

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE CLIMATE EMERGENCY OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE HELD ON 14 MARCH 2023 FROM 7.00 PM TO 8.30 PM

Committee Members Present

Councillors: Andy Croy (Chair), Chris Johnson (Vice-Chair), Michael Firmager, Norman Jorgensen and Rachelle Shepherd-DuBey

Other Councillors Present

Councillors: Alistair Neal, Sarah Kerr and Ian Shenton

Officers Present

Richard Bisset, Lead Specialist - Place Clienting
Neil Carr, Democratic and Electoral Services Specialist
Sabrina Chiaretti, Climate Emergency Service Specialist
Andrew Collins, Specialist Climate Emergency Officer
Simon Dale, Director - Place & Growth
Ian Gough, Energy Officer
Rhian Hayes, Assistant Director - Economic Development & Growth
Sarah Morgan, Assistant Director - Commercial Property

10 APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from David Cornish.

Al Neal attended the meeting as a substitute.

11 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 4 January 2023 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman, subject to the addition of Councillor Al Neal as an attendee.

12 DECLARATION OF INTEREST

Andy Croy declared a personal interest in Item 17 – Barkham Solar Farm Update – on the grounds that he was a member of the Barkham Solar Farm Project Board.

13 PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

There were no public questions.

14 MEMBER QUESTIONS

There were no Member questions.

15 CLIMATE EMERGENCY ACTION PLAN - LINK

The Committee noted the link to the Council's Climate Emergency Action Plan on the WBC website.

16 CARBON SAVINGS FROM WASTE COLLECTION PROPOSALS

The Committee considered a report, set out at Supplementary Agenda Page 3, which gave details of the projected Carbon savings linked to the proposed changes to the Council's waste collection service.

The proposed changes to the service included a move from the current weekly collection of refuse and recycling to an alternate weekly waste collection model including:

- Move to a fortnightly collection of refuse in wheeled bins, ceasing the supply of blue bags;
- Move to a fortnightly collection of dry recycling using the existing green reusable sacks;
- Maintaining the existing weekly food recycling collections and the paid garden waste collections.

The report stated that the carbon savings linked to the proposed changes had been calculated using a methodology approved by the Waste Resources Action Programme (WRAP). The table included in the report indicated that carbon savings would be delivered in relation to dry recycling, residual waste and organic recycling. The total projected Carbon saving was 2,415 tonnes CO₂e per annum.

In the ensuing discussion, Members raised the following points:

The proposed changes to the waste service would be underpinned by an extensive communications campaign. How would this be delivered? It was confirmed that the communications campaign would contain a number of strands, starting before the new wheeled bins were rolled out. The aim would be to provide clear guidance for residents on which materials should go in the relevant bin or bag.

In relation to the projected Carbon saving of 2,415 tonnes CO₂e per annum, how did this figure compare to the current baseline position? It was confirmed that the calculation would vary depending on the type of materials involved in each waste stream. The figures were consistent with the information submitted to the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee at its meeting on 22 February 2023. It was confirmed that an update on the calculations could be circulated to Members after the meeting.

In relation to the reported Carbon increase of 325 tonnes CO₂e per annum linked to transport, were there any plans to address this through, for example, using more local sites? It was confirmed that the calculation was based on the current treatment routes which may change in 2024. The Carbon impact of transport had increased as an increase in the amount of recyclables meant more journeys to disposal points. Members would receive an update in due course.

Were there any plans to introduce electric or hydrogen powered waste vehicles as part of the changes? It was confirmed that this would be a matter for discussion with the re3 partnership. Any developments, including potential Carbon savings, would be reported back to Members in due course.

The Climate Emergency Action Plan (CEAP) referred to Carbon savings of 48,000 tonnes CO₂e. What was the link to the 2,415 tonnes CO₂e saving outlined in the report? It was confirmed that the savings from the changes to the waste service were one of a number of elements in the CEAP. This would be clarified in the next update of the CEAP due in the summer of 2023. The draft CEAP update would be submitted to this Committee for consideration prior to submission to Council.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) Ian Shenton, Richard Bisset and Emma Tilbrook be thanked for attending the meeting to answer Member questions;

- 2) the update on projected Carbon savings from the changes to the waste service be noted;
- 3) additional information, requested in the discussions, be circulated to Members.

