

Environment and Sustainability Panel

13 January 2022

Present: Councillor Lewis Barber
Councillor Mark Cory
Councillor Peter Chillingworth
Councillor John Jowers
Councillor David King
Councillor Lee Scordis
Councillor Julie Young

Substitutes: None.

51. Minutes of the previous meeting

RESOLVED that: the minutes of the meetings held on 7 December 2021 be confirmed as a correct record.

52. Pathway to Net Zero by 2030

Ben Plummer, Climate Emergency Project Officer, attended the meeting to present the report and assist the Panel with its enquiries. The report was based on work that had been undertaken for Colchester Borough Council (the Council) by the Carbon Trust, updating the Council's pathway to net zero emissions.

Oliver Patrick, the Carbon Trust, attended the meeting remotely and appraised the Panel of the work that had been undertaken in partnership with the Carbon Trust as part of the Council's decarbonisation strategy and response to the climate emergency. The Council had declared a Climate Emergency in July 2019, which contained an ambitious decarbonisation target to reduce direct operational emissions to net zero by 2030. This included scope 1 and scope 2 emissions which included energy consumption from natural gas, diesel from the Council's fleet, and electricity, together with wider indirect emissions which were sometimes called scope 3 emissions, and which included business travel, waste and water. It was also recognised that the Council should use its influence to empower the borough and drive area-wide emission reductions. The Carbon Trust had provided the Council a baseline carbon footprint in 2019, and had conducted some emissions modelling to identify and prioritise decarbonisation projects. The Panel were advised that the report that had been produced was only a single element of the Council's response to the Climate Emergency, which also included Climate Challenge and Sustainability Strategy Themes.

The Council had been working on several decarbonisation initiatives, and had a clear understanding of how many of its assets would contribute to the 2030 target. The

Carbon Trust (the Trust) had worked with the Council to conduct a review of The Council's assets and approaches and provide an updated pathway projection based on this review, and conduct a review of offsetting to help inform the Council's offset strategy and shape key principles around which this strategy could form. In reviewing key assets, the Trust recognised that the Council had well established plans in relation to its fleet decarbonisation and moving towards a wholly electric fleet, and in relation to the retrofitting of Rowan House which met best practice decarbonisation standard. The Trust therefore focussed on other areas of work such as the building management programme and sheltered housing scheme and had made further recommendations in addition to work the Council had already undertaken. It had been intended to include Leisure World in this review, however, analysis of the site had been restricted due to uncertainty over potential operational changes, and it had therefore been agreed that there was too much ambiguity around the site to be able to include it in the pathway projection at this time.

As a result of the analysis which had been carried out, the Trust had looked to quantify the changes in energy consumption that would be a result of the implementation of the Council's plans, and this had been possible for three of the four assets which had been reviewed; the complete electrification of the Council's fleet, the retrofitting of Rowan House, and the refurbishment of a number of sheltered housing blocks. By 2030, the modelling that had been carried out indicated a reduction of 3,563t of CO₂ on the baseline year leaving a residual emission of 2,617t of CO₂ equivalent, which was the result of the implementation of Council projects and effect of the decarbonisation of the National Grid. It was important to note that the pathway did not constitute an exhaustive list of projects, and represented a snapshot in time of the current position. What was demonstrated by this snapshot was that the Council should seek to use its best efforts to now deliver the electrification of its fleet, as this generated significant savings. Leisure World was also highlighted as a hotspot, and it was recommended that the Council should now spend significant resource developing plans to reduce emissions at the site. Over 75% of project-related emission reductions were expected to come from the electrification of the Council's fleet, with a significant drop in emissions expected in 2026 when the waste collections vehicles were replaced. The use of heat pumps was also expected to have a significant impact on emission reductions by 2030, making up 22% of project-related emission reductions, and the use of heat pumps would be central to the Council's decarbonisation. With regard to the Council's fleet and sheltered accommodation schemes, it was considered that the Council was close to maximising its decarbonisation potential by 2030, and to make further savings would require the pursuit of low carbon heating options in the normal maintenance cycle. These options would, however, be naturally limited by the fabric of the buildings being considered.

