

Extract from the minutes of the Policy Panel meeting of 11 January 2023

66. Climate Change Policy

Ben Plummer, Climate Emergency Officer, gave a presentation on the key points relating to the Climate Change Emergency which had been declared by the Council, including actions taken and the embedding of this within the culture of the Council, including the draft Strategic Plan, Climate Emergency Action Plan and in work with partners. All committee reports now had a standard 'Environmental Implications' section and environmental assessments were carried out in the initiation stage of all projects.

Low-carbon offices at Rowan House were being prepared for in-person use by staff, including the use of heat pumps. A sustainable travel plan was in place for staff, including greater use of online working and reductions in waste. Environmental training had been rolled out for all staff. SPDs [supplementary planning documents] were being written on a range of environmental and sustainability topics. An Energy Manager was being recruited to help reduce bills and emissions.

Partnership working relationships, such as with Essex County Council, were described. The Climate Emergency Officer outlined the Active Travel Fund and the hosting of the Climate Action Anchor Institution's working group.

The Council's sustainability work included working to meet the Future Homes Standard 2025 and to entirely phase out use of glyphosate weed killers. The Amphora Energy Heat Network and solar park were described.

The Council continued to engage with community groups, and its approach to community engagement was outlined.

The Council's emissions data from 2021-22 were described, with an explanation of how emissions were measured and where they originated from. The main parts of the Council's carbon footprint came from gas, electricity and the Council's vehicle fleet. A 10.1% decrease in Council emissions had been recorded since its declaration of a Climate Change Emergency. Projections of Carbon Dioxide emissions to 2030 were given, having been produced in cooperation with the Carbon Trust, and including emissions from Colchester Borough Homes. The Panel were told of the surveying and work which was ongoing to achieve net zero Carbon emissions by 2030.

A request was made for the Climate Emergency Officer to circulate his presentation slides to all elected members.

Monitoring included by the Climate Change Working Group, the Environment and Sustainability Panel, and the County Council Project Board. The work of these bodies was explained. Climate Emergency UK [CEUK] conducted external reviews and provided advice. The Council's action plan was scored at 52% by CEUK, compared to the average score of 43%. A plan was being drawn up to implement actions based on recommendations from CEUK and scoring from CEUK on climate action was expected from February 2023 and would be published.

The Panel considered the report and presentation. A Panel member gave the view that climate change and sustainability were related but different subjects. When looking at vehicles for use by the Council, the Panel member argued that the Council should examine vehicles' complete footprint for production and use, and judge which were most sustainable and least damaging to the environment.

Approval was expressed for the 10.1% reduction in Carbon Dioxide emissions, but concern was also raised that the Council was only two-thirds of the way towards achieving its target of net zero emissions by 2030. A request was made for more environmental SPDs to be produced, and more details requested on environmental training for councillors, partnership working with the County Council, and on whether there were enforcement powers which the Council could use to control or restrict emissions and vehicles producing high levels of emissions. Panel members suggested that producing an overarching Climate Change Policy would underline the Council's commitment to reaching Carbon neutrality, and communicate to the public the importance of active travel and lowering emissions.

A Panel member suggested that a Member Champion could be appointed for the field of Climate Change, working with Portfolio Holders and officers to ensure decision making takes place with consideration duly given to the Council's emissions. The Panel considered whether the Council should commit to never taking decisions which would damage the environment.

Councillor Bentley, who was also Leader of Essex County Council, gave a brief description of the Active Travel Scheme and the funding involved, and argued that a Council transport champion would help to advertise the Scheme and increase uptake. It was emphasised that the work being done was to educate, inform and persuade people, not to dictate to them regarding their travel options. It was noted that action against climate change was everyone's responsibility, but that many people did not know what they could do to help improve the situation and that the Council could act to persuade people to change their travel behaviour, to the extent that they could do so. Councillor Bentley argued that the UK must show leadership in tackling climate change, that the current generations might be the last which could act to reverse changes, and that the Council should have a policy to guide its efforts and clarify its targets and methods to achieve them.

The Panel discussed the current 'no idling' policy, with the Leader explaining that the Council was looking at how to inform, persuade and, if necessary, enforce the policy.

Panel members urged caution when enforcing, and to seek effective ways to engage with and persuade people, working alongside the County Council.

A Panel member urged the Climate Emergency Officer to seek the latest survey data collected by colleagues at Essex County Council.

The Panel considered the potential benefits of having an efficient, reliable, low-cost public transport system, looking at examples such as 'Transport for London.'

The Climate Emergency Officer gave assurance that he had noted the views and suggestions given and his view that the Panel was indicating that it wished to see a simple overarching policy on addressing climate change. The implementation date for the new environmental SPDs was imminent and the Climate Emergency Officer explained that he would investigate what powers the Council held to control emissions. Regarding engagement with the public, there was a section covering resident engagement and surveying in the upcoming action plan. A County Council app was about to go live to help people seek ways to reduce their emissions and energy usage, leading to savings on energy bills.

Rosa Tanfield, Group Manager (Neighbourhoods), summarised the conversation held regarding the ways the Council and individuals could change their behaviours, and highlighted the number of local groups which were working with an environmental focus, dealing with issues such as fuel poverty and active travel, and which the Council was supporting where possible.

The Deputy Leader posited that the Climate Emergency Declaration already laid out what was needed, and that actions being taken were widespread and ongoing, with a clear target of carbon neutrality by 2030. The Deputy Leader argued for officers to focus on work necessary to meet this target, rather than on policy development. Counter arguments were heard from some members of the Panel, including that the Climate Emergency Declaration was not a policy, that it was important to clarify what the target was (e.g. was it for carbon neutrality within the Council or for the whole area of Colchester) and that a simple policy would set a framework and codify targets. It was argued that the County Council's policy could be used as a template, allowing a policy to be quickly drafted. A Panel member suggested that the drafting of a policy might entail more work to set out something that was already embedded in the Council's culture. Rory Doyle, Strategic Director, noted that the Panel did not seem to have a consensus as to whether it wished to recommend that a formal overall policy be drafted.

The Leader praised the work done by officers to make progress, including to get two-thirds of the way to the target of 'zero carbon by 2030'. The Leader asked that the Panel acknowledged this work and support the work of Cabinet and the Environment and Sustainability Panel, which would look at what gaps there might be in the Council's approach and how best these could be addressed.

RECOMMENDED to CABINET that Cabinet work with the Environment and Sustainability Panel to identify if gaps remained in the Council's approach towards meeting its targets relating to fighting climate change and, where identified, to identify how best to address them.