17 BARKHAM SOLAR FARM UPDATE

The Committee considered a report, set out at Supplementary Agenda pages 5 to 9, which provided an update on progress relating to the delivery of a solar farm at Barkham.

Sarah Kerr, Executive Member for Climate Emergency and Resident Services, attended the meeting to present the report, supported by Sabrina Chiaretti (Climate Emergency Service Manager), Andrew Collins (Specialist Climate Emergency Officer), Ian Gough (Energy Manager), Rhian Hayes (Assistant Director, Economic Development & Growth) and Sarah Morgan (Assistant Director, Commercial Property).

The report stated that the financial business case for the Barkham Solar farm had been submitted to the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee at its meeting in October 2022. The Committee supported the project and recommended that it proceed in a timely manner.

The report stated that the financial forecasts projected a net income (after Capital financing costs) over the 25 year life of the development of £67.16m (£2.69m per annum on average). This was set against an initial Capital expenditure of £26.85m for the delivery of the project.

In January 2023, the Council appointed Bouygues Energies and Services (E&S) as the main contractor for the delivery of the solar farm, following a competitive tendering process. Subject to successful completion of pre-construction work, it was proposed that the stage 2 construction contract would be awarded to the same contractor.

The report stated that commencement of operation of the solar farm would depend on connection to the grid. A grid connection offer had been received from SSEN and accepted by the Council. This involved a connection date of summer 2026. In the meantime, officers were continuing to lobby the Government and energy companies about the need for realistic charges for grid connection for councils and other affected organisations.

The Council was also working with a local charity – Feeling Fruity – to provide an area on site for orchard planting, which was due to commence in March 2023.

In the ensuing discussion, Members made the following points:

Members were pleased to see the developing partnership with Feeling Fruity and hoped that the site would generate further partnership opportunities.

The positive financial returns against the original forecasts were welcomed. What factors led to the more positive financial returns? It was confirmed that the price of energy had increased significantly – wholesale electricity prices had increased by 250% over the past two years. This position was predicted to continue in future years, meaning increased profits for the Council against the original estimates.

What percentage of the energy produced by the solar farm could the Council use for its own operations? It was confirmed that the solar farm output could meet up to 60% of the Council's energy needs.

The current agreed connection date with SSEN, set out in the report, was June 2026. This could be up to two years after the completion of the solar farm. Was the Council lobbying the Government through local MPs to seek a speedier connection? It was confirmed that the Council was part of a Berkshire-wide group which was lobbying on this issue. There were also wider issues to consider such as infrastructure capacity. It was agreed that lobbying needed to be joined up and collaborative in order to maximise impact.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) Sarah Kerr and the attending officers be thanked for presenting the report and answering Member questions;
- 2) progress relating to the delivery of the Barkham Solar Farm be noted;
- 3) further progress reports be submitted in due course;
- 4) officers seek to ensure that lobbying on this issue is co-ordinated across Berkshire and engages with the Borough's MPs.

18 SOLAR FARMS DELIVERY WITHIN THE CEAP

The Committee considered a report, set out at the supplementary Agenda pages 11 to 14, which provided an update on the delivery of solar farms within the Council's Climate Emergency Action Plan (CEAP).

Sara Kerr (Executive Member for Climate Emergency and Residents Services) introduced the report.

The report confirmed that the CEAP update report, submitted to Council in September 2022, included a commitment to deliver two solar farms by 2030. This represented a change to the initial CEAP (2020) which included a commitment to deliver five solar farms in five years. It was noted that the original CEAP targets were aspirational. Subsequent feasibility and financial studies had resulted in a reduction in the number of proposed solar farms in order to ensure that the projects were practically deliverable and based around Government targets. The latest target of two solar farms, approved by Council in 2022, would deliver carbon savings of 14,058 tCO₂e, with a combined cost of £50m. The reduced number of solar farms was informed by the financial and feasibility data generated by the Barkham Solar Farm project.

The report noted that timing and deliverability of solar farms was influenced by the availability of sites in WBC ownership and connections into the grid. SSEN were currently working to a four year minimum standard for grid connections. Initial feasibility work was currently under way on two owned by WBC in the Borough. A feasibility report was expected later in 2023.