Even with the implementation of the projects, and under an accelerated decarbonisation pathway, it was expected that the Council would still have residual emissions left in 2030 which would require offsetting. There was still uncertainty as to what the Council's offsetting strategy would be, and this was largely caused by a lack of availability of guidance and standards, particularly in relation to public sector bodies. In the light of this lack of guidance, a workshop was carried out with Officers to try to identify key principles around which an offsetting strategy could be formed. The workshop determined that attendees had an agnostic approach to offsetting

methods, but did consider that the Council's offsetting strategy should be aligned to a decarbonisation target and that any strategy should prioritise offsets within the Council's sphere of influence and the local borough (known as insetting). The Panel were advised that there was a distinction between removal offsetting and reduction offsetting, with removal offsets serving to actively take carbon from the atmosphere via methods such as afforestation, while reduction offsets sought to reduce the impact of every day function on emission levels through methods such as introducing solar powered energy provision. By the decarbonisation target date, all residual emissions should be offset using removal methods. The workshop provided a very clear preference for the use of insetting, and the Panel were advised that this would require additional research, as typical offset providers would be unlikely to have offsets available in the local area. Although there would be challenges to insetting, the Council was in a strong position to deliver benefits of the strategy to the local area, and the Trust therefore recommended that any offsetting strategy should initially prioritise offsetting within the Council's sphere of influence.

The Carbon Trust made a number of recommendations to the Council as a result of their study in respect of the review of key assets and pathway projection:

- Consolidate existing plans that realize significant emission reduction, such as the decarbonisation of the Council's fleet, which would be a key driver behind the Council's decarbonisation
- Embed carbon reduction in existing Council operations.
- Maintain an active view of the market with a view to taking advantage of favourable developments in technology which would support a reduction in emissions
- Seek clarity over unaccounted hotspot emission sources, such as Leisure World.

Recommendations had also been made with regard to the Council's approach to offsetting:

- Await further guidance and remain informed of any changes to best practice or emerging technology to ensure that the Council was able to remain agile and adapt any strategy as appropriate
- Consider local offsetting
- Target setting, to ensure certainty in the Council's targets and decarbonisation ambitions

Andrew Tyrrell, Client and Business Manager, attended the meeting remotely to address the Panel, which was advised that the Council had a pathway to net zero emissions in place following the declaration of a Climate Emergency in 2019, and there were still eight years to go down this path. The Council's carbon emissions had already been reduced by 3,563t, leaving the Council to find the final 2,617t of carbon reduction required over the coming eight years. It had always been known that some offsetting would be required for the Council to achieve its targets, however the reductions that had been made to date, and would be made in the future, would reduce the final offsetting amount which was required.

In terms of the next steps along the pathway, the Council would now create a Carbon Management Plan which would demonstrate how the reductions from the Council's assets would be maximised, and the Climate Emergency Action Plan

would be maintained and modified as necessary. It was intended to implement all previously agreed sheltered housing plans within the HRA Business Plan, which was to be presented to Cabinet in January 2022. A large amount of work had been carried out in respect of the Council's sheltered housing stock in recent years, and it was considered that the best approach to be taken was to insulate the fabric of buildings to minimise heat loss before introducing technologies which provided a lower carbon energy source, because heat would still be lost from the buildings. Three schemes would be completed before 2030, and a further scheme would be completed after 2030 and the heating system in a building which was already well insulated would be replaced with a system with a lower carbon heat source. The Panel heard that central government would also be lobbied by the Portfolio Holder for Housing and the Portfolio Holder for Environment to seek additional funding to support housing modification, as all councils would be placed under significant pressure in this regard. The Council was in a strong position with regard to the energy efficiency of its housing stock, and registered in the top quartile of efficient stock. New projects would be continually sought, and a key project would be a detailed consideration of the Leisure World facility to seek improvements in the energy efficiency of the site. Leisure World had faced an uncertain future with the restrictions which had been placed upon its operation by the Covid-19 pandemic, and the first priority of the Council had been to get the site reopened for the benefit of both the Council and the public.

