

Environment & Economy Select Committee – Interim review findings and emerging recommendations – 23 March 2022

In line with the request from the Chair of the Environment and Economy Select Committee for a brief interim report with emerging recommendations has been drafted at this stage of the review. The review has already heard from a large number of witnesses and it has received a lot of evidence in the form of data; presentations; written responses to Members prepared questions; and face to face meetings with external witnesses, SBC Officers and a number of the Executive Portfolio holders. However, there are still a large number of witnesses to interview which will take the review into a second municipal year, 2022-23 to complete. With this in mind the Chair and Officers supporting the review are looking at ways that the remainder of the review can be completed in the most time and resource efficient way and will come back to the Committee with a plan of action in the new Municipal Year 2022-23.

The Chair is keen to see what ground has been covered already and to identify any emerging recommendations, so that progress can be consolidated prior to the final report and recommendations being published, which would likely be near the end of 2022 or into 2023. The Chair and Vice-Chair will seek the approval of the Committee for the final wording of its interim recommendations to be submitted to the relevant Executive Portfolio Holders during the summer, so that progress can be made on those recommendations.

Emerging recommendations:

Recognising what the main areas of emissions for the Stevenage area are, and then prioritising where our focus should be?

Members recognised that the Council's Climate Change Strategy and action plan focusing on 8 key themed areas was a good plan:

- People
- Biodiversity
- Transport
- Energy & Water
- Business
- Homes
- Construction & Regeneration
- Waste & Recycling

The Environmental Sustainability Co-ordinator for Housing and Health, David Thorogood, provided Members with the CO2 emission data for Stevenage. These equate as a percentage split of all CO2 emissions to: transport (34%) produced the biggest CO2 emission followed by the domestic (28%), commercial (18%), industry (13%) and public sector (7%). In fact, transport and domestic emissions combined were almost 2 thirds of the overall emissions for the area (64%).

One area that the Council can lead on is in working in the Community encouraging small changes by residents, recognising that some of the larger changes needed were big ticket items and would need national strategies to make them deliverable such as decarbonising domestic cars and heating systems in homes.

The Borough Council may have a small percentage of the overall CO2 emission for the Stevenage area, but as the local authority it has a large role to play in influencing people

to make the right choices. The biggest effect the Council could have is to enable people living in Council properties to have lower emissions, by way of education and also by making adaptations to their homes by a long term capital investment programme to improve insulation and provide clean low emissions heating by replacing fossil fuel heating systems.

Recommendations:

- That Officers provide Members with the plans to decarbonise its housing stock over the coming decade.
- That the plans for working alongside and influencing local people be provided to Members.

Resident engagement:

Recommendation:

- With regards to the Citizen Panel, the handling of future iterations needs to be improved regarding the feedback with the group and ongoing engagement.

Baseline figures - measuring how we are doing with regards to our Net Zero targets for 2030 linked to a shared study with the University of Hertfordshire Zero Carbon Lab

The Council has used baseline figures using 2018 data for the Stevenage area's kilo tonnes of carbon as the baseline. Members understood that it was important that the Council had previously established a baseline based on data from 2018, as it need to know if it was reducing the carbon footprint for the whole area of Stevenage. Members queried how the baseline was produced and whether it was possible that the figures could be adjusted? How would we measure if we had reached the goal of saving 350m kilo tons for carbon by 2030?

The Council needs to be able to measure what progress SBC and the area of Stevenage is doing by different measures e.g. transport, domestic heating, businesses, food consumption etc. on an annual basis to see where we are and what more we need to do to reach Net Zero by 2030? – To this end, the Environmental Sustainability Co-ordinator is now working with officers to establish a baseline for the Borough Council and is collecting data from all SBC business units, so that in future years it can quantify how well it is doing to reduce its carbon emissions.

