

Report of the Corporate Infrastructure and Regulatory Services Climate Change Standing Overview Group - 06 September 2021

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 06 September 2021, 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), J Berry, M Asvachin, J Hodgson, P Bullivant

Cabinet Member: Roger Croad

Officer: Doug Eltham (Environment and Sustainability Policy Officer)

Scrutiny Officer: Fred Whitehouse

4. Summary of Discussion

4.1 Progress with Devon County Council's Environmental Performance Programme

Members were provided an Environmental Performance Highlight Report which offered a quarterly update on the Council's corporate Environmental Performance Programme. It assigned a colour value (Green, Amber, Red) to individual projects to indicate their current status and provided information on work done and work required. Key highlights from the report included:

- the planned installation of 86 new electric vehicle charging points in Devon which would double the current number, alongside the Council's growing fleet of electric vehicles, which indicated significant progress in this area;

- the ongoing development of a detailed plan to get Devon's supply chains' carbon emissions to net zero by 2030. It was explained that the calculations currently used to determine supply chain emissions were producing significant underestimates and, as such, further attention would be needed to ensure that the estimates are accurate to allow adequate action to correctly offset emission levels;
- problems with purchasing carbon that had been absorbed by woodland in order to offset carbon emissions, which was due to landowner reluctance to sell their land, anticipating that they would get higher profits in, for instance, 10 years when the land would be even more valuable, and that solutions need to be found to allow the Council to offset its carbon emissions; and
- resource issues meaning that both projects within the Environmental Risk category were indicated Amber.

Member discussion points included:

- concern surrounding the replacement of all remaining street lights with LED lamps and the potential impact on insects. Members were assured that the lighting policy was currently being reviewed in partnership with Highways, explicitly looking at the impact of LED lighting on wildlife;
- the importance of increasing the number of schools in Devon being retrofitted or refurbished to reduce, or offset, carbon emissions. The current number was at approximately 6 per year having this work undertaken, which was behind trajectory to meet 2030 targets. Members discussed the importance of making the correct judgements in choosing between, for instance, demolition and refurbishment. It was explained to Members that work was being undertaken in conjunction with the University of Exeter to identify the carbon costs of proposed works, which would assist in making the most environmentally friendly decisions;
- what the Council was doing, and could do, to incentivise rewilding and tree planting on farmland, with particular stress put on the fact that low quality land is actually better for tree planting in terms of reducing carbon emissions, with scope for the Council to adopt an 'every bit helps' approach in securing land for this purpose; and
- the growing interest in the public sphere being given to the development of new wind power and 'green hydrogen' and what could be done, or was being done, by the Council to develop new technologies along this route. Members were advised that although the Council had no explicit plans to link new wind power to hydrogen, both the Heart of the South West Local Enterprise Partnership and the Plymouth and South Devon Freezone had strong ambitions to produce hydrogen from electrolysis, namely that work was being done on this in the general geographic area.

Members requested that the SWEP Programme Corporate Energy Manager be invited to the next Climate Change Standing Overview Group.

4.2 Progress with the Devon Climate Emergency Partnership

Members were presented with a Project Progress report on the Devon Climate Emergency Partnership, which was a collective of 29 strategic partners (which included district councils, national parks, government organisations, non-profit organisations and others) working together to produce a Carbon Plan for Devon.

The Interim Devon Carbon Plan and following work was contextualised for Councillors. Firstly, that a consultation had taken place on the Interim Plan, with feedback generally indicating that the plan was too large with too many priorities and that the most important thing was that the Partnership acted without delay to start implementing strategies to counteract Climate Change; and secondly, that a Citizens Assembly had taken place in June and July 2021, managed by Involve, which consisted of 70 participants demographically representative of Devon examining the three most contentious issues regarding Climate Change. These issues were: whether onshore wind should be used in Devon, how people could be encouraged to use their cars less, and how people could be encouraged to retrofit houses and building premises more quickly. A report by the Citizens Assembly was to follow, which would be available in the public domain by the end of September 2021.

Member discussion points included:

- the importance of getting the entirety of Devon involved, to include the general public, and what lessons could be learnt from, for instance, the campaign to incentivise seatbelt wearing and the campaign to disincentivise smoking;
- problems surrounding youth and male engagement (where most engagement with the Council's carbon policy come from females aged 40 and over) and how this could be addressed;
- limited powers of local councils to directly impact nationwide policy for large businesses such as supermarkets to incentivise recycling, with the recognition that there was still scope to have informal conversations with local branches of shops that form the centre of their respective communities to introduce, for example, signage that encourages people to buy local, in-season produce which would help cut down emissions; and
- what actions could be taken to address emissions caused by road haulage. The specific example of rail freight was raised, although Members were advised that this would be incredibly expensive and as such is unlikely to see increased usage, but that there were other solutions that could be explored such as hydrogen fuelled trucks, with further work required to develop this technology.

The meeting began at 2.15pm and ended at 3.27pm.