

## Notes for 3 March 2022 Informal E&E Select Committee:

### Attendance:

E&E Members – Cllr Michael Downing (Chair), Cllr Adam Mitchell (Vice-Chair), Stephen Booth, Maureen McKay, Sarah Mead and Claire Parris

In attendance as a witness – Cllr Jeannette Thomas, Executive Portfolio Holder for Housing, Health and Older People.

Officers – Zayd Al-Jawed, Tom Pike, Rob Gregory, David Thorogood, Jonathan Sayers, Andrew Garside, Stephen Weaver

1. Apologies – Cllr Wendy Kerby
2. Interview with Cllr Jeannette Thomas, Executive Member for Housing, Health and Older People

The Chair reminded Members that they had received a written response to the questions they had set. These included officer's responses and the Portfolio holders own response. Members asked Cllr Jeannette Thomas some supplementary questions based on the written responses as follows:

Question 1 – 'How are you reaching out to influence partners, residents and businesses in Stevenage and Hertfordshire towards our shared climate change ambitions...?'

In response to the written response Members asked:

- Do new tenants receive any information on climate change in their "welcome packs" when they enter a new property? Jeannette said to her knowledge this was not happening but could easily be included, perhaps by including the Council's ten climate change pledges and the most up to date information on recycling at their property
- In addressing the gap between the Council's current engagement processes and where it needs to be can more be done with residents groups to, over time, move residents away from the day to day housing tenant issues to considering wider, more strategic, Climate change matters that in time will affect all residents?

Jeannette stated that she is very supportive of resident meetings and resident engagement and there were gaps in the cover for these meetings which Members and Officers were trying to address. Jeannette agreed that small scale local projects and face to face conversations would help get the message out to residents.

A possible recommendation for the review could be encouraging a very local, small scale, grass roots events that can focus resident's involvement in things such as environmental projects (gardens/trees) or community kitchen/growing or bulk buying schemes as an example, which needs to be joined up with other neighbourhood activities and needs to be a thread through all activities to address climate change, not as an add on or special one off focus. The Assistant Director, Communities and Neighbourhoods, Rob Gregory stated that he was working with his teams to mainstream this as a default thinking and activity for all things they do.

The Communications Officer responsible for Climate Change messaging for the Council, Jonathan Sayers, stated that he was very encouraged by what he had heard in this meeting regarding resident engagement on this issue and suggested that there are a number of events throughout the year where it was the Council's "shop window" to the public to get out some positive messages about climate change to help nudge the public to think about the issues. The way the Council can do that is to say how the event was addressing its carbon footprint. The Chair agreed that events like Stevenage Day are important for two reasons (i) as a vital community day for the town and as such a great opportunity to reach people who otherwise have limited dealings with the Council, and (ii) also in terms of how serious the Council was treating the Climate Emergency as a real emergency, similar to how the Council responded to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Question 2 – '(i) What actions so far has your Executive Portfolio area been taking towards achieving the Council's ambition for Stevenage to be Net Zero by 2030? (ii) Plans for retro fitting the Council's housing stock?'

In response to the written answer Members asked: Is the Council considering a whole town areal drone survey of properties to establish using infrared cameras to establish the heat loss of properties?

This was not currently under consideration because of its prohibitive cost and the focus has been on applying for various funding bids which takes up officer time and resources with no guarantee of a successful bid. The Council has just received £1.3m Local Authority Delivery Fund (LADs) and £1.8m Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund (SHDF) government funding which is being match funded by 33% contribution from the Council's Housing Revenue Account.

In terms of meeting the Council's Zero Carbon target by 2030 the focus so far from government has been on fabric first, so this would include Photovoltaic (PV) solar panels and on getting properties that are under Energy Performance Certificate (EPC) rating of D or below rectified via improved energy efficiency such as improved insulation. Clean heat sources have not been the government's priority, therefore the Council has been unable to consider this yet, or bid for any funding sources as none exist at present. It is expected that the focus from government may turn to this at the end of the decade.

Members asked:

- Is the data for the Housing stock derived from desk top studies or from sampling?

