

### **DRAFT NOTES - Informal meeting with Friends of the Earth – Monday 24 Oct 2022 6pm on Zoom**

#### Background to Local and National set up for Friends of the Earth

Peter Foord shared a PowerPoint Presentation with E&E Select Committee Members. Peter provided Members with a description of the local and national structures of Friends of The Earth. Friends of the Earth is the UK's largest grassroots environmental network, which is part of international community which started in US in 1060s and was established in the UK in 1971.

Peter provided a critique of SBC's response to the Climate Emergency, which provided their view of what that Council has done so far and what the Council needs to focus on.

Friends of the Earth is involved in lobbying Government and policy makers on issue covering pollution, waste, recycling, and biodiversity.

Friends of the Earth had been instrumental in helping lead a coalition of climate change groups to get the 2008 Climate Change Act into legislation, which was the first national legislation of its kind in the world and has since been copied elsewhere. Friends of the Earth are keen to support both People and Planet. Developing counties and working people deserve a just transition away from Fossil Fuels.

The North Herts and Stevenage Friends of the Earth group are a local group that is licenced by national body. The local body can call on national professional staff but the local team are all volunteers. The local body in North Herts & Stevenage has 60 paid up members and approximately 300 on a mailing list. They hold regular meetings online and in-person.

The local group is involved in outreach at local events includes events such as Stevenage Day and the Hitchin Apple event with a publicity desk at each event.

The Groups Membership is different to national level. Local groups are autonomous. Local campaigns have been focused on protest to any Luton Airport expansion and against a waste incinerator in Hatfield. The local group keeps contact with the three Councils in its area including SBC, NH & HCC. Peter suggested it's hard to keep up to pace with all three authorities, but they do their best.

#### Policy context

- Where we are today. Current pledges and targets for Co2 reduction, looks like will inevitably go above 1.5oC – heading for 2.0oC.
- COP26 – Friends of the Earth were critical of National Strategy. The High Court says the current report does not meet the standard – Net Zero Strategy: Build Back Greener (green energy and EV good but failing on all of the rest of the measures)
- a tonne of CO2 is equivalent to driving an average sized car for 9 months; heating an average sized home for 5.5 months; fly one person economy to Cyprus; and 9 months of eating meat

#### Andy Holtham provided a critique of what SBC is doing:

Accept there are a lot of limitations on what the local Council can do. Lots of demarcation between what one Council does and another e.g. Transport, fleets. SBC alone is producing a lot of stuff on this

- SBC is doing a lot of good thing – declared an emergency 2019 – commend setting an ambitious target for the town – suitably to match the emergency we are in. HCC has no target.
- On Biodiversity, Stevenage has had a plan for several years. Herts Wildlife Trust have said Stevenage is a model for other council to adopt.
- The Council has a focus on Housing and insulation EPC rating by 2030 – and make new build net zero by 2030. Friends of the Earth agrees with SBC's target re home insulation
- On governance there is a question mark. The work that the E&E has done is good, and the work that the new Climate Change Executive Portfolio Holder, Cllr Speller has started with the Climate Change Progress Group shows promise, but it will need time to get established to see what impact there is. Welcome that climate change is getting imbedded in other work the Council is doing, for instance around procurement and corporately on its decision making there is a paragraph on the impact on climate change. It appears to Friends of the Earth that there is good senior buy in from the Strategic Leadership Team.

