

Agenda Item 9

For decision – Update on Climate & Ecological Emergency work programme & proposal to extend contract of Energy Advice Volunteer Coordinator

Authors: Peter Wheelhouse, Economic Development & Regeneration Manager & Deputy Town Clerk & all staff involved with delivery of work programme (Owen King, Joanna Morris, Sally Richards, Emma Parker & Katie Fraser)

Summary

This report provides an update on our 2023/24 work programme to address the Climate & Ecological Emergencies. It provides a summary of progress against the objectives set at the beginning of the financial year and a Red, Amber & Green (RAG) rating. A more detailed update has been provided below this for all areas of work. A presentation will be made at the meeting to cover the key points.

Future updates will be against the 2024/25 work programme that was approved in January.

Approval is also sought to extend the contract of the Home Energy Advice Volunteer Coordinator to further grow the volunteer team working with householders and utilising funding provided by the Climate Action Fund of the Lottery.

Progress review for programme to address the Climate and Ecological Emergencies

Strategy sub- heading	Summary
Support the independent development of climate and biodiversity community groups and initiatives.	Regular links in with Sustainable Frome, Frome Food Network, Future Shed. The Climate Action Lead will have a responsibility for coordinating the efforts of local community groups. Continued support for The Wild Bunch (see below for details).
Promote resilience & reduction of carbon across all FTC activities	Solar panels on Town Hall continue to make a difference in terms of energy efficiency (details will be provided at meeting). New bike shelter installed and will assist in driving more active travel – something that we will step up through the School Streets trial from April. Plans for Badgers Hill repairs and improvements include energy efficiency measures and renewable energy generation.
Understand the impacts of climate and ecological breakdown on Frome, review strategy to mitigate these at a town level, and consider adaptations we can make.	This will be a key area of work in 2024/25 and will be picked up by Climate Action Lead when recruited.
Communicate the work we are doing to respond to the climate and ecological emergency and build resilience as a town and encourage residents to participate in and contribute to climate action.	We are updating our website to provide greater prominence to the work in this area and the new Climate Action Lead will work with the Marketing & Communications Team to update our Communications Plan
Campaign for sustainable future developments, and support and encourage Housing Associations to access funding for retrofitting projects.	All HAs with housing stock in Frome were contacted to find out how many properties they have which are EPC D or below, and what their plans are to meet new legal requirements by 2030. These responses have been followed up and discussions are ongoing around how retrofit plans can be implemented.
Support FRECo (Frome's energy company) to acquire land and build community-owned wind turbines in and for Frome alongside exploring new opportunities for solar, microgrids and other renewable generation.	FRECo wind turbine project put on hold due to lack of grid capacity. Participating in stakeholder group for Somerset's energy investment plan, to address this and other issues. Meetings are being held with prospective developers of Saxonvale to discuss how FRECO's microgrid proposal can be implemented.

Explore opportunities to develop the Good Business framework to increase impact, including energy savings and carbon reduction	Lack of capacity to deliver this project through 2023/24. Climate Action Lead to explore how we can have greater impact in reducing carbon emissions in the commercial sector
Review provision for food growing in Frome, including allotments, and encourage community growing projects.	Broadway Community Gardens established. Climate Action Lead to take the lead in mapping the food grown in and around Frome and explore how food resilience can be developed through a thriving local food network.
Promote and campaign for better public transport infrastructure and greater use of it in Frome	Bus shelters improved. FTC campaigning for electric buses in Frome. Supported bid for DfT De-carbonisation funding. Whilst that was unsuccessful, a strong partnership has been established bringing together FTC, Somerset Council, Somerset Bus Partnership, The Big Lemon, Frome Community Hospital and Frome Medical Practice to promote bus improvements in Frome. Exploring potential for electric bus charging at Badgers Hill.
Apply for funding and promote agreements with developers that support Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan (LCWIP) infrastructure improvements	LCWIP being used to engage with developers. Lack of clarity from SC about LCWIP delivery - FTC not eligible to apply for active travel funding through DfT.
Promote and support circular economy initiatives developed through Loop de Loop, Edventure, and other organisations.	Keep It Frome page on FTC website - directory for organisations supporting circular economy. Work to find a location for a reuse centre is being progressed through our Asset & Service Devolution project.
Lobby for divestment (SCC Pension Fund)	Brunel have a firm policy in favour of engagement over divestment. They have surpassed their targets for reducing carbon intensity of their portfolios so far. Thanks to pressure from Cllr Anne Hills, Sarah Williams and Somerset officers, Somerset pensions committee has moved 25% of investments into a Paris aligned portfolio.
Develop signposted network of walking and cycling routes (subject to external funding)	Linked to LCWIP delivery- no clear funding pathway yet but Planning & Development Manager is working on this.
Provide (subject to funding) through the Green & Healthy Frome Partnership, Healthy Homes, Evaluation, Cycle Together & Fair Frome projects	As below

