

STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

**ENVIRONMENT & ECONOMY SELECT COMMITTEE
MINUTES**

Date: Tuesday, 12 November 2024

Time: 6.00pm

Place: Council Chamber - Daneshill House, Danestrete

Present: Councillors: Rob Broom (Chair), Leanne Brady, Forhad Chowdhury, Alistair Gordon, Sarah Mead, Claire Parris, Ellie Plater CC, Graham Snell and Jade Woods

Start / End Start Time: 6.00pm

Time: End Time: 7.30pm

1 **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Andy McGuinness and Nigel Williams.

There were no declarations of interest.

2 **MINUTES - 8 OCTOBER 2024**

It was **RESOLVED** that the Minutes of the meeting of the Environment and Economy Select Committee, held on 8 October 2024, be agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

3 **CLIMATE CHANGE UPDATE**

The Chair introduced the Climate Change Update, a biannual review typically taken in November and March of each year and highlighted the Committee's long-standing commitment to monitoring progress in this area due to its critical importance.

The Chair welcomed the guest speakers to the Committee. Matt Partridge (Chief Executive), Simon Speller (Portfolio Holder, Environment and Performance), Zayd al Jawad (Assistant Director, Planning and Regulation) and Fabian Oyarzun (Head of Climate Action).

The Chair opened the discussion with a reflection on the global urgency surrounding climate change. Recent events such as flooding in Central Europe and Spain, and high temperatures across the Mediterranean, were noted as stark reminders of the ongoing crisis. While these events were not directly attributable to local action or inaction, they underscored the importance of the Council's efforts in reducing carbon emissions, enhancing biodiversity, and encouraging behavioural change.

The Cabinet was presented with a report and received a presentation from the Head of Climate Action which provided an overview of the measures the Council was implementing to address climate change. Specifically, the report detailed the most significant climate action efforts undertaken across the themes identified in the 2020 Climate Change Strategy.

The Committee were informed about a Climate Action Framework that considered 9 levels of climate action ranging from a macro global and national levels, through to a micro community, family and individual levels.

The Head of Climate Action advised the Committee of ongoing participation in regional initiatives including the Hertfordshire Climate Change and Sustainability Partnership (HCCSP) and the Hertfordshire Waste Partnership (HWP).

The Committee heard that Stevenage's 2022 emissions had decreased by 17.5% against 2018 levels, while the Council's organisational emissions had dropped by 39%. A switch to hydro-treated vegetable oil (HVO) for fleet fuel was projected to yield further reductions.

The Head of Climate Action informed the Committee that an online portal had been launched, detailing over 50 climate actions and offering citizens opportunities to provide feedback.

Addressing the ongoing efforts of local businesses, the Head of Climate Action advised members that large local companies were actively pursuing net-zero targets, while small and medium-sized businesses were supported through schemes such as the recently launched Stevenage Green Business Grant, the Sustainable Business Programme funded by the UKSPF (UK Shared Prosperity Fund), and the WENTA Zero Action Plan.

The Committee heard that the Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund had enabled retrofitting of 446 homes using the last two rounds since 2023, with other ongoing projects supporting improved energy efficiency in social and private housing. While transport initiatives included the Council's fleet decarbonisation, deployment of electric vehicles, and public schemes like a cycle hire programme and enhanced EV charging infrastructure.

Addressing waste and recycling, the Head of Climate Action advised Members that targets included transitioning entirely to energy-from-waste facilities by 2030 and increasing recycling rates from the current 39.1% to 60% by 2035.

The Committee were informed that a Biodiversity Action Plan had been adopted, focusing on habitat conservation and enhancement, with 63 actions identified. The Climate Change Strategy 2020, included linked targets such as increasing Stevenage's tree canopy cover to 19% and planting 4,000 trees by 2030.

The Committee heard that eight community-led initiatives had been funded under the Climate Change Community Fund, addressing waste reduction, biodiversity, water conservation, and climate adaptation. Examples included a rainwater collection pilot and community garden projects.

The presentation concluded with details of ongoing projects and a reaffirmation of the Council's commitment to its climate strategy goals.

Responding to a question related to the increase in reported electricity and gas consumption, the Head of Climate Action advised that the initial 2020 baseline only included 12 primary sites, selected due to their significant energy usage. By 2023, the scope had expanded to in excess of 500 sites, offering a far more comprehensive understanding of energy consumption across the Council's portfolio. The Head of Climate Action also noted the inclusion of non-corporate contract sites in an ongoing review, further enhancing the comprehensiveness of the data. This proactive approach aimed to eliminate residual gaps in reporting, but it may initially cause reported figures to rise.

