

Full Council Meeting – 13 May 2020

Scrutiny Committee Annual Report 2019/2020

1 Foreword

- 1.1 It was a great honour to have been appointed the inaugural Chair of the Somerset West and Taunton Scrutiny Committee by my Councillor peers at the Annual General Meeting of Council in May last year.
- 1.2 The last year could be characterised as one of ongoing 'transition' as we have all embedded into our roles and taken time to re-assess the role of the Scrutiny Committee in the democratic process. This transition has not been helped by a series of disruptions firstly through the initial bedding in of the new Council and its staffing structure, followed by a General Election and finally the Covid 19 pandemic.
- 1.3 The year started with the publication of new Government Guidance seeking to clarify and broaden the role and influence of Scrutiny Committees. Both myself and the Vice-Chair have been keen to ensure that Scrutiny Councillors gained a greater oversight of their work programme than was done previously. This was to give us a stronger voice over the Executive reports we wished to look at in detail and enable maximum influence to be exerted. We also wanted to be more proactive and investigate external matters which had a bearing on the residents of our area.
- 1.4 The Leader of the Council was also keen to ensure transparency and improve the involvement of members. To this end as well as the Scrutiny Committee a series of Briefings was established to inform Members about topics for information, progress or 'to note'. This allowed them to be aired and questioned without impinging on the committee process where time is limited.
- 1.5 As a Scrutiny Committee formulating our programme of work and getting updates on our suggestions and recommendations is a key way that this Council can demonstrate the transparency and accountability that the residents of Somerset West and Taunton expect from their decision-makers. Scrutiny's role as critical friend of the Executive is important in ensuring that the voice of the community is heard and should result in more inclusive decision-making.
- 1.6 In the last year, the Committee has discussed many issues of community interest and concern such as The Local Plan, Firepool, Watchet Library, Climate Change Strategy, Shared Legal Services, 5G, Financial Monitoring Reports and Budget Setting Reports, Performance Reports, Somerset Climate Emergency Framework and SWT Carbon Neutrality and Climate Resilience Plan, Voluntary and Community, East Quay Wall and others.

- 1.7 However, while I believe we were able to add value to many of these topics, it was also clear that being adequately sighted on emerging issues was not always straightforward. There have also been issues around the process for differentiating between topics for Briefing and ones going to Scrutiny. As a result we have made some adjustments to the process of flagging topics and reports for Scrutiny. We have also refreshed the agenda setting process and the involvement of Committee members in that.
- 1.8 In order to reflect on our first year and help us focus our role and efforts we had planned a Committee 'Away Day' with an external Facilitator on 20th March 2020. This unfortunately fell foul of the current restrictions. However it is intended to re-schedule this as soon as possible as it will a key opportunity for the Committee to review, and build in a bigger and better suite of work to take up in the future such as Spotlight Reviews and Task and Finish Investigations.
- 1.9 As the current Municipal Year ends I have high hopes for 2020/21 and believe that the work we have undertaken this year has laid a strong foundation to build upon and continue taking forward for future years.

This Report is the responsibility of Councillor Gwilym Wren – Chair of the Scrutiny Committee and has been compiled in collaboration with the Vice Chair Councillor Libby Lisgo.

Somerset West and Taunton Scrutiny Committee 2019/2020



- 1 Councillor Gwilym Wren (Chair)
- 2 Councillor Libby Lisgo (Vice-Chair)
- 3 Councillor Ian Aldridge
- 4 Councillor Sue Buller
- 5 Councillor Norman Cavill
- 6 Councillor Dixie Darch
- 7 Councillor John Hassall
- 8 Councillor John Hunt
- 9 Councillor Sue Lees
- 10 Councillor David Mansell
- 11 Councillor Hazel Prior-Sankey
- 12 Councillor Philip Stone
- 13 Councillor Nicholas Thwaites
- 14 Councillor Danny Wedderkopp
- 15 Councillor Keith Wheatley

Topics:

- **Watchet Library Transfer – June and July 2019**

This involved the public on an issue of community concern. After Scrutiny's involvement the Executive changed course to the satisfaction of community.

- **District Wide Local Plan: Local Development Scheme**
- **District Wide Local Plan: New Member Steering Group – Nominations**
- **Statement of Community Involvement (SCI): Draft for Consultation**
- **Local Plan Issues Document – Approval for Public Consultation**

Councillors queried whether they could recommend changes to the document. They suggested that due to the Council's commitment to addressing climate change, the wording needed to be checked. Members wanted to know how Planning could be harnessed to deliver on climate change. The Chair suggested that they propose an amendment to the recommendation when they were addressed at the end of the discussion. The Head of Strategy advised that they would look to incorporate climate change more robustly in the papers and would make it clear that the Council had declared a climate emergency.

