and Capital Budget Setting 2022-23 including Dwelling Rent Setting 22-23, MTFP Update and 30-Year Business Plan Review**

The portfolio holder for Housing introduced the report and raised the following points:

- The report included rent setting.
- The HRA faced a number of financial pressures but there was confidence that the standards provided for tenants could be maintained and the development of more housing could continue.

- Increased rents were recommended to be CPI plus 1%.
- Further investigation regarding the recommendation for the disposal of the Duke Street car park would be undertaken ahead of the report going to the Executive.

The Director for Housing and Communities raised the following points:

- The previous meeting of this committee looked at the future plans for the HRA and some of the challenges it faced.
- The HRA was facing substantial pressures and challenges. There had been changing customer needs, pressure on the labour and skills market, climate change and retrofit, increased standards following the Grenfell tragedy, Covid and Brexit. These pressures had put significant challenges on the budget setting process. The budget was effectively a balanced budget.
- An annual review of the business plan was undertaken, and officers had done that again with the financial advisers Altair. The proposed budget did meet the parameters for being safe but some of the margins on these are tighter than they have been previously due to the pressures on the budget.
- The budget would require efficiency savings to be made.
- There was more work to do over the coming months to plan mitigations for various scenarios to ensure the HRA would be resilient to increased pressures on the business.
- There would be a need to make sure income performance was good on void management and arrears.
- The central recharge paid to the General Fund from the HRA for the HRA being part of the Council would need to be looked at. It would also be important to agree the percentage the HRA would pay the new unitary authority once that came into existence.
- Officers were looking to maximise the use of grant funding.
- A review of the HRA's discretionary services was also planned to be undertaken.
- A review of the HRA's assets was intended to be undertaken with the intent to potentially dispose of a few assets a year to meet a modest target of £350,000 of income generation per year.
- The Duke Street Car Park is owned by the HRA but the income of the pay and display car park had been going to the general fund as the running of a car park was not something which would usually be owned by the HRA. There would be a review of the car park to see if the income could go to the HRA and if this was a function the HRA could undertake, but the current proposal was to effectively sell the car park to the General Fund.
- The report detailed a proposed rent increase of 4.1%. This figure was based off of CPI plus 1%. CPI was 3.1%, meaning a rent increase of 4.1%. The Council has an agreed rent strategy. There had been significant increases in the cost of the business. The Council did provide hardship support to its tenants.
- There was an ambitious capital programme for the HRA including building new homes. Also, an ambitious maintenance and regeneration programme.

- The report included an Equalities Impact Assessment as an appendix. Consultation had been undertaken with the relevant organisations, but no further feedback had been received from them.
- The Tenants Strategic Group had commented on the report and given overall support for the report.

During the debate the following points were raised:

- Concerns were raised about the lack of comments on the equality and diversity assessment. It was responded that the Christmas break may have had an impact, but officers would contact the relevant organisations again.
- It was highlighted that there were increases in the price of fuel and food and concerns were raised about the rent increase and its affordability for tenants in combination with this and whether this level of increase would result in a greater level of defaults on payments. Officers responded that they shared these concerns and that the impact of the rent increase would be monitored closely. Housing organisations across the country were struggling with the same issues. Due to the pressures many were also raising rents. It was also added that for the 65% of tenants on benefits it would not cause as much impact as their benefits would cover the cost, but it was acknowledged that it would more significantly impact some of the remaining 35% of tenants. However, there would be support for those tenants who needed it and officers would be signposting tenants to a winter hardship fund which would provide grants to tenants.
- It was raised that 4.1% was a significant increase to rent and that the communication of that needed to be considered. Officers responded that there had been four years of rent reductions, with rents reducing by 1% each year. Communication would be considered, and explanation for the increase provided.
- It was raised that the ethnicity of tenants should not need to be included in the report as it did not matter what race people were, they were all the Council's tenants.
- It was asked what the level of arrears currently was. Officers responded that arrears were around £500,000. Performance around arrears management was a strong area of the business.
- It was asked if housing benefit was now paid directly to the tenant who would then pay the council. Officers answered that housing benefit could be paid to the tenant or directly to the Council.
- It was asked about the saving to be made in relation to the Taunton Citizen's Advice Bureau. It was responded by officers that the reduction was due to the HRA having gained a debt advisor which previously was part of the contribution to the Citizen's Advice Bureau, but significant funding would still be provided to the Citizen's Advice Bureau. Officers had spoken to the Chief Executive of the Citizen's Advice Bureau to sight them on this.
- It was asked if the HRA would have to contribute to any Local Government Reorganisation costs. Officers responded that the HRA would have to contribute to a share of the costs as it was part of the Council.
- Concerns were raised about the Council disposing of difficult properties as problem properties which were sold may not be sold to an owner who was adept to deal with the issues. Officers responded that considerations for

disposal for a property included the receipt it could realise for the HRA. Many properties sold provided an opportunity for to invest in properties and renovate them.

- It was asked about whether all new build properties the Council were building would be to a zero-carbon standard. Officers responded that they would provide a response to this after the meeting.
- It was asked about grant money to local government from central government to pay for hardship. It was asked if some of that money could be used to help those tenants who are struggling to pay their rents. Officers responded that the County Council had received a sum from government and that some of that was used to provide free school meals. A further announcement was made today which officers would share further information with members after the meeting.