#### What can the Council do better?

1. **Improve its Public Engagement** – Annual report work with residents – doesn't feel like there has been a lot of engagement with residents. Wait to see Cllr Speller's approach. Citizen's Panel good but not followed up properly so lost momentum.
2. **Behaviour change needed** (According to a House of Lords report 40% of climate change can be influenced by behaviour change). This has been an area that is really weak from UK national government strategy. This is an area local government can challenge, its cost neutral to change behaviour. For individuals there is a huge up-front cost to mitigations like solar panels, Electric Vehicles and air source heat pumps but no up-front investment needed to change behaviours. Councils could do more here to promote eating less meat, flying less, and cycling and walking more.
3. **Travel and Cars** – Within the Council's existing strategy there are good initiatives to decarbonise taxis and buses which are good, but the policy is weak on trying to get people to take up electric vehicles and to use public transport and other modes of zero carbon travel active travel such as cycling and walking.
4. **Pathway to 2030** – No clear targets or pathway to see how Stevenage gets from where it is now to 2030. There is a need for interim targets or ways to measure carbon savings so carbon budgets could be needed.
5. **Community Energy Projects** – some Council's have gone a lot further than SBC has so far so Stevenage could look at developing community energy projects such as heat and power projects.
6. **Pitfalls and worries** – Things that could go wrong with the Councils strategy. It's good that the Council looks to address at its own estate emissions and its own carbon footprint. A lot of these measures should be as a given, that SBC will be an exemplar to other companies. Reducing the whole town's emissions is the big target and should be the main focus, our own estate is easier to do.
7. **Avoid an over focus on other green issues such as tree planting/ recycling and litter** – these can be a distraction – if the climate strategy just focused on this it would miss the target. Tree planting good public initiative in terms of adaptation to provide shade, but it won't get us to carbon neutral. We can't do 30,000 trees a year, Stevenage doesn't have the space even if we wanted to.

8. **Pace** – This is a worry. Friends of the Earth recognise that it is hard for Council's to move quickly, but the 2008 Climate Change Act was made legislation 14 years ago. Most of those years have been a missed opportunity and could be called lost years up to 2019 when the Council declared a climate emergency. Is it really an emergency? We need to ramp up the pace to get to net zero for the town by 2030.

### **Questions from Members**

#### **Community Energy Projects**

The Chair asked for clarification and some examples from Friends of the Earth regarding community energy projects? Friends of the Earth said that they would share examples, but this could include heat and power projects. For new build projects including ground source heat pumps ensuring there is space in new developments to incorporate these. Another suggestion was for the Council to consider setting up its own clean energy company with solar, wind or ground source heat pumps to help supply the town or public buildings.

#### **Responsibility to take action**

A Member suggested that money is tight for residents who would not be able to cover the big cost of change. Friends of the Earth suggested that this has to be led by central government. Peter Foord said that there were some grants available for residents, but these were too small scale. The Council bids to funds for decarbonisation of its Housing Stock but this is very limited too small. Friends of the Earth have a campaign for improved insulation called United for Warm Homes Campaign. Which is looking for a massive insulation campaign to address some of the most energy inefficient homes in Europe.

Andy Holtham said improved insulation would reduce the cost of heating and reduce CO2. Chair said he was concerned about the capacity issue for this type of work. Andy Holtham said regarding air source heat pumps not many companies were doing this. On this count he agreed with the Chair regarding current capacity issues but said that in the future there would be a market opportunity around this moving towards a green economy. Insulation would likely be the easiest mitigation to focus on.

#### **Mechanism to record carbon reductions in the town and impact on CO2 reduction from tree planting**

The Vice-Chair asked about (i) the weakness for the Council without having an obvious mechanism or flight path to check progress as we move along, any suggestions regarding what a successful plan to monitor this might look like? And (ii) can't just get there by just plant trees and recycling. The Council understands that there isn't enough money and space to make this work, are Friends of the Earth recommending moving to other priorities that could help the Council reach its climate change ambition? Andy Holtham said that regarding (i) a mechanism to measure how the Council was doing regarding reaching net zero the Council has a number in the strategy allocated by the government office Business Enterprise and Industrial Strategy, which is made up of different components such as cars, homes, businesses, some gas some electricity etc. Different areas can be tackled at different timescales and different paces. All the measures put together should show the Council if the area is on the right path. The Council can't have binding targets for each year, but it should help the Council see if it is on track. Friends of the Earth think it is probably unlikely that Stevenage will be net zero by 2030 unless the national government steps up to make it happen. Regarding (ii) Friends of the Earth are not saying the Council shouldn't have a priority to plant trees or reduce waste, use less in the

first place. There is always going to be important things to grapple with at the same time. Yes, do what you are doing or tree planting and be more ambitious on recycling and using less but don't rest on laurels – tree planting is good, but it won't get us there. Andy – the amount of tree planting that the Council is talking about isn't going to be reducing that much carbon or get you there quicker. The review had already established the 64% of the emissions comes from domestic heating and transport, these should be the main area of focus.

