

STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

ENVIRONMENT & ECONOMY SELECT COMMITTEE MINUTES

Date: Wednesday, 6 March 2024

Time: 6.00pm

Place: Council Chamber, Daneshill House, Danestrete, Stevenage

Present: Councillors: Rob Broom (Chair), Jim Brown, Bret Facey, Conor McGrath, Sarah Mead, Claire Parris and Graham Snell.

Start / End Time: Start Time: 6.00pm
End Time: 7.20pm

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Andy McGuinness, Adam Mitchell, Ellie Plater, and Baroness Taylor of Stevenage.

There were no declarations of interest.

2 MINUTES - 12 FEBRUARY 2024

It was **RESOLVED** that the Minutes of the Environment & Economy Select Committee held on 12 February 2024 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

3 UPDATE ON CLIMATE CHANGE ACTIONS

The Chair introduced the Assistant Director (Planning & Regulatory) Zayd Al-Jawad, Assistant Director (Direct Services) Steve Dupoy, Head of Climate Action Fabian Oyarzun, Climate Change Programme Lead Officer Jennifer Bratchell, and the Portfolio Holder for Environment and Performance Councillor Simon Speller.

The Head of Climate Action presented an update to the Committee. He advised that the Stevenage Climate Action Plan Tracker was officially launched on 27 February 2024 and the launch was supported by communications via the Councils communications channels including a press release issued to The Comet and they have included it on their website.

The Climate Action Plan Tracker had been produced through a partnership with Kausal, and created an interactive, web-based portal that highlighted the projects being undertaken by the council to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, improve climate change resilience, and promote environmental stewardship and sustainability. The tracker could be viewed by everyone in an easy-to-understand format, detailing data in charts, figures, and diagrams and could be accessed at <https://climate.stevenage.gov.uk/>.

The Action Plan contained relevant climate actions Stevenage Borough Council was undertaking, or planned to undertake, broken down into the following eight strategic themes:

- Businesses
- Homes
- Transport
- Construction and Regeneration
- Energy and Water
- People and Awareness
- Waste and Recycling
- Biodiversity

There were 46 actions included across the 8 strategic themes and each action included multiple tasks.

The Head of Climate Action advised that the Climate Action Plan website was the priority consultation site in terms of climate action for stakeholders. The website had been presented to voluntary groups for feedback and would be promoted through official SBC Communication channels, the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise sector and through the work of the Council's Communities and Neighbourhoods team.

A calendar had been collated of national and international sustainability key dates which would be linked to the Council's actions to share and promote proper communications in this regard.

The Head of Climate Action advised that the Climate Change Community Fund had been created to allow for the development of community-led environmental projects with social benefits. The aim of the Climate Change Community Fund was to foster and improve a sense of community around climate focused projects to increase community engagement surrounding the topic of climate change and deliver both environmental and social benefits.

The CCCF is funded through the Community Infrastructure Levy and had supported five projects that were detailed in the report. There was £7,500 annually allocated to each ward. The funded projects supported climate action through a variety of different aspects which included avoiding waste, improving air quality, improving soil health and biodiversity, producing local food, creating habitats for wildlife and supported the physical and mental wellbeing of residents.

A Member asked a question relating to sustainability of the funding of the Climate Change Community Fund. The Assistant Director (Planning & Regulatory) advised that the funding was coming from the Community Infrastructure Levy and was ringfenced from developer contributions. There was funding committed for the next few years.

A Member asked a question regarding Biodiversity. The Portfolio Holder for Environment and Performance responded that 4000 trees were an initial target based on the availability of suitable land and funding that was available to support

this planting. He added that the periphery of Stevenage offered an opportunity to develop a form of green belt and that he hoped to maximise the number of trees planted and welcomed pressure from the Committee to push for more tree planting utilising some of the future CIL monies. The Assistant Director (Planning & Regulatory) clarified that money received for development in the Borough in relation to biodiversity net gain would be located in the Borough where appropriate. The Impact of Development would be tested against the Council's Biodiversity Supplementary Planning Document, as such, the Council had to demonstrate that it could deliver the agreed percentage net gain planted on the ground and it would be legally bound to provide that.

A Member asked a question relating to the cost of decarbonisation of the social housing stock. The Assistant Director (Planning & Regulatory) responded that the cost was approximately £30,000 per property but that all properties were different. This provided an indication that the total cost for the Council would exceed £200m. He added that the Council targeted pots of funding from central government which the Council strategically predicted had the most likelihood of success but that most of the available funding was for small amounts relative to the total cost. In addition, it was noted that this approach was very time consuming for each local authority to bid against each other, with no guarantee of success. The Head of Climate Action added that a decision needs to be made regarding what we will understand and accept as net zero housing, distinguishing between onsite emissions reduction and some emissions difficult to abate that we will consider able to offset. Offsetting is an option that can be contentious so care would be needed when defining what a net zero house is. This is currently being worked in the context of the partial update of the Local Plan.

A Member asked a question relating to legal documentation and the wider responsibility of the Council with regards planning and housing developments. The Assistant Director (Planning & Regulatory) responded that officers were working on a revision to the Local Plan which was the best document to capture how the Council can control planning with regard to climate change measures. He advised that the Council would promote measures relating to climate change as far as was possible within the current legislation but it could be difficult to go beyond what central government was trying to promote. He added that the Local Plan included two potential development sites that were already allocated and for which the Council would be pushing for net zero. He advised that the Town and Country Planning Association principles of a 15-minute town were embedded in a lot of the Council's planning policies.