- **Regeneration of Firepool**
- **SHAPE Legal End of Year Report**
- **Statutory Guidance on Overview and Scrutiny in Local and Combined Authorities.**

1. Work with the Executive to draft an Executive-Scrutiny protocol, which is then formally approved by the Scrutiny Committee and Executive and added to the Council's Constitution. 2. Resolve that the Chair and Vice Chair meet with the Executive to discuss the Scrutiny Committee work programme. 3. Develop a work programme for the remainder of the Municipal Year which can be amended if any new or emerging issues arise.

- **Climate Change Strategy – Joint Scrutiny Task and Finish Group**

The Committee urged the Executive to request an increase in the membership from two to three to encourage political inclusion and broadening expertise. This would take account of both urban and rural areas and increase the capacity of the group to deliver. The Committee noted the lack of reference to farming systems and diet implications in respect of the climate change strategy, and expected it to be considered in the drafting of the strategy.

- **Concerns from public around 5G technology**

The Chairman thanked all members of the public for their statements and requested ongoing dialogue; so that further consideration could be given to setting this as a Scrutiny item at a stage where further information is available

around the rollout and the role of District and County Councils in 5G technology implementation.

- **Corporate Performance Report and Update on Development of Future Reporting.**
- **Financial Monitoring – 2019/20 as at 31st July 2019**
- **Watchet Harbour Update**
- **Somerset Climate Emergency Framework and SWT Carbon Neutrality and Climate Resilience Plan**

It was requested that a greater focus was given to Methane and Nitrous Oxide emissions.

More details are needed around divestment from fossil fuels, including stipulations around the licensing of new taxis.

Growing food with allotments and urban farms on waste land should be a priority. Definitions to be clear around the objectives of reducing and mitigating emissions.

Rules around the Built Environment need to be more explicit about energy efficiency and renewable energy on new developments.

Work around energy reduction to be undertaken with utilities and others as well as community energy groups.

The strategy needed to be more explicit about installing Renewable Energies on assets and land owned by the Council.

Waste - carbon emissions of operations in waste (collection, haulage, processing, and energy recovery - Avonmouth).

Further input from Councillors and how they could be a part of the Climate agenda was encouraged.

Public engagement was key to the strategy but conversations were needed, to ensure they didn't lose sight of rural poverty - domestic and transport.

The committee encouraged lobbying with GWR/Network Rail over electrification of the network.

Monitoring of performance of the strategy and targets were considered along with and funding for delivery of projects.

Hinkley would need to be mentioned as a major CO₂ source.

Holistic thoughts on planning policy should include further options to tackle climate change - not just about PV on roofs.

Introduce more efficient and better flues for wood burners to minimise issues and tackle rural poverty.

Working and engagement with farmers as well as work with communities and organisations to improve their supply chain pressure.

Electric bike hire between transport hubs was requested.

A parking review would be required to tackle emissions in the town.

The consultation would need to be different to normal consultations and need to include further details on proposed activities; with a communications plan and Executive report.

As part of the framework Councils should lead by example on EV charge points at Deane House In council car parks.

Greater emphasis on Technology and R&D was requested to maximise the input into a global emergency.

The committee were of the view that the framework needed to be the priority document dictating all other policy documents. The framework would need to outline best practice and what might be possible for others.

Concern was expressed that the Task and Finish group had not met to discuss this document with clearer communications requested with all Members and not just the working group. There was also a need for a stronger link with the Committee on Climate Change Net Zero targets with mention of consumption emissions.

In relation to monitoring targets, performance and progress needed to be accompanied by a cost benefit analysis related to carbon reduction projects.

The committee requested clarity in relation to how levels of emissions from the M5 were included where the Council had very little oversight. Electrification of heating and the impact of aviation would be included.

Taunton not being parished as an area was requested to be reflected in the consultation.

- **Financial Strategy and Budget Approach**

The committee requested that the climate change priorities be reflective of the climate change priorities; in particular the difference in the income and cost of implementing the strategy. The committee requested the potential of developing tools and calculators for public engagement along with the increase of investment in services.

The Committee requested that South Somerset District Council's investment in battery storage at Bishops Hull would be investigated. The committee requested regular updates on the budget forecasts with Councillors and shared through Scrutiny, to be published on the public domain to ensure transparency and protecting public interest.

- **Voluntary and Community Sector Grants Annual Review**
- **Homelessness and Rough Sleeper Strategy**
- **Financial Monitoring – 2019/20 as at 30 November 2019**
- **Draft 2020/21 Budget Progress and Initial Budget Options**
- **East Quay Wall, Watchet**
- **Housing Revenue Account – Business Plan Review**
- **Corporate Performance Report – Jan 20**
- **HRA Account Budget Estimates**
- **Somerset Homelessness and Rough Sleeper Strategy 2019-23**
- **General Fund Revenue Budget and Capital Estimates 2020/21**
- **Off Street Car Parking Charges Reports**
- **Joint Scrutiny and Audit on Transformation Lessons Learnt SWAP Report**