The Chair asked a number of questions regarding Daneshill House and the proposed Civic Hub, raising concerns regarding inefficiencies in managing one of the Council's highest-emitting buildings. The Chair spoke of the importance of interim measures, given the time before the new hub is operational. In response, Officers explained that the building's heating and energy systems were outdated, making it extremely difficult and cost ineffective to implement a modern Building Management Plan or zoning system. They advised that they were exploring interim measures such as mothballing underused floors to reduce energy consumption and deploying LED lighting across different parts of the building. Behavioural change among staff, while promoted, had limitations.

The Chair expressed concern that the new hub could require retrofitting within a few years if sustainability measures were not prioritised during the design phase. They stressed the need for it to align with Stevenage Borough Council's climate leadership ambitions. The Chief Executive reassured the committee that sustainability was central to the hub's design. The Chief Executive suggested that Members may wish receive a presentation concerning sustainability in the hub from the scheme's Architects at an appropriate point in the design process.

Members asked questions related to waste management and the scope of carbon emissions accounting. The Head of Climate Action responded that 70% of residential waste was processed at energy-from-waste (EfW) facilities that likely used incineration. The Head of Climate Action explained that EfW contributed to carbon emissions but offset some fossil fuel energy generation. Currently, those emissions were not included in Stevenage's territorial emissions, as the facilities were outside the area. The Head of Climate Action assured Members that waste-related emissions would be given consideration under the developing of a Greenhouse Gas Reporting Strategy methodology for Scope 3 emissions.

A Member raised questions about passing the carbon burden to other areas due to Stevenage's zero-landfill policy. The Head of Climate Action indicated that the zero-landfill policy is a county-wide one and that these matters are commonly addressed in conjunction with HCC and the Hertfordshire Waste Partnership.

Members also questioned the availability of recycling bins in high streets, parks, and commercial areas.

Members queried the accuracy of data, including emissions from leisure centres and displaced emissions caused by staff working from home. The Head of Climate Action confirmed emissions data for specific sites like leisure centres was available and acknowledged that a comprehensive organisational emissions baseline was needed for accurate accounting. The Committee were informed that surveys had been issued to assess home energy use by staff, recognising the displacement of emissions from office space closures to private homes. The Portfolio Holder (Environment & Performance) commented about the importance of having good modelling and tracking methods to improve data accuracy and ensure comprehensive measurement of emissions and supported the ongoing expansion of data gathering.

Responding to a question related to housing decarbonisation target, the Assistant Director (Planning and Regulation) advised the Committee that the Council's decarbonisation programme was in part reliant on external match funding. Members asked for a breakdown of the EPC ratings for the whole of the Council's Housing Stock so that its possible to see the scale of the task to reach a minimum rating of C and what progress has been made. The Head of Climate Action indicated officers will provide this breakdown of the EPC ratings.

Members asked questions related to Hydrotreated Vegetable Oil (HVO). The Head of Climate Action responded that the entire SBC fleet, previously running on diesel, had transitioned to HVO as of October 2024. The Head of Climate Action acknowledged that HVO was an interim solution until electric vehicle infrastructure and technologies became more viable. The Committee heard that large refuse and recycling freighters were more likely to adopt hydrogen technology and less likely to be electric due to the weight and size of the batteries that would be required. Members raised concerns related to Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) and recommended the introduction of quarterly or annual reports on BNG contributions, spending and achievements, ensuring public access to reports to enhance transparency and accountability.

Members highlighted recent decisions to replace shrub beds with grass which appeared to undermine biodiversity efforts. The Portfolio Holder (Environment and Performance) emphasised the need for joined up thinking regarding greenspaces and proposed that community maintenance agreements could be considered for residents who wished to retain those features.

The Chair invited Members to comment outside of the meeting on the updated climate emergency scrutiny review action tracker which was included in the agenda papers at pages 57 to 76. Members were encouraged to send any comments they had on this to the Scrutiny Officer or the Head of Climate Action.

4 **URGENT PART 1 BUSINESS**

There was none.

5 **EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC AND PRESS**

Not required.

6 **URGENT PART II BUSINESS**

There was none.

CHAIR