In the ensuing discussion, Members raised the following points:

The reduction in solar farms in the CEAP from five to two meant less carbon savings and less income for the Council. Was there not an argument for pressing ahead with more

solar farms on financial/environmental grounds? It was confirmed that the CEAP targets were based on what was realistic and achievable. If the feasibility studies indicate that more solar farms could be delivered, that was an option which could be pursued. There were other, smaller scale, renewable energy projects which should also be considered in addition to the solar farms.

One issue was the availability of land for development of solar farms. If the Council did not own sufficient land, could it buy land for this purpose? It was confirmed that the purchase of land was not currently an option. Other factors included the capacity of officer teams who were also working on other key projects.

There appeared to be an inconsistency between this report and the earlier report on the Barkham Solar Farm. The latter appeared to be more positive whilst this report emphasised the constraints on the development of further solar farms. It was confirmed that the original target of five solar farms (2020) had been aspirational. The current target was more prudent and reflected that fact that the CEAP was a living document. Further updates would be provided to Members in due course as the feasibility work on further solar farms progressed.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) Sarah Kerr and the attending officers be thanked for presenting the report and answering Member questions;
- 2) the rationale for reducing the number of solar farms in the CEAP from five to two be noted;
- 3) further updates be submitted to the Committee in due course as part of the annual CEAP update.

19 CLIMATE EMERGENCY DELIBERATIVE PROCESS UPDATE

The Committee considered a report, set out at supplementary Agenda pages 15 to 76, which provided an update on the CEAP Community Deliberative Process, conducted in 2022.

Sarah Kerr (Executive Member for Climate Emergency and Residents Services) presented the report, supported by officers.

The report stated that a Motion was approved by Council in October 2021 which agreed that the Council host a Community Deliberative Process for Climate Change. The aim of the process was to engage local communities in developing a Vision for a net zero Borough. Since then, two pieces of work had been carried out. Firstly, a number of deliberative peer group sessions (March-April 2022). Secondly a residents' e-panel (an on-line survey), conducted in August/September 2022.

The report stated that an additional piece of work was required in order to complete the process. The results of the peer group sessions and the residents' e-panel had been useful in identifying the motivations and barriers faced by residents when faced with making sustainable decisions. The next step was to combine the findings into a Vision for a net zero Borough. The information gathered would be shared with relevant teams within WBC, including Transport, Energy, Planning and Procurement, to ensure that it informed

the development of future policies and programmes. This included the next iteration of the CEAP, due to be submitted to Council in September 2023.

In the ensuing discussion, Members raised the following points:

Whilst the information gathered during the deliberative process was useful, did it reflect the views of all groups within the Borough? It was confirmed that views had been sought from a variety of groups in order to reflect a broad spectrum of viewpoints. The appointment of an Engagement Officer within the Council's Climate Emergency team would ensure that consultation and engagement would be an ongoing element in the progression of the CEAP. It was noted that no radical ideas had been generated by the process to date which was a motivation for deeper and wider engagement.

Were residents engaged in the process able to gain enough knowledge to understand what was achievable and realistic in terms of the options available? It was confirmed that external experts had been engaged in the process but this was an issue to address as part of any future engagement exercises.

There appeared to be some confusion about funding. The Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) included a line headed "Citizens' Assembly" with a cost of £120k. This report referred to a "cost of engagement" of £40k. Clarification was requested on the actual costs and description of the deliberative process.

Officers confirmed that the next iteration of the CEAP would include greater use of visuals in order to make the document more accessible to residents and community groups. Members welcomed this initiative but requested that the detailed supporting data behind the CEAP targets also be retained.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) the progress made in delivering the CEAP deliberative process in 2022/23 be noted;
- 2) officers provide clarification on the actual costs and description of the deliberative process in the MTFP;
- 3) the inclusion of a Vision for a net zero Borough in the next CEAP update be supported.

20 WORK PROGRAMME

The Committee considered its work programme for 2023/24 as set out at Agenda pages 11 to 12.

RESOLVED: That the Committee's work programme for the next meeting on 23 May 2023 be noted.

21 ACTION TRACKER

The Committee considered the Action Tracker report, set out at Agenda page 13.

RESOLVED: That the Action Tracker report be noted.