

Report of the Corporate Infrastructure and Regulatory Services Climate Change Standing Overview Group of 13 May 2022

1. Introduction

The Standing Overview Group of the Corporate Infrastructure and Regulatory Services Scrutiny Committee meets regularly as an informal information sharing and member development session where issues are presented to the councillors to raise awareness and increase knowledge. The Standing Overview Group considers key updates and pertinent issues from across different services, with the aim of developing Members' knowledge, and bringing to the forefront any areas which may benefit from further scrutiny.

Any action points arising from the sessions are reported back to the next formal Committee meeting.

This report outlines the topic(s) covered at the meeting of 13 May 2022, highlights the key points raised during discussion and details any agreed actions.

2. Recommendation(s)

The Corporate Infrastructure and Regulatory Services Scrutiny Committee accepts this report as an accurate record of the meeting and agrees the outlined actions raised during the discussion including the addition of the highlighted issues of concern to the future work programme.

3. Attendance

Councillors: A Dewhirst (Chair), C Slade (Vice Chair), P Bullivant, Y Atkinson, M Asvachin, J Hodgson, M Hartnell

Cabinet Member: Andrea Davis (Cabinet Member for Climate Change, Environment and Transport)

Officer: Doug Eltham (Environment and Sustainability Policy Officer)

Scrutiny Officer: Fred Whitehouse

4. Summary of Discussion

4.1 Review of Devon County Council's Environmental Policy

Prior to the meeting a short paper was circulated to Members which highlighted that the Council's current Environmental Policy was prepared in 2011 and required updating on various contemporary issues around climate and the environment including a stronger focus on Devon County Council's strategic effort on the climate emergency. The cross-authority Environmental Performance Management Group had agreed that an update to the currently existing policy was sufficient rather than developing an entirely new policy.

It was explained to Members that the Policy represented a high-level, aspirational overview of where the Council should be heading with regards to the environment. More specific performance action plans were made available [here](#).

Of the proposed changes, key highlights included:

- explicit reference to the Council's 2021-2025 Strategic Plan and its aims to be net-zero carbon by 2030;
- the transition of the Authority's vehicle fleet to low-carbon and clean alternatives;
- an explicit focus on Coast (alongside the previous categories of Countryside and Heritage); and
- the introduction of a Community Leadership category to reflect the importance of involving communities and individuals in the Authority's net-zero aims.

There was particular discussion around the use of pesticides, where Members commented that the Policy specifying that pesticides can be used only when 'absolutely necessary' was too open to interpretation. It was important to Members that the definition of necessity was a high bar to reach and that this should be referenced.

Other notable points of discussion included:

- under Countryside, Coast and Heritage, Members supported the focus on reducing light pollution and expressed that involving community opinion could be useful;
- under Community Leadership, Members expressed that a more explicit reference to smaller Authorities such as parish and district councils would be welcome, as well as ensuring they are well informed about their role in achieving net-zero; and
- that it was important to ensure that farmers were incentivised and encouraged to be at the forefront of the journey towards net-zero. As the Environmental Policy refers only to Devon County Council and therefore not privately-owned farms, Members expressed that the Authority should use its own farms to demonstrate best practice in moving towards net-zero in line with the Government's Environmental Land Management schemes.

Of the Member's comments, the following were incorporated into the final environmental policy to go to cabinet on 8 June 2022:

- the addition of 'where practical alternatives are not available' to limit the use of pesticides;
- an additional clarification to paragraph 2 that a climate emergency has been declared locally;
- a specific focus on improving practices (as well as standards) under 'Purchasing'; and
- more detail around reducing light pollution particularly with reference to public consultation.

The proposed amendments that were not included were seen to be implicit in other categories – such as helping communities switch to sustainable and active travel being implied under ‘Travelling’ and ‘Community Leadership.’

4.2 2020/21 Carbon Footprint Report

Prior to the meeting, the annual carbon footprint report (which monitors the effectiveness of implementing the Carbon Reduction Plan), and covering paper, were circulated to Members. The report covered the financial year 2021/22.

For the first time, the impact of home working on the Council’s carbon footprint had to be incorporated into the report. A study from the University of Exeter, commissioned by the Council, revealed that home working constituted a total of 5% of gross greenhouse gas emissions. These emissions were more than compensated for by the reduction in other areas as a result of home working; corporate property (-16%), business travel (-60%) and vehicle fleet (-33%). Of these three, the former two were likely to remain below pre-pandemic levels owing to permanent changes in working culture. In the short term, the latter of the three would likely return to pre-pandemic levels but the Council’s long-term plan to replace most of its fleet with electric vehicles would eventually bring this back down.

