

Extract from the minutes of the Environment and Sustainability Panel meeting of 22 March 2022.

64. Community Engagement and Climate Emergency - Update

Jill Bruce, Lead Climate Ambassador for the Essex Federation of Women's Institutes, attended the meeting and addressed the Panel in accordance with Colchester Borough Council (the Council)'s Have Your Say! provisions. The Panel was urged to increase communication with the community on climate action to promote the impressive work which had been undertaken in this regard. The Panel were advised that Colchester Borough Council (the Council) was a trusted organisation which could use its influence to ensure that advantage was taken of as many government grants as possible by advising the local community of what was available to them. It was noted that when council tax invoices were sent to residents, they often included inserts with the invoice, and this would be an opportunity to raise awareness of available grant funding and provide additional relevant information. Although the Council was doing good work in this area, and making use of its social media accounts and other channels, Jill urged for more action to be taken, believing that there was still not enough public awareness.

Mandy Jones, Assistant Director - Place and Client Services, welcomed the points which had been made, and considered that there was scope for considering how the Council made use of its contacts with individuals and groups such as the Women's Institute, in the future. There was an opportunity to carry out some of this work with the Council's own social housing tenants, and it was key to the Council's communication strategy that a process of continuous evaluation of the effectiveness of various methods of communication was undertaken.

Ben Plummer, Climate Emergency Project Officer, attended the meeting to present the report and assist the Panel with its enquiries. The report gave an outline of the different methods by which the Council carried out community engagement, which sought to both inform residents about the work being undertaken by the Council, as well as a method for consultation to seek the views of interested parties and encourage collaborative working with communities.

Councillor Chillingworth addressed the Panel and explained that his personal view, which was in no way a criticism of Officers, was that the Council was missing the opportunity to effectively demonstrate to residents what action was being taken to tackle climate change and biodiversity loss. The Council had declared a Climate Emergency in July 2019, and resolved to publicise this to the people of Colchester to raise awareness and support the public to take effective action. The Council had undertaken great works in its quest for carbon neutrality by 2030, but was failing to publicise this effectively. To meet the national target for carbon neutrality was a huge task, and local authorities who were close to their communities had a key role to play

in achieving this – enabling people to understand the problem and showing them what needed to be done. Although he considered that the Council was doing a good job with engaging with communities, more communication was needed, particularly targeted at people who were less aware of the issues that were faced.

Councillor Chillingworth had attempted to use the Council's website to find information, but his search for 'climate change' had only returned three relevant results, some of which were outdated. He considered that the Council should set up a dedicated website which covered environmental issues, and which would be accessed via a clear link from the Council's website homepage. The dedicated website might include information such as a clear scientific story explaining climate change, links to the latest news and to authoritative websites, and information about the latest government policies. It could also set out the work that the Council had undertaken, including working with the Carbon Trust and the fleet transition. Advice could also be given on action which residents could take themselves and what financial support was available to them to assist. It was also suggested that the website should offer the facility for posing questions, feedback and discussion, and it should be kept up to date with interesting articles and links to social media to maximise its accessibility. It was accepted that maintaining such a website would have cost implications, however, Councillor Chillingworth proposed that a recommendation be made to Cabinet that his suggestion be implemented, if the Panel supported this.

Councillor Barber supported the points that had been made, but further considered that local Councillors should also be challenged to share information themselves among their constituents, and he would welcome challenge from Officers as to whether he had done this effectively.

Councillor Cory considered that between 2018 and 2021 the Council had carried out some excellent work, but despite the obvious Officer commitment he remained frustrated by the lack of success in communicating this to the public. He offered his support for the suggestions which had been made by Councillor Chillingworth as a recommendation to Cabinet, and further considered that a communications officers dedicated to promoting the environmental work of the Council would be useful.

Ben Plummer advised the Panel that there was significant information on the Council's website in relation to environmental issues, although he could not comment on the function of the search facility. The current information was collected under the heading "sustainability and climate action", and included some information on the Council's work to date and action that local residents could take. The Panel were advised that a partner organisation, Eco-Colchester, maintained a comprehensive website with guides for residents and other information, and there was signposting on the Council's website to this site.

It had been noted that in the past Councillors had stated that they wished to do more to promote the Council's projects and wider assistance that was available to residents, and a monthly update had been circulated to all Councillors to facilitate this sharing of information about key projects and grant opportunities. Regular

updates were also provided to Town and Parish Councils about opportunities which were available for them, and which could also be disseminated to their residents.

Mandy Jones advised the Panel that in her experience, most websites were used for completing transactions as opposed to seeking information, and information was more commonly sought via social media. More could be done to make additional content available via the Council's current website, but the Panel were advised that creating an additional platform would be difficult to achieve as it would require significant additional resources to keep this up to date. She considered that working with partners such as the Essex Climate Action Commission would be useful to maximise the reach of the Council's communications, before going ahead and creating a brand new platform. The Panel heard that use of the Council's website was low apart from transactional engagements, and people wishing to find information would use a search facility such as Google to find it, rather than visiting a specific website. It was suggested that the Council's communications were examined on a wider scale, with consideration being given to encouraging visits to the webpages which the Council currently had.

Councillor King supported the suggestions which had been made, and wondered whether external funding could be secured to support such a project. He noted that the Council had a large workforce, and wondered whether it would be possible to use this as a means of communicating the Council's message to a wider audience. Mandy Jones confirmed to the Panel that webinars had been carried out with staff in relation to the Council's Climate Emergency Action Plan, with the aim of empowering them to become ambassadors for the Council in this regard, and Officers were also involved in awareness raising events across the borough.

Ben Plummer acknowledged the importance of digital communication, and advised the Panel that much of what had been discussed was already being carried out by the Council. He did, however, urge the Panel not to lose sight of the importance of in-person events for engaging the public and raising awareness of the Council's work among residents who may not be reached by digital means. Additional question and answer sessions were being considered to allow residents to pose questions to Officers, which had been successful elsewhere in Essex in engaging people.

It was suggested that green communication channels could be an item included in the work programme of future Panels.

RESOLVED that:

A recommendation be made to Cabinet that Colchester Borough Council establishes a website dedicated to environmental issues, accessed via an easy, simple link from Colchester Borough Council's home page, to cover subjects such as:

1. A clear scientific story of what the climate problem is and why it has happened. This would include pollution and biodiversity loss, latest news and links where possible to authoritative websites.
2. Government targets and policies.

3. What the Council is doing, its work with The Carbon Trust, its Climate Emergency Action Plan, its fleet transition, etc.
4. What people can do themselves; householder advice, tips, financial aid schemes.
5. What partner organisations and commercial companies are doing in Colchester.
6. What Town and Parish Councils are doing.
7. Volunteer news and programmes.
8. What can be done around Listed property, Conservation areas and the Dedham Vale Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.
9. Feedback, questions, and interactive discussion.