

Environment and Sustainability Panel

22 June 2022

Present: Councillor Tracey Arnold (Deputy Chair)
Councillor Molly Bloomfield
Councillor Michelle Burrows
Councillor Andrew Ellis
Councillor Mark Goacher
Councillor Sue Lissimore
Councillor Kayleigh Rippingale
Councillor Lee Scordis (Chair)
Councillor Michael Spindler

Substitutes:

68. Minutes of the previous meeting

RESOLVED that: the minutes of the meetings held on 22 March 2022 and 25 May 2022 be confirmed as a correct record.

69. Overview of progress on Environment and Sustainability

Ben Plummer, Climate Emergency Project Officer, attended the meeting to present the report and assist the Panel with its enquiries. The Officer's report provided the Panel with an overview of the progress which had been made in the preceding municipal year.

The Panel were advised that as part of declaring a Climate Emergency, Colchester Borough Council (the Council) had resolved to reduce its emissions to net zero by 2030. The Council had established a baseline of its emissions in 2018/2019, and the most recent calculations, which had been completed for the financial year 2020/2021, showed that there had been a 17.4% reduction in emissions compared to the baseline figures. The net zero target included gas, electricity and water consumption in all the Council's buildings, and work had recently been undertaken to estimate emissions associated with working from home. Fuel consumption from the Council's fleet was also considered, together with the emissions associated with staff commuting and business travel.

Considered separately to the Council's net zero emission target were what is known as 'scope three' emissions, which were indirect emissions associated with goods and services procured by the Council. Also included in scope three emissions were buildings which the Council owned and leased out, and the Council's own housing stock.

The Council's Climate Emergency Action Plan consisted of eight themes and over fifty actions, and the themes were:

1. Reducing emissions from our buildings and fleet to help achieve a net zero carbon footprint by 2030
2. Produce renewable energy
3. Enhance biodiversity and protect our environment
4. Facilitate walking, cycling and sustainable transport around Colchester
5. Provide sustainable waste management and support residents to reduce, reuse and recycle
6. Enable partnerships and community action for sustainability and low carbon development
7. Ensure sustainable planning and development
8. Change the way we work to achieve our climate commitment

Highlights of achievements under each theme over the preceding municipal year had been set out in the Officer's report.

Officers had identified key areas of priority for the forthcoming municipal year. Work would be carried out on a new Carbon Management Plan for the Council in conjunction with a consultant to examine the Council's estate to determine whether improvements in emissions, energy efficiency and carbon reduction could be made. Work with key partner organisations in the borough would continue, for example Essex County Council and the University of Essex to ensure that any synergies in the work of partner organisations could be taken advantage of. Examples of joint projects included oyster conservation and the reduction of single use plastics by business in the town centre. Communities were to be encouraged to take action on environmental issues, in line with the Council's approach around asset based community development, through the use of existing projects such as local bicycle hubs and bicycle kitchens.

Several strategies would be developed through the forthcoming year, including the Blue and Green Infrastructure Strategy, and the Council's Waste and Recycling Strategy. These Strategies would be carried forward with the input from the Council's Environment and Sustainability Panel and the Policy Panel.

Active and sustainable travel was to be promoted through the introduction of secure bicycle parking in the town centre, together with shared travel hubs where e-bikes and e-cargo bicycles would be available for use on a pay per use basis. These projects were innovative and their success would be monitored very carefully. Electric car charging points would also be available for the public to use in the Council's Priory Street car park, and consideration would be given to other suitable sites for the installation of additional charging points. Areas which had been identified in the Council's Positive Parking Strategy would be explored to determine whether or not alternative parking locations could be identified away from the town centre, and it was intended to develop a Supplementary Planning Document on Climate Change and Sustainability, which would provide additional guidance to developers.

The Council was aware that emissions would remain which still needed to be reduced by the 2030 target, and work to understand these was to be undertaken in conjunction with a consultant, Anthesis Group, who had been developing a concept called Authority Based Insetting which could allow a Council to reduce carbon emissions by offsetting these locally.