A significant breakthrough established by the review has been the relationship built up and work undertaken by the University of Hertfordshire – helping the Council find a mechanism for measuring the carbon of the whole area of Stevenage and what steps the area would need to take to be net zero. To carry this out officers have been meeting with the University in parallel to the Scrutiny review meetings. To this end the Zero Carbon Lab at the University of Hertfordshire will publish a report for Stevenage in April 2022. The report will be based on the data the Council provided and will be a significant step to be able to quantify and measure the town's carbon footprint and what it needs to do to lower it. There is a possibility that this will help the Council to see how realistic the date of 2030 is for meeting its net zero ambitions for Stevenage, and a more realistic longer date may be recommended by the Scrutiny review based on this work. The University have indicated that they are bidding for a larger research fund which would link with trials and studies towards interventions for the Council's housing stock and have expressed an interest in continuing to work with the Council in its climate change ambitions, seeing this work leading to a model that could be rolled out to other district council's in the UK.

Regarding the regeneration it was acknowledged that it was better to reuse and repurpose buildings rather than completely demolishing. However, it's acknowledged that regarding Stevenage regeneration projects many of the sites are on car parks or the buildings are not suited to reuse because of their original construction methods.

Recommendation:

- Officers continue to work with the University of Hertfordshire towards its zero carbon ambitions.

Establishment of a Climate Change Lead Officer

Early in the review Members expressed concern that there should be a dedicated officer to head up this work to support officers who have been leading on this alongside other significant responsibilities – E&E encouraged that funding was put in place in the 2022-23 budget to establish a post to drive this work forward.

Recommendation:

- that this post be made permanent.

HEART – Challenge

The session with HEART (Hertfordshire Enabling and Adapting for Resilience Together) was challenging, their view was the Council was making good progress towards its climate change ambitions, but needed to go much further and faster and should be focussing on more on specific adaptations with the coming climate emergency environmental crisis, including more frequent food shortages, extreme weather episodes, climate migration and resource wars.

Recommendation:

- that the Council engage further with HEART to provide some Member seminars on the Climate Emergency and that the Council teams up with HEART in support of a social enterprise such as a Climate Resilience Hub, or Climate Emergency Centres (CEC's) Increasingly, these local physical hubs or spaces are popping up over the UK, and they collaborate, network and learn from each other. There are none so far in Hertfordshire – [see presentation to E&E Select Committee 18 11 21](#)

Mainstreaming of Climate Emergency thinking with regards to all Council activities

Recommendation:

- look for opportunities where the Council can consider if an activity or an event can be made as low carbon as possible. A helpful tool is the good ideas about running a reduced carbon sustainable event, considering things such as measuring the current events carbon footprint; making a plan; consulting with contractors; organise essential waste management and start simple – [How to make an event sustainable \(7 examples\) Eventbrite blog](#)

Session with Executive Portfolio Holder for Environment and Regeneration – Cllr John Gardner

Recommendations:

Tree Canopy

There are challenges regarding the level of Stevenage's Tree Canopy, the current percentage is 17% but the target is 19%. The University of Hertfordshire Zero Carbon Lab has suggested that trees offer the Council one of the best measure towards its net zero targets.

Recommendation:

- That the Executive Portfolio Holder for the Environment and Regeneration and Officers establish a plan to meet the 2% gap in Stevenage's Tree Canopy, and that an even more ambitious plan be considered to expand the number of trees in Stevenage or offsetting in other locations as this offers one of the best measures for carbon reduction open to the Council.

Planning & Development

Recommendation:

- Within the constraints of the exiting planning legislation and powers for local planning authorities, establish a plan to make Climate change a planning consideration for all applications.

Focus on improved Recycling

There is an example in the County of St Albans District Council that moved from 189th place three years ago to the top ten in 2020-21 and first place in 2021-22. In addition, Watford has improved by 5% in the last year. The recycling rate for Stevenage was improved in 2021-22 up to 40.2% a 0.7% increase. Direct parallels may be difficult as these authorities may be in a different place in its recycling journey, but whatever lessons can be learned would be welcomed. Progress on alternative recycling collection methods would be welcomed including separate food waste caddies. Currently, each household in Stevenage is sending equivalent to 1/3 of its food shopping straight into the bin as waste, so food waste is an area that can be improved upon. There is scope to do this work linking with the National Food Waste Strategy. Officers have indicated that there is some capital funding available to carry out 4 pilot projects in the Borough.

Recommendation:

- That the Executive Portfolio Holder for the Environment and Regeneration and AD Stevenage Direct Services brings back a report to Scrutiny Members on the actions and strategy it is taking to improve the Council's recycling rates.