A Member asked if the Council's Climate Action Plan went far enough and whether the Head of Climate Action had been able to have as big of an impact as he hoped since taking up the position. The Head of Climate Action responded that there had been considerable positive engagement and understanding among officers regarding the Council's initiatives. However, he highlighted challenges related to working in silos and addressing sustainability comprehensively which are common in most large organisations. He stated that the focus on carbon reduction was just one aspect of the broader sustainability agenda and that the potential of utilising the new Climate Action Plan Tracker platform to showcase progress and foster engagement among officers would be beneficial. He added that the Council were looking to

establish an 'Climate Champions' group that consisted of officers from across a wide range of departments to improve cross departmental communication. The Portfolio Holder for Environment and Performance added that climate change was a very technical topic and that the 2030 net zero target makes sense for the Council as an organisation, the big challenge was around what the Council did within the community where it needs to be an exemplary organisation.

A Member asked a question relating to solar power. The Head of Climate Action responded that the installation of solar power in homes across Stevenage had been promoted through the Solar Together scheme. He added that there had been some solar installations on Council owned buildings through the Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund (in Council houses), and that solar was a technology that continued to be explored but that the upfront cost was a barrier. The Assistant Director (Planning & Regulatory) added that the majority of the Council's commercial building stock had a net zero electricity supply and that whilst solar power did have a sustainability benefit it did not always necessarily mean a reduction in carbon emissions.

A Member asked a question relating to cycle recycling schemes and stated that nationally over 15 million cycles were thrown away each year. The Head of Climate Action advised that the Council supported a bicycle recycle scheme but was unsure of any police involvement in a Member suggestion that the Police should donate stolen cycles if the owners did not come forward once they were recovered, which could help address transport poverty.

A Member asked a question relating the data included in the Stevenage Territorial GHG Emissions graph contained within the presentation. The Head of Climate Action advised that the graph was the latest version available at a territorial level. He added that the 2022 data would be available in July 2024 and that an updated graph would be circulated at that time.

The Portfolio Holder for Environment and Performance presented an update to the Committee. Strategic partnerships were in a good place. The Council worked actively within the Herts Waste Partnership, Herts Infrastructure and Planning Partnership and Herts Climate Change Strategy Partnership. The partnerships all had aspects of biodiversity and climate change however only the Herts Climate Change Strategy Partnership was focussed solely on climate change, and it worked as an information exchange.

The everyday work within future planning and planning development was supporting the Council's climate change and sustainability agendas and Members were urged to engage with officers, when they had any concerns or suggestions, at any time and not to save it for Committee meetings. Traditional communication methods should still be used alongside digital communication channels.

The Climate Change Community Fund had been a success and the work of community groups that had received funding was praised. By next year, there was hope all wards would have participated in climate change funding applications.

Waste Not Want Not were praised for their work which had recently seen them

awarded the King's Voluntary Service Award. Local litter picking groups were also praised and litter picks had continued to be well supported.

The Portfolio Holder for Environment and Performance presented an example from another authority in the form of a chart that could be used to provide a simple demonstration of the Council's current position in its move towards the net zero carbon objective. Members agreed that it would be useful to have a similar chart for Stevenage that could be shared with the public to show the Council's path to net zero.

A Member asked a question relating to community capacity. The Portfolio Holder for Environment and Performance responded that engagement was strongest in neighbourhoods with strong community centres. Some primary schools had shown interest. He added that the officer support was available, but community capacity continued to face obstacles as residents would need to be part of a group, with a bank account.

A Member asked a question relating to Scope 3 emissions. The Head of Climate Action responded that the focus had been on procurement and that the Council had been taking part in a sustainable procurement project led by the regional climate change forum. He added that 90% of emissions for a local authority come from their supply chain. Whilst this was a well-known fact, it was still difficult to address as most organisations can only see back one step in their supply chain. The project had a diagnostic a regional level and preliminary results suggested that the Council had scored relatively well in terms of how officers are engaged with the subject. There was an upcoming workshop to work on an action plan for regional priorities. The Council had recently conducted a staff travel survey and officers were analysing the responses. There were known challenges in this area and work was needed with issues like the Council's Grey Fleet (employee's own vehicles). The Portfolio Holder for Environment and Performance added that big business often process mapped their supply chains rigorously to control costs. This contrasted with the public sector which has a more diffused set of stakeholders and open-ended processes making it inherently more difficult to identify, control and manage. A comparison of business supply chains and public service supply chains could be considered at a future meeting of the Committee.

The Portfolio Holder for Environment and Performance suggested that the Council could promote its corporate social responsibility to release employees for a day or two a year to work in the community focusing on environmental projects.

The Chair thanked all those who had contributed to the meeting.

It was **RESOLVED** that the Officer and Executive Portfolio Holder Presentations were noted.

4 **URGENT PART 1 BUSINESS**

None.

5 **EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC AND PRESS**

Not required.

6 **URGENT PART II BUSINESS**

None.

CHAIR