The Council’s downward trajectory in its reduction of carbon emissions by 70% by 2030 (with plans to carbon offset the remaining 30%) was ahead of target (down 53% from the base year of 2012/13); however, Members were advised that reducing emissions further gets progressively more difficult as the Authority approaches the target, therefore increasing the 70% target for instance would not be realistic.

There was concern that the Council was facing huge barriers in attempting to purchase ‘Woodland Carbon Units’ to offset carbon emissions; specifically, that the owners of such units were not willing to currently sell, anticipating that the price would increase dramatically in the future and opting to pursue greater long-term profits. To address this somewhat the Council had purchased ‘Pending Issuance Units,’ i.e., had paid for trees to be planted on their behalf. This would create long-term benefits once the trees achieved adequate growth but did not solve the immediate problem. Members were advised that a new staff member had been recruited to look specifically at this problem and potential solutions for the Authority.

Key areas from Member discussion included:

- other areas for carbon offsetting that could be explored by the Council. The particular example of ocean sequestration of carbon dioxide was discussed, as well as carbon capture technology on power plant chimneys which Members were advised was in its developmental infancy;
- scope to expand environmentally friendly energy systems, such as district heating whereby residual heat from energy plants is diverted to heat areas, such as that seen in Cranbrook, and that which was proposed but not implemented into a new Exeter housing development;

- that School Transport constituted almost one-half of the gross greenhouse gas emissions in Devon. Members were advised that much of this is the result of large buses and that the Council was working with smaller providers (where the transport system is outsourced) to switch over to electric vehicles, although this would increase costs to the Authority; and
- that Street Lighting constituted almost one-quarter of the gross greenhouse gas emissions in Devon. Members were advised that within 12 months' time every street light owned by DCC will have been swapped out with LED bulbs, reducing emissions by 90% compared to 2012 levels. Capacity for flexible operational control is also implemented as part of the Council's street lighting policy.

Members were interested in learning more about the carbon footprint of Devon's waste system at the next Standing Overview Group.

Members also expressed interest in looking at potential improvements to Devon's street lighting policy in an effort to reduce carbon emissions, such as by reducing the time periods that streetlights are on; as well as it's school transport policy and vehicle fleet.

4.3 Devon Carbon Plan Update

Members were provided with an update on progress towards the final Devon Carbon Plan. They were advised that a public consultation had recently been completed regarding whether or not the public felt that the Devon Climate Emergency Partnership had responded well to the resolutions of the Citizens' Assembly which was held in July 2021. This public consultation took the form of a questionnaire (with a short and a long version) available online and in public libraries. Most of the respondents were individuals from Devon, with poor turnout from Plymouth, Torbay and young people across all areas. Although there was no scope to revisit the consultation in an effort to improve involvement of these groups, it was specified as a priority to ensure that all sectors of the population would be involved in the implementation of the final Devon Carbon Plan.

Response to the Assembly's resolutions were mixed. While all but three of the partnership's proposals had over 50% of respondents agreeing with their approach, and no proposals received more than 50% of respondents disagreeing, there were concerns from respondents that the partnership was not planning to implement car parking charges to deter car usage, and workplace parking levies. Because the public consultation was inherently self-selecting and would therefore consist of responses from those most interested in the climate, where the Assembly was demographically representative of Devon, it was decided in conjunction with Team Devon to prioritise the resolutions of the Assembly.

However, it was stated that parking levies and similar measures may be required but should be used in conjunction with other measures, recognising that although unpopular these would discourage car usage and therefore drop

emissions. Members agreed that these measures should not be entirely discarded and that in implementing policies designed to reduce carbon emissions it would not be possible to please all residents especially with contentious topics such as parking levies and car usage.

4.4 Socioeconomic Impacts of Climate Change

Members were invited to raise specific areas on the socioeconomic impacts of climate change for inclusion on the work programme. It was agreed that, as a rural county, it would be pertinent to examine such impacts on the farming sector in Devon.

Councillor A Dewhirst
Chair, Corporate Infrastructure and Regulatory Services Scrutiny Committee

Electoral Divisions: All

Contact for Enquiries: Fred Whitehouse, fred.whitehouse@devon.gov.uk

Local Government Act 1972: List of Background Papers

Nil

The meeting began at 2.01pm and ended at 3.25pm.