Councillor Andy Milne left the room for part of the debate on this item.

The Community Scrutiny committee resolved to note the report.

The committee resolved to extend the meeting by 30 minutes.

67. **Litter Strategy**

The Portfolio Holder for Environmental Services introduced the report and raised the following points:

- Protecting and enhancing the environment of the district was one of the Council's corporate priorities. The Litter Strategy would provide a framework within which to do this.
- The Litter Strategy had been written in line with the government's Litter Strategy for England.
- The strategy proposed a zero-tolerance approach to littering.
- There were 8 key objectives from the strategy which included a litter prevention programme, community protection notices, looking at how the Council was proactively addressing the causes of littering, creating a public realm which looked cared for, understanding of the cleansing schedule which the Council had to do, building a strong sense of community and a set of enforcement and reward responses.
- The Portfolio Holder welcomed officers from East Hampshire District Council who were attending the meeting via Zoom to discuss the External Litter Enforcement item which would follow the Litter Strategy.

The Assistant Director for Commercial Services raised the following points:

- The Litter Strategy was designed to change culture and behaviour in the district. There would be a focus on education, ensuring that there was the right infrastructure with litter and dog bins and there also would be a focus on enforcement.
- Litter damaged the environment and could impact the economy by discouraging people from visiting the area.

During the debate the following points were raised:

- Concerns were raised about the litter being dropped during waste collections by Somerset Waste Partnership. Officers responded that the Council would take this up with SWP as the Council's contractor if they were failing to keep to the agreement of the contract.
- Support was expressed for the Litter Strategy coming forward.
- It was asked if the mapping exercise of dog bins mentioned in the report could be shared with members and it was queried if the mapping exercise included bins owned by parish councils or only those owned by Somerset West and Taunton Council. It was responded that litter and dog bins which were Somerset West and Taunton Council's responsibility had been focused on as part of the reason for the survey was to use the data to form a maintenance and repair programme for the bins owned by the Council.
- It was questioned about whether the bins in the unparished area of Taunton had been surveyed and mapped. Officers responded that they had been in contact with the Charter Trustees as there were several bins in the unparished area which are going to be replaced. The maps would be provided to members following the meeting.
- It was questioned whether the Council would undertake educational work in schools as part of the strategy. It was responded by officers that this would be part of the strategy.
- It was asked if a system of numbering bins could be adopted to allow for members of the public to report issues with a particular bin. It was responded by officers that ways to identify bins, such as QR codes, were being looked at.
- It was suggested gathering data on how regularly each bin becomes full may enable more effective cleansing schedules to be established. It was responded by officers that this would be looked at as part of the action plan in the coming months.

The committee resolved to note the recommendations in the report.

68. **External Enforcement - Litter**

The Assistant Director for Commercial Services introduced the report and raised the following points:

- The report detailed a one-year trial with East Hampshire Council who already provide this service for 10 other councils. The aim would be to have a service with a net zero cost.
- The planned trial would employ two full time Environmental Enforcement Officers. It was proposed that £100 fixed penalty notices be issued, reduced to £80 if paid within 14 days. Estimated payment rate was 72-80%. If six fixed penalty notices were issued per officer per day the service would break even.
- Provision had been made in the 2022/23 budget to cover the risk of the trial.
- The trial was based on monthly payments of fixed penalty notices with a three-month notice period if it was not working.

During the debate the following points were raised:

- It was raised that the report noted that enforcement officers may attend safeguarding training, but it was suggested that this be changed to say that enforcement officers must attend safeguarding training.
- It was asked how many challenges East Hampshire District Council had and the court cases this had led to. Concerns were raised about the costs of challenges to the Council. Officers responded that one of the reasons the decision had been made to work with East Hampshire was because they did not conduct litter enforcement to make money. Fixed penalty notices would not be served to children under 18. Officers from East Hampshire responded that they ensured that enforcement officers were ethical in their actions and body cameras were also used for monitoring. There had not been a single stage two complaint against officers because if a mistake was made the fixed penalty notice would be cancelled. They had had more than a 99% success rate in the single justice procedure. East Hampshire officers responded that they had the same concerns initially about enforcement before they started their scheme. Through implementation of the scheme a 60% reduction in littering was anticipated.
- It was suggested that only two officers for the whole district seemed a very small number. It was responded that the more officers employed the less chance there was of meeting targets. Officers would be deployed in high footfall areas.
- It was questioned how payments worked. It was responded that there was now a more streamlined process and payments would be made directly.
- It was asked about coverage of more rural areas and whether they would be patrolled. Officers responded that this was something which would have to be reviewed constantly and a balance would need to be struck to ensure the scheme remained cost neutral.
- It was asked about litter being seen alongside waste bins outside people's homes and whether this counted as fly tipping or litter or what could be done in these instances and whether litter officers could intervene to speak to those responsible. Officers responded that this was something which SWP intended to address with as part of their business plan post Local Government Reform.

The committee resolved to note the recommendations in the report.

(The Meeting ended at 9:42 pm)