#### Issues with EV as the best environmental measure

A Member stated that, barring an extremely cold winter, because of the high cost of energy this year due to the war in Ukraine and other global issues the energy consumption will be down this year. The promotion of Electric Vehicles as a solution for the transport element of carbon saving was a problem as the mining of Lithium to manufacture the batteries is terrible for the environment, as well as unethical mining practises, so this is replacing one environmental problem with another. The best solution is better public transport and the promotion of carbon neutral modes of transport such as cycling and walking. Regarding Electric buses there is a need for a reliable service or people won't use it regardless of the energy it uses. Regarding Electric Vehicle charging points there are a lot of private ones, but it's very difficult for SBC to provide these in any great number, especially with the layout design of Stevenage's housing stock. All new houses at Tabor Close has EV and it is encouraging that new developments will have these as standard but that doesn't provide a town wide solution.

Insulation is an issue, but this should include dealing with badly sealed doors and windows not just loft and wall insulation.

#### 20's plenty speed reduction initiative and links to reduced CO2

In response to a question regarding the Friends of the Earth's views on Hertfordshire's County Council 20s Plenty scheme to reduce speed limits they were not convinced it would help enough with reducing CO2, reducing speed had some limited value, but if a combined measure it helps to promote a modal shift to active travel then that could help. Pedestrian and Cyclist accidents at the lower speeds are far less serious.

#### Behaviour change

The Chair asked about behavioural change and how the Council might encourage modal shift and encouraging people to consider reduce meat consumption? Does Friends of the Earth have any examples from elsewhere to encourage people to think of it?

Peter Foord said this was all about education. The Council could help by presenting alternatives. It was now more common to see vegan food on menus, this issue is beginning to become mainstream, 20 years ago this would have been very rare and seen as a novelty. Understand the reality of climate change and impact of behaviours is important. There is also a public policy role in terms of market signals, as energy prices are up so much, people follow this and change behaviour. Andy Holtham added that the Government have a nudge until behaviour change, was going to be published at same time as the Governments Net Zero Report in October 2021 and this withdrawn but it was accidentally published and it's therefore out in the public domain. This report concedes that it will be very tough to get people to change behaviour. Hertfordshire County Council now have someone to advise on this. The Hertfordshire Climate Change Sustainability Partnership has now a renewed focus on behaviour change and adaptations, and it will be looking at this at its next meeting on 9 November.

A Member asked about the focus on implementation change. In New Zealand 56% of homes have heat pumps this is because they have space for them around their properties. The lack of space around homes in UK doesn't help.

In response to a question from a Member, Andy Holtham stated that the positivity around the growth of Elec cars was not from Friends of the Earth but from the Government, as they saw this as meeting their target.

A Member stated that the critique of regarding the public involvement was firm but fair. The Council was doing all we can to involve people, but Friends of the Earth are correct, as only people who are involved in climate change in a group etc. would know about it. Do you have any practical solutions for engaging with people who are not at all interested in climate change and examples of other local authorities who are exemplars in this area? Friends of the Earth agreed to share this information.

#### Conclusion re engagement

Peter Foord said SBC had started well with the Citizens Panel and then this work had stalled. People on the group would have been keen to be actively engaged to help the Council. The ideas around the new Panel's sound promising but they are yet to see any details on this. Friends of the Earth had seen some attempts to use social media to engage people, but by the nature of social media this leaves the Council open to receive hostile responses.

The Chair thanked Peter Foord and Andy Holtham for their time and contribution and said he would like to talk to them again in the future.

The meeting ended at 7.20pm