Develop the ability for residents and communities to save on energy bills and retrofit their homes through the Healthy Homes programme, and creating a street level retrofit project (subject to CAF funding)	Joanna Morris (Resilience Officer) and Sally Richards (Community Retrofit Lead) are working together to engage the community in insulating and retrofitting their homes to enable people to save money on their energy bills. There has been good take up of these services assisted by a Home Energy Advice Volunteer Coordinator (employed by FTC and funded by FRECo) who has been successful in recruiting volunteers who are imparting advice to householders. See below for further details and a proposal to extend the Volunteer Coordinator contract beyond March 2024 utilising Lottery funding.
Cycle Together	In 2023/24, FTC entered into an agreement with Frome Community Bike Project to deliver Cycle Together and the hire of e-bikes and other services are now delivered by them. 8 new e-bikes have been purchased with Lottery funding considerably expanding the resource. See below for further details of Cycle Together.
Evaluation	The Climate Action Researcher (Owen King) has put in place a process for evaluating all the partners' work and is supporting other FTC strands that require evaluation. See below for further details.
GHF partnership	FTC and partners, Edventure and Frome Medical Practice succeeded in securing £1.7m for the period up to 2026 to deliver Green & Healthy Frome project. In 2023/24, the team at FTC has been expanded and now includes a 4 day per week evaluation role, a Community Retrofit Lead and Home Energy Advice Volunteer Coordinator.
Support the Wildlife Mapping Project in partnership with SERC and look at ways of further encouraging engagement, through schools in particular.	3,074 observations recorded by local residents so far this year. Mapping being put in place for our open spaces. Frome College engaged with wildlife mapping now. With Joanna Morris now working with the Environment Team, there is greater capacity to support the development of our open space management plans to promote biodiversity.
Promote and support food resilience initiatives developed through the Frome Food Network and other organisations.	FTC is working towards taking on the lease of Loop de Loop building and has completed cleaning and electrical work to allow Edventure to use the building for the Community Fridge and other activities.
Retain Plastic Free Champions Awards	Award retained for 2023/24

<p>As part of our conversation with the new Somerset Council, make the case for a town-wide transport strategy for Frome that prioritises active and sustainable travel and includes metrics that measure success.</p>	<p>Initial positive discussions and promise of £20k funding for Movement Strategy, but no funding or commitment yet from Somerset Council. The Planning & Development Manager is pushing Somerset Council to provide support for this project.</p>
<p>Work in partnership with residents, local schools, and stakeholders to influence behaviour change to more sustainable and playful modes of transport</p>	<p>Encouraging behaviour change is a significant challenge but we have an opportunity through Frome Safer School Streets and other initiatives with their emphasis on improving safety and wellbeing to secure commitment. See below for details.</p>
<p>Monitor and evaluate the 18 months trial of School Streets and continue engagement with residents and schools.</p>	<p>Infrastructure works commenced in February. On track to start trial in mid-April when summer term begins. Evaluation will involve utilising traffic counts, air quality monitoring, speed monitoring using new SID and qualitative surveys. An engagement programme with schools and residents is continuing. A detailed report on this project was provided at the last Council meeting.</p>

Detailed update on delivery

The following represents a detailed update on our work to deliver the 2023/24 work programme which is relevant to addressing the Climate & Ecological Emergencies and is the first since October 2023. Future updates will relate to the 2024/25 work programme. In the future, work to promote biodiversity will be subsumed within reports prepared by the Environment Manager.