A Panel member noted that one of the aims of the Council's Community Engagement Team was to support residents carrying out tasks such as weeding of paths and they wondered how communications in respect of this would be managed, so that residents were aware that the Council may not be clearing certain areas. How would the Council's contracts with grounds maintenance contractors be managed to ensure that good value for residents was still being delivered if some pathways were no longer being tended to? Mandy Jones, Assistant Director Place and Client Services confirmed to the Panel that a variety of methods would be used to control weeds, with a varied cutting regime used for shrub borders and tree bases. The use of non-glyphosate herbicides had been trialled on hard surfaces and the efficacy of these methods would be monitored. It was accepted that communicating the Council's maintenance policy and the reasoning behind this effectively to residents may pose a challenge, and careful consideration was being given to the provision of effective communications in the future. A Panel member noted that the Council's current grounds maintenance contractor was under contract for a further three years, after which time it had been the recommendation of the Council's Policy Panel that the work be brought back 'in house', subject to the necessary Cabinet approvals.

A Panel member enquired about the use that had been made of the Council's Park Active scheme, and it was proposed that more comprehensive information about the project be provided to the Panel as part of the Active Travel and Electric Vehicles Update which was scheduled to be an agenda item at the January meeting of the Panel.

In response to an enquiry from a Panel member, Ben Plummer explained that the Council used a methodology published by a consultancy called EcoAct when calculating emissions associated with working from home. It was possible to estimate emissions associated with working from home by using a series of average energy consumption figures, and the Council had also undertaken a staff survey to gain further insight into staff behaviours. Obtaining this information would enable an informed estimate of energy consumption to be made, and a comparison with the emissions associated with staff commuting to work suggested that there was a slight benefit in staff working from home in terms of the emissions generated.

At the request of a Panel member, it was confirmed that the survival rate of the trees which the Council had planted in eleven different green spaces was between 75% and 94% as at September 2021. The Panel heard that once the trees became larger then it would be necessary to thin them out as part of the management of the green spaces. Site visits were offered to Panel members who wished to obtain more details on how areas of planted woodland were managed. The use of glyphosate weedkillers had now been phased out completely on green spaces owned and managed by the Council, and Colchester Borough Homes had also ceased using these chemicals.

The Panel heard that work had been carried out with one primary school, the Unity Primary Academy in Greenstead, using funding provided by the Local Government Association to support a project designed to champion environmental engagement activities. Funding had been obtained to enable the school to continue to work with the organisation Together We Grow in the future to create green spaces at the school. The Council did carry out regular engagement with schools around issues such as air quality, and was supporting The Essex Schools Green Day in July 2022, which was a county-wide day devoted to learning about environmental issues, and celebrating the progress made by schools in reducing their environmental impact. Additional resources would be shared with other schools during the week of the Essex Schools Green Day. Additional project work had been undertaken with schools across the borough, for example in relation to the Woodland and Biodiversity Project when schools had designed signage to explain to the public the new methods of land management which were being adopted. The Panel offered its support in the future with encouraging schools to become involved with future projects.

A Panel member praised the educational materials that had been provided to schools in conjunction with the Council's CARless scheme, and confirmed that they had shared the videos provided by the Council in support of this scheme. There was discussion around the CARless signage which had been placed at pollution hotspots around the town encouraging motorists to turn off their engines, and it was confirmed to the Panel that signage had been removed and replaced during the scheme in order to test the effect that it had on engine switch offs. At the conclusion of the scheme, work would be undertaken with the University of Essex to assess whether the project had achieved its aims. The Panel was very supportive of the continued use of signage, and additionally thought that consideration should be given to attempting to obtain countdown traffic light timers which showed motorists how long they would have to wait at a set of traffic lights, with the aim of encouraging engines to be switched off. Interim data which had been collected demonstrated that more car engines were switched off when the signage was displayed, and engine switch offs had also increased around schools as a result of the campaign. The Panel would review the campaign in more detail as part of the scheduled agenda for its meeting in November 2022.

The Panel requested clarification from Officers around the difference between emission offsetting and insetting, and were advised that the difference between the two terms was that insetting was emission offsetting work which was carried out within the local area, and therefore remained more under the control of the Council. The idea behind insetting work was that local emission reducing projects would be created which could include tree planting, the provision of e-cargo bicycles and working with the private sector and other organisations as potential funding sources for the projects. It was not anticipated that this work would be able to be undertaken in the near future, however, the preparatory work which was taking place would be of key importance to making the projects successful. Work was planned to take place with the Kent Wildlife Trust on a pilot site within Colchester to gain an idea of the potential impact a project such as wetland restoration may have on reducing emissions.