In terms of surveys the Council is doing a lot to capture data of its housing stock and has access to a piece of software that models the data to show the energy performance of the stock. The Council now has 50% SAT data which gives a good indication across the spread of stock types so Officers can bid for funds when they are available. The data comes from EPC's, energy surveys and completed works on properties including when new boilers, window and doors are installed.

Question 3 – 'What issues do you perceive to be the main difficulties/challenges for your Portfolio area to address in the Council's Climate Change Strategy to meet Net Zero?'

In response to the written answer Members asked:

- If the biggest stumbling block is finance and the way the Government is encouraging all authorities to bid for relatively small pots of funding for specific schemes, what is the estimated global figure that the Council needs to decarbonise its whole stock?

The Executive Portfolio Holder for Housing, Health and Older People, Cllr Jeannette Thomas stated that the way authorities are competing against each other and using up valuable officer time was not good and would further delay real progress in the local government housing sector, but we were bidding for all available funds. Andrew Garside suggested that the rough global figures that they are projecting is around £160m for the whole stock, which is around £20k per property in addition to usual replacement end of life windows and roofs etc. The Strategic Director informed Members that this was all being considered as part of the HRA business plan refresh over the summer and he agreed that the current funding mechanism to tackle this was way short of what is required and the LGA and ARCH would be making a compelling case to government to address this.

Question 4 – ‘What mitigations and adaptations do you see might be necessary....?’

In response to the written answer Members asked:

- How is EV charging points going to be retrofitted into the existing housing stock and specifically into flats and are all of the new build schemes being developed now making provision for this charging infrastructure?

David Thorogood shared that within the Social Housing Fund there is a relatively generous scheme which is due to start in May 2022 providing funding for £3.5k per charging point which the Council will be bidding for. The exact funding available for the scheme is not yet fully known, but Officers will share the details when they have it. It was fair to say that the level of EV charging infrastructure around the town, like many other areas was at this point still relatively small but more publicly available EV charging was being installed around the town and charging for flat blocks would be addressed but it will take a number of years to deliver this and be dependent on funding from central government.

Question 5 – ‘Are you more or less encouraged following COP26 in Glasgow in November 2021?’

It was agreed by all that the focus had quickly moved onto other global news stories so not much momentum was harnessed by the Conference being hosted in the UK.

Question 6 – ‘As an Executive Member of the Council do you think the issue yet has the priority it needs?’

In addition to the written response that the Executive Portfolio Holder for Housing, Health and Older People, Cllr Jeannette Thomas provided, she stated that in terms of Housing she believed the Council was doing all it could to address the issue of the Climate Emergency but felt that there was more work needed with older people to get the message across regarding what the long term impact of climate change could mean to them, that was why she was working with the Older Peoples Network to step this up. Jeanette stated that across the Executive and Council services she believed it was getting the priority it needs. However, whether it's enough is not yet clear.

#### Question 7 – ‘With regards to Older People and Climate Change...?’

In addition to the written response that the Executive Portfolio Holder for Housing, Health and Older People, Cllr Jeannette Thomas provided, she stated that in her opinion the Older People are interested in Climate Change and care about the environment but don't yet really see how this is going to impact them, so they need help to see what's coming. Older People who are owner occupiers of private property need help with grants to be able to afford air or ground source heat pumps and other mitigations like effective blinds and air cooling in their property, especially those who are relying on just the state pension, as they will not have the means to make these costly alternations to their homes. With regards to the Council run sheltered schemes the Council is looking at low carbon solutions to cool buildings for excessive heat episodes during the summer months and effective insulation for heat retention in the winter and cooling in the summer.

A Member suggested that consideration should be given to triple glazing when older glazing systems were being replaced as these offered much better insulation and really help keeping the heat out during the summer.

Members agreed that it was wrong to characterise the public response to the Climate Emergency as an age demographic stereotypical response, as there were people engaged and also indifferent in both the young and the old.

#### Resident Survey – request by Members to see the data now

With regard to the data in the resident survey for the local neighbourhoods that the Council had commissioned through a third party survey provide, Members present at the informal Select Committee meeting made a request for it to be recorded at this meeting that the data be provided to all Members now so that they could interpret the data prior to any analysis or summary being provided to Members.