Green & Healthy Frome (GHF) Programme

A financial update together with quantitative and qualitative data is still being prepared for a Year 1 report to the main funders, the Climate Action Fund of the Lottery. But the following is nonetheless a comprehensive report on activities and outputs delivered by FTC staff through 2023/24.

Healthy Homes - Community Retrofit – Sally Richards, Community Retrofit Lead

This project is about encouraging the retrofit of local homes. Surveys and assessments started 1 September 2023 and to date, 32 retrofit surveys and assessments have been completed (30 more homes waiting for appointments). In addition, an initial community engagement/scoping event has been held at Edventure with more events planned.

Some changes have been made to the project since we started, and the original budget has been reworked to add:

- Centre for Sustainable Energy (CSE) telephone callback service (now in place)
- Series of 12 free public talks to cover retrofit themes (begins 30 April)
- Additional help from CSE to provide 12 retrofit surveys and assessments per year (begins March)
- Toolbox talks for local contractors

We are working with partners across the county and as part of this there is a weekly engagement with Retrofit Somerset to investigate how to reduce local barriers to retrofit. Sally has also attended a Green Construction Advisory Panel event involving key representatives from industry.

Where possible, we are developing various online tools to support householders. Currently, there is user testing of a 'Fairer Warmth' app/online tool which could aid energy volunteers and provide first contact and signposting for homeowners interested in retrofit.

Next steps include:

- Evaluation questionnaire to be sent to recipients
- More outreach and comms including retrofitting blog and top tips social media shares.
- Film commissions etc as part of GHF

Healthy Homes – Home Energy Advice – Joanna Morris, Resilience Officer

Since the last update in October 2023, our Home Energy Advice project has reached 488 people including 48 people who attended 11 energy advice sessions at the Library and Fair Frome.

The new Energy Advice Volunteer Coordinator, Caroline Wajsblum is working 6 hours per week (December-March) and has contributed to a big increase in the number of home visits, many resulting in referrals for gas and electric meter vouchers, referrals for grant funded work such as loft and cavity wall insulation and new heating systems. She has recruited 7 Community Advice Champions, and more are in the pipeline. Existing volunteers are “feeling energised” after a volunteer event organised by Caroline. Since October, an additional 50 Winter Warmth packs have been distributed.

Cycle Together – Emma Parker, Project Officer

14 e-bikes are now available for 4-week loans. Bookings are now ramping up following the purchase of additional bikes with Lottery funding. Cycle Together also now offers weekly adult cycle training classes ranging from beginner to advanced. There are also twice monthly bike maintenance classes teaching simple repairs such as brakes, gears and punctures. Monthly Dr Bike sessions are offering free bike checks and active travel advice. All of these services can be booked online at <https://www.fromebikeproject.org/>

Plastic Free. Period. – Joanna Morris, Resilience Officer

This Lottery funded project is about enabling women locally to switch to plastic free period products. Young people are a particular target and 40+ celebration packs containing 3 pairs of period pants, a reusable pad and a wash bag have been distributed to young people in Frome. Plastic Free. Period. sessions have been delivered at Frome College including a session for parents. Sessions have also been booked at Avanti Park.

Frome Medical Practice working with the Town Council has set up a fundraiser to raise £4500 to purchase Plastic Free. Period. packs for all year 7 & 8 students in town launching the first week of March to mark International Women’s Day. As part of the promotion, a Plastic Free. Period. Town Hall window display is in place with the FTC Marketing & Communications Team leading the creative work.

Green and Healthy Frome Evaluation - Owen King, Climate Action Researcher

The evaluation has involved deliverables review and monitoring including:

- a review of the Green and Healthy Frome bid to the Climate Action Fund (CAF) to establish key deliverables for each work package
- devising a spreadsheet monitor to track delivery against commitments in the bid
- establishing a quarterly schedule for reporting against deliverables for feedback to work package leads, project advisory group and Climate Action Fund
- a 6-weekly schedule for evaluation reviews with each work package lead

- establishing a research, journalling and writing process generating written outputs (interim reports, policy papers, academic journals), conference presentations and other media (in collaboration with Storytelling)

Owen has implemented a quantitative and qualitative evaluation plan for each work package:

- Online participant surveys are in place for relevant work packages
- Focus groups are being conducted with participants in Future Shed and Green Connectors work packages.
- Qualitative participant observation is being conducted for Cycle Together and Future Shed work packages.