A Panel member had received comments that the voltage provided to the Council's Priory Street car park electric vehicle charging points was inadequate, and additionally had noted that emissions associated with staff business travel were higher than those associated with commuting. By way of response, Ben Plummer confirmed that the power provided to the Priory Street charging points was 22 kilowatts, which should be sufficient to fully charge a car in under 4 hours. It was possible that if all 3 charging points were being used at the same time then there may be a dip in the power provided, but nothing of this nature had been reported as yet. The difference between emissions could be explained by the fact that during the financial year 2020/2021 staff commuting had reduced dramatically due to the Covid-19 pandemic, meaning that required business travel, for site visits for example, had overtaken commuting in terms of emissions generated.

The Panel supported the 8 core themes which had been outlined in the Council's Climate Emergency Action Plan, however, it was suggested that an additional theme could be added around communication. The additional theme could be split into 2 parts; encouraging local residents to get more involved in the Council's ecological projects such as tree planting, and communications explaining why the Council was taking the action that it was taking, and highlighting the successful results of projects. Mandy Jones confirmed to the Panel that the issue of communications was currently being considered as part of a wider strategic narrative, and this area of work could be referred back to the Panel in the future.

RESOLVED that: the contents of the report summarising progress on environment and sustainability be noted;

AND that: the Council's related priorities for the coming year had been reviewed and approved.

70. Climate Emergency Action Plan Update

Ben Plummer, Climate Emergency Project Officer, attended the meeting to present the report and assist the Panel with its enquiries. The Panel heard that actions and highlights from Colchester Borough Council (the Council)'s Climate Emergency Action Plan were presented to it at every meeting.

A Panel member requested more detail around the work that had been undertaken with the University of Essex in relation to reducing single use plastics in the town centre. Ben Plumer confirmed that the project had just started, and it was proposed that the Council would identify challenges and then work with the University to attempt to secure funding to tackle these. With regard to the aspiration of reducing single use plastics in the town centre, it was intended to work with businesses to share knowledge and identify the challenges which may be faced in achieving the reduction, and this was a project which Colchester's Business Improvement District was also supporting. It was not known which businesses would be participating yet, but this information could be reported back to the Panel at a future meeting.

In response to a question from a Panel member, it was confirmed to the Panel that the Council did not currently have a specific policy addressing the provision of wildlife corridors to allow animals to move safely between green spaces, however, this was something which would be considered as part of the Council's ongoing work on the Blue and Green Infrastructure Strategy. It was considered by a Panel member that there would be future synergies in biodiversity net gain and insetting which could be brought forward through the management of the Council's green spaces in the future.

The provision of secure bicycle parking at the Council's Shrub End Depot was noted by the Panel, and it was wondered whether there were plans to extend the provision of similar parking to the Council's other sites to give staff the confidence to cycle to work. The Panel heard that the Council's Trave Plan was concerned with encouraging staff to use more sustainable methods of transport to get to work, and that cycle parking was also provided at the Council's Rowan House site. Plans were also in place to open secure cycle parking in the town centre at St Isaacs Walk, and this site was due to open at the end of July 2022, with the opening supported by appropriate publicity.

A Panel member reported that the Council's 'No Mow' policy had been a success in Wivenhoe, with a local resident confirming to them that there had been 141 species of wildflower reported across 15 'no mow' sites displaying 4 times as many flower heads as on traditionally mown areas. Additionally, 10 residents had joined the project as surveyors and a poll that had been carried out to seek responses to the strategy had received 111 responses, with only 6 of those responses expressing opposition to the scheme.

RESOLVED that: the contents of the report be noted.

71. Work Programme 2022-2023

Matthew Evans, Democratic Services Officer, attended the meeting to present the report and assist the Panel with its enquiries.

The Panel heard that the Council's Blue and Green Infrastructure Strategy which was to be considered at the next Panel meeting in July 2022 would not be completed at this time as consultation with the University of Essex was ongoing.

The Panel discussed potential items which it might like to consider adding to the work programme in the future, but it was considered that it was already proposed to consider a broad range of topics, and a Panel member suggested that rather than adding items to the work programme now, it would be more productive to see whether items came forward throughout the forthcoming municipal year in response to new or changing proprieties.

The Panel were reminded that a briefing session which would be open to all Councillors was scheduled for September 2022, and more information would be provided in due course.

RESLVED that: the contents of the work programme be noted.