Protecting climate emergency targets within the budget setting process

Members suggested that as a minimum possible recommendation could be that when considering the budget the Executive considers in its discussions when making their annual budget savings that they do not cut any service area that directly links to climate change measures or mitigations.

Recommendation:

- (i) That Members and Officers involved in the budget setting process, as a minimum, consider the climate change implications of any budget decisions. Nor should there be a cut to services if there is a detrimental climate change implication; and

(ii) Going further, scrutiny members would like the Executive to consider creating a small ring fenced budget in each service delivery area to investigate the long term budget implications of climate change for that business unit.

Session with Executive Portfolio Holder for Economy, Enterprise & Transport – Cllr Lloyd Briscoe

Members heard from the Executive Portfolio Holder for Economy, Enterprise & Transport, Cllr Lloyd Briscoe that transport is responsible for 1/3 of emissions. Substantial change needs to happen to bring carbon emissions down. Regarding its licensing responsibilities the Council can help influence the licensed taxi trade but this would likely be a long journey and the trade will need help to decarbonise. For E-Taxi licence the Council has some influence, but private cars and Uber present a challenge – The Portfolio Holder has started a conversation with the licenced taxi trade who have a high barrier of costs to move to clean electric vehicles.

With regards to the Council's business support, all of the big Gunnels Wood Road businesses are targeting 2030 for net zero and they are about 5 years ahead of us in their journey to net zero. Where the Council could offer more support was to the Small to Medium Enterprises (SME's) to this end the Business Relationship Manager was looking to work closely with them to provide them with the support they need to make their businesses lower carbon, access grants and sharing best practice.

With regards to business support, there is currently two grant funding schemes available to businesses. Grants of up to 20k were available for the Eastern New Energy Programme to support energy efficiency and investment in renewable. Grants of up to 5k were also available for the energy efficiency and for upgrading equipment.

The Council is currently bidding for the 18 new double bay charging points in car parks across Stevenage. It would cost about £112k. The Council would provide a contribution of £12k and the remainder would be funded by Central Government. A consultation of the charging points would be carried out and the roll out would be by mid-2022.

Recommendations –

- Re EV Charging in neighbourhood centres – Members recommended that, where possible, officers consider the locations used should be close to the cycle network.
- Members suggested that when the Electric Car Club charging equipment was reinstalled in town centre locations that a promotional campaign with residents of town centre accommodation be carried out to promote their use and officers should consider rebranding it, making it clear that it is for public use not just for SBC officers as the original livery made it appear it was just for corporate use.

Session with Executive Portfolio Holder for Housing, Health and Older People – Cllr Jeanette Thomas

Recommendations –

- That new tenants receive information on climate change in their “welcome packs” when they enter a new property, to include 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?

- encouraging 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 agreed with this approach and informed members that he was working with his teams to mainstream this as a default thinking and activity for all things they do.

Informal meeting with Members – 17 January 2022

Members carried out their own session to look at possible longer term strategic and short term quick wins from the review and made the following recommendations for action:

- (i) Officers devise a strategy re tree management & P&D (Strategic)
- (ii) Members and Officers lead by example, even if the benefits are small by acting appropriately in Council offices, plastic bottles, drinks cups etc. (Quick wins)
- (iii) Consider how to represent the progress of the strategy? Fishbone chart/Gantt chart, target lines, KPIs etc.(Strategic)
- (iv) A communications plan needed with channels, calendar, key messages, campaigns etc. Suggest starting with a campaign on the reduce your heating by 2 degrees (Strategic)
- (v) Review Council activities to ensure carbon friendly practices are truly embedded. (Strategic)
- (vi) Engage with young people via schools, Youth Mayor and Mayor's activities. (Distinct Project)
- (vii) Promoting the 20 Minute Neighbourhood theory and willingness to encourage local businesses and tap into big business. These items would suit a workshop that needs to be facilitated externally to tease out some tangible actions. Possible HEART (focus on adaptations only, in their view we are past the point where behaviour can affect significant climate change) or Mutual Gain (a neutral facilitation company who facilitated the Climate Emergency Panel – circa £5K) or another external organisation to facilitate? (Distinct Project)