Owen has also supported others involved with the GHF programme. He has supported the Sustainability and Evaluation lead at Frome Medical Practice (FMP) to develop an evaluation for Choosing Wisely and Green Connectors work packages that FMP are responsible for managing. He has also supported the GHF Project Manager, Becky Lovegrove with governance and evaluation processes. He has contributed to the GHF Storytelling through a number of blog posts exploring the scope of the partnership and the emphasis on nature connection and health.

Owen has developed connections with a number of partners with a view to widening audience for evaluation outputs, particularly in policy making, including University of Glasgow, University of Bath and the British Academy.

We embarked on a project through consultants to conduct a Social Return on Investment (SROI) analysis of the GHF programme. As the work ensued, it became clear that the methodology promoted by the consultants would not work for GHF and there would be insufficient capacity within the evaluation team to deliver it. We quickly withdrew from the contract with the support of the Climate Action Fund. This has enabled £26,250 of grant money to be re-allocated to delivering community climate/health outcomes and freeing up time for other evaluation activities. There is a proposal to extend the contract of the Home Energy Advice Volunteer Coordinator using some of this budget.

Additional non-GHF activities have included:

- supporting Hannah Stopford with strategy review and engagement process
- supporting implementation and evaluation of Safer School Streets scheme
- working with Ben Still on a potential water and resilience project
- supporting Jane Llewellyn in engagement with Heidelberg's Whatley and Westdown quarry proposals

Other Resilience work (not part of GHF)

Active Travel – Katie Fraser, Resilience Project Officer

We continue to promote active travel, through the Safer School Streets project and the Big Walk & Wheel active travel challenge, along with supporting Walkers are Welcome with map sales and the organisation of the Walking Festival. The school and community engagement work associated with School Streets is currently taking up much of Katie's time. Katie is

working with Clean Air Frome and TechShed Frome to monitor the impact of active travel on the quality of the air in the School Streets area. Our findings will inform future actions and campaigns.

Katie is exploring ways in which we can use the platform of this years' Great Big Green Week to encourage climate resilient pledges from the community that will last into the future.

Biodiversity – Joanna Morris, Resilience Officer

Community Wildlife Mapping Project

3074 observations have been recorded in total by 238 observers and 923 species have been recorded. We are extending the mapping work to FTC's open spaces and individual mapping projects are being created for the Dippy, Showfield, Rodden, Welshmill and Weylands to support the new management plans. A survey project has been created for Broadway Community Garden. Joanna is also supporting Frome Families for the Future with the River Vision Project.

The Wild Bunch

A series of nature friendly gardening sessions and outreach events are booked for 2024. Topics range from natural bee keeping to climate friendly planting, composting and building wildlife housing. 2023 events in Frome were the most successful and biggest bat counts to date in Somerset. Joanna is in discussion with Somerset Bat Group to organise 2 more bat counts in 2024.

There is now a newsletter with 200+ subscribers and a fortnightly Frome Times column on how to support biodiversity in private gardens.

Proposal to extend contract of Home Energy Advice Volunteer Coordinator

As the report above shows, the Home Energy Advice Volunteer Coordinator has hit the ground running since she started her temporary contract in December. There has been good progress made in both recruiting and retaining volunteers and delivering home energy advice.

The FRECo funding for this post ends at the end of March. However, the release of Lottery funds from the SROI contract presents an opportunity to extend the Coordinator's contract subject to the Climate Action Fund's approval.

The proposal is to extend the Coordinator's contract to March 2025. This will be budget neutral for FTC and will enable the Council to meet its target of recruiting a total of 20 Community Advice Champions (there are 7 so far) and enabling many more households to benefit from their advice.

This project is an important element in building a legacy beyond the end date of the Lottery funded programme and enabling the community to play a bigger role in delivering better home energy efficiency.

Recommendations

1. Approve an extension to the contract of the Home Energy Advice Volunteer Coordinator until 31 March 2025 subject to the agreement of the Lottery's Climate Action Fund to fund this utilising reallocated funds available to FTC
2. Delegate to the Deputy Town Clerk in consultation with the Business Manager to finalise the details of the contract