Councillor Cory noted that the target which had been set for the Council was to achieve net zero emissions, but he now felt that the aspiration should be to achieve carbon neutrality, as he had some reservations about the use of offsetting. He would, however, support local offsetting which removed carbon from the atmosphere, and hoped that this Panel would work closely with Cabinet over the coming years to ensure that the right investments were made to support the Council's decarbonisation aims. He asked whether the Carbon Trust could give examples, either nationally or globally, of leisure centres and crematoriums which had been constructed or managed on a carbon neutral basis. The Panel were advised that a leisure centre had recently been built in Exeter, which was the first ever to have been built to 'passive house standard', which was considered to be best practice in terms of energy efficiency. With regard to Leisure World, the fabric of the building itself would have a large impact on the type of work which could be undertaken, and reducing the emissions from the site would likely focus on reducing the use of fossil fuels as much as possible. The fact that the site would require retrofitting was an added complication which potentially limited the efficiencies which could be made there. The Panel were not made aware of any crematoriums which had been constructed or managed in an energy efficient way.

Councillor Chillingworth considered that there should be a national definition which the Council could adopt with regard to whether it was aspiring to be carbon net zero, or carbon neutral. He supported the idea of local offsetting, and considered that the Council should explore the possibility of using a solar farm for this purpose, possibly leasing Council land to an operator on which to establish a solar farm. Oliver Patrick explained to the Panel that when Climate Emergencies were being declared, the terms 'net zero' and 'carbon neutrality' were often used interchangeably. It was, however, possible to obtain certification against a publicly available standard called PAS 2060 in respect of carbon neutrality which would allow an organisation or

product to state that it was carbon neutral. There were now also emerging standards for organisations to use in aspiring to become net zero which had recently been agreed with the Science Based Targets initiative, and the Carbon Trust recommended that organisations seeking to become carbon neutral aligned themselves to these standards. There were key differences in the meanings of the two terms being used, with an organisation only have to have a carbon management plan in place, together with an unspecified carbon reduction target to become carbon neutral, with the rest of its emissions being offset. To be considered to be net zero, the Science Based Targets initiative specified that an organisation should have a short term and a long term decarbonisation target, and these should be aligned specifically to a 1.5 degree warming scenario. It was important that there was transparency when using the terminology, and in particular when referring to key criteria. There was a further complication for the Council in relation to being certified as being a 'net zero' organisation, in that the Science Based Targets initiative did not provide this certification for public bodies at this time, although this may change in the future. It was considered that the accepted standards required for achieving 'net zero' were the most credible and robust that were available and these also had relevance to the public sector. The Panel heard that Solar PV could be claimed as a carbon offset as it displaced the need to use less energy efficient sources of electricity, and the ownership of the site itself did not matter if the Council was funding this through an offset fund.

Councillor Jowers noted the large expense which was associated with making the Council's housing stock more energy efficient, and requested some more detailed costings in relation to this so that expenditure could be prioritised. He considered that retrofitting properties to fit heat pumps was a costly and difficult endeavour. He further considered that more consideration needed to be given to larger rural centres in the Council's thinking. Andrew Tyrrell confirmed that a significant piece of work had been carried out in respect of the Council's stock, which would be presented to Cabinet as part of the HRA Business Plan. It was estimated that there would be a requirement for between £82m and £102m of work to be carried out across the Council's approximately 7,000 housing stock properties to reach net zero. The approach in the short term was to focus on the fabric of the buildings, and the Council currently had 991 properties below an energy efficiency rating of C. the national target was to have all properties brought up to this rating by 2035, however, Colchester Borough Council would achieve this by 2030. The energy efficiency of buildings could be improved by the use of common and tested methods such as loft and wall insulation which could be implemented by any builder, however, when technology was being considered to achieve the same result, it was important to remember that this represented a niche market and was improving and becoming cheaper all the time. It was therefore considered more efficient to focus on the building fabric first, and consider other technological solutions as these were further developed and became cheaper in the future. The Panel heard that replacing a boiler with an air source heat pump would cost many thousands of pounds more than simply buying a replacement boiler, and would require changes to the infrastructure of the property in which it was installed. It was therefore considered a risk to carry out this sort of work ahead of improving the building fabric, as investment in technology which although new now, could become obsolete in a relatively short time period would be a waste of resource.

Councillor King considered that the Council needed to consider what changes could be made, at what pace, using what technology and which would be financially prudent. He believed that investments which were overtaken by events or which were destructive of the Council's other priorities, would not be helpful in encouraging the people of the borough to follow the Council's example and make the positive changes that were necessary. He supported Councillor Jowers' comments around costings, and thought that any investments that were made needed to be very carefully considered to ensure the optimum return. There was, for example, little point in making a major investment into heat pumps which would become obsolete within a few years time, having been replaced by newer technology which would be significantly cheaper.

Councillor Young considered that the Council should take whatever steps possible to educate the public, and applauded the work that had been undertaken by the Council to reduce emissions. She noted the expense associated with replacing a boiler with an air source heat pump, and considered that this expense would be beyond the reach of most people, or would not be something that they would prioritise. The Council should help and encourage the public as far as possible towards insulating their properties to increase energy efficiency.

Mandy Jones, Assistant Director – Place and Client Services, advised the Panel that the ambition that the Council had was to be a carbon neutral organisation, with operational net zero emissions within the areas which it could directly control, being scope 1 and 2 emissions. It was considered that government grants would be forthcoming for the retrofitting of properties, and the Council was taking every opportunity to seek these forms of funding to assist the public.

Maggie Ibrahim, Sustainability and Climate Change Manager, attended the meeting remotely and advised the Panel that the Council did not have to wait until 2030 to begin introducing offsetting schemes, and it could be developing and implementing these now. Schemes such as the e-cargo bikes scheme were a way of assisting businesses to reduce their emissions, as well as providing income which could be used to support further offsetting schemes such as solar farms. It was not suggested that the remaining deficit of 2,617t of carbon emissions would all be dealt with by offsetting, and work would continue to reduce emissions as far as possible, although residual emissions which would remain would need to be offset. The Panel heard that the report demonstrated that the Council was on the best practice trajectory with a predicted 5% reduction in emissions yearly.

Oliver Parker advised the Panel that he believed that any offset scheme put forward by the Council should be the subject of very careful scrutiny to ensure that it was held to very high standards. Any scheme should also represent additional offsets from either the private or public sector to avoid claims of 'greenwashing' being levelled at the organisation. With regard to domestic buildings, heat pumps were considered in the industry as the best current option, and Oliver considered that their installation should be prioritised for development, as he felt that waiting for other energy efficient technologies to come forward would delay taking action now to reduce emissions. With regard to locally based offsets, the Council could consider supporting skills training to develop the expertise in the borough to install and maintain new energy efficient heating systems.

Councillor Cory acknowledged that the cost of acting now was high, but considered that the cost, both locally and globally, of not acting to reduce emissions was far greater. The Council had to lead, and accept that leading had an associated cost. He considered that it was better to act now and install heat pumps to generate immediate emission reductions, even if these pumps had to be replaced over the coming years. He would welcome greater regulation from government to ensure that developers delivered carbon neutral housing, even if this were to cost some of their profits. He advised the Panel that the major housing development companies in the country had made billions of pounds in profit over the past two years, and should be required to use these profits to build houses which to a much greater ecological standard.

Councillor Young wondered whether it would be possible for the Council to set requirements for developers in terms of the installation of efficient heating systems, possibly through the Planning regime? Mandy Jones confirmed that the Council's Planning requirements had already set down markers for developers in respect of the ecological standards which were expected, and work was ongoing to see whether or not these could be improved. She confirmed to the Panel that the Council's emerging Economic Development Strategy was likely to focus on green sector development, with strategies aligned with Essex County Council. Funding had been obtained as part of the Additional Restrictions Grant to support local businesses, and it was suggested that some of this be devoted towards helping these businesses improve their green credentials. Councillor King reiterated his desire to receive more information on the decisions which would be taken around emission reduction in the future, together with the cost implications of those decisions and the carbon reduction benefits that were provided, in order that the benefit obtained from any money invested was maximised.

Councillor Chillingworth expressed sympathy with Councillor Cory's stance, but considered that the Council had no control over housing developers, as this was achieved by Building Regulations which were set centrally. He had personally installed a heat pump in his home, which had been expensive; however, even with the increased consumption of electricity that the pump required, it was still cheaper to run than his old gas system.

Councillor Barber noted the cross-party support for the Council's aim to reduce emissions, and agreed with Councillor Cory that the cost of the Council doing nothing was greater than the costs of acting. He noted that even at a local level, there had been an increase in flooding which had impacted on budgets, habitats and lifestyles, and considered it vital that as an organisation, the Council used its influence to try to encourage private sector businesses to follow the example which was being set.

The Panel was directed to a case study which had been included in the papers presented to it, which was The London Plan 2021 which stated that a minimum of 35% of on-site carbon improvement on national Building Regulations must be met by developers, with any shortfall being offset with a cash payment to the relevant London Planning Authority to be used in carbon offsetting projects in the relevant

borough. The Panel would welcome any further information on this Plan, and wondered whether a similar arrangement could be introduced in Colchester.

RESOLVED that: the contents of the report be noted.

53. 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, and highlighted some key areas in the Officers report. The Panel heard that the locations of the new air quality sensors which had been installed in Colchester were identified on the map presented with the papers, in accordance with a request made previously by the Panel. Progress had been made with the electrification of the Council's fleet, with the first hybrid vehicles having recently arrived, and fully electric vehicles were due to arrive in the near future. Electric vehicle charging points had been installed in the Priory Street Car Park as part of a pilot scheme, and would be open to the public in the near future. Further grant funding had been secured for further domestic energy efficiency work from March 2022 and further information would be released nearer to this date. The Essex Schools Green Day was to take place on 6 July 2022 which was an Essex-wide event to which all schools were invited and given the opportunity to demonstrate what they were doing to reduce their environmental impact and raise environmental awareness. The event had been a great success in the previous year despite restrictions imposed in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic, and Councillors were encouraged to support it in any way possible.

Councillor Chillingworth was pleased to see that the Council was working with other local authorities in Essex, and considered that Colchester had much to offer.

Councillor Cory noted that the previous Administration of the Council had an aspiration to provide a 'green' (or living) wall, and wondered whether any progress had been able to be made in this regard. Mandy Jones, Assistant Director – Place and Client Services advised the Panel that consideration had been given to planting in the town, particularly in areas which had the poorest air quality, but that a careful balance had to be struck between the benefits of such planting and the costs associated with maintaining it.

Rory Doyle, Assistant Director – Environment, confirmed that there had been some viability issues with the sites that had been identified for the potential installation of green walls. He did, however, consider that there may be an opportunity to reconsider green walls in the future as part of the diversifying Woodland and Biodiversity Project and was happy to explore this possibility further. Councillor Barber would be keen to work with any other Councillors to explore ways to get such a scheme off the ground. Councillor King would welcome this opportunity, and looked forward to receiving more information around the points of difficulty which were associated with such schemes. He would welcome an update on Colchester Orbital and the Fixing the Link projects. Mandy Jones confirmed that progress had been made with regard to the Orbital, however, this was dependent on what funding

streams could be accessed. More detailed information had been circulated to the Panel prior to the meeting in respect of the work that had been carried out.

Councillor Scordis enquired whether the data from the air quality monitoring sensors could be made publicly available and published by the Council via its' social media platforms. He further asked for clarification around what issues there had been in procuring electric vehicles, and wondered when the cycle parking in St Isaac's Walk was going to open, having received planning permission in September. It was confirmed that the cycle parking was expected to be open early in the year, and further enquiries would be made around the possibility of publishing air quality data and using this to encourage drivers to turn off their engines when stationary. Rory Doyle confirmed that hybrid vehicles were now being used by the Council for its Helpline service, and the Council's small fleet electric vehicles were on order. The full order for these vehicles had not been able to be placed due to issues with the infrastructure needed to support them, which was caused by a slight delay in the Rowan House refurbishment works. However, the required infrastructure was now being installed at Rowan House and there was also the ability to charge the Council's vehicles in St John's car park.

RESOLVED that: the contents of the report be noted.

54. Work Programme 2020-2021

Matthew Evans, Democratic Services Officer, attended the meeting to present the report and assist the Panel with its enquiries. The Panel were asked to approve the addition of an item to the agenda of its meeting in March 2022 in the form of a report examining the Council's approach to community engagement, and also to agree that the item on the Council's Waste Strategy be moved to this meeting. The item that would provide an overview of the Environment Act 2021 would be moved to the February meeting of the Panel.

RESOLVED that the contents of the work programme be noted, and that the proposed amendments be agreed.