

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE CLIMATE EMERGENCY OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE HELD ON 11 JULY 2023 FROM 7.00 PM TO 9.10 PM

Committee Members Present

Councillors: Andy Croy (Chair), Chris Johnson (Vice-Chair), Michael Firmager, Catherine Glover, Charles Margetts, Ian Pittock, Alistair Neal and Shahid Younis

Other Councillors Present

Councillors: Sarah Kerr

Officers Present

Ian Bellinger, Service Manager for Growth and Delivery
Rob Bradfield, Head of Procurement
Neil Carr, Democratic & Electoral Services Specialist
Sabrina Chiaretti, Climate Emergency Service Manager
Andrew Collins, Specialist Climate Emergency Officer
Giorgio Framalocco, Director, Place & Growth
Andy Glencross, Head of Environmental Services
Ian Gough, Energy Manager
Rhian Hayes, Assistant Director, Economic Development & Growth

11 APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were submitted by David Cornish, Graham Howe and Norman Jorgensen.

Al Neal and Shahid Younis attended the meeting as substitutes.

12 DECLARATION OF INTEREST

Andy Croy declared a personal interest as he was a member of the Barkham Solar Farm monitoring group.

13 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The Minutes of the meeting held on 23 May 2023 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair, subject to Member attendance at the meeting being confirmed as:

David Cornish, Andy Croy (Chair), Norman Jorgensen, Charles Margetts, Ian Pittock, Catherine Glover, Graham Howe, Pauline Helliar-Symons (Substitute) and Andrew Mickleburgh (Substitute).

14 PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

14.1 Peter White asked the Chair of the Committee the following question:

Is the aim of WBC to have Wokingham Borough be net zero in 2030 or carbon neutral in 2030? I am asking because I saw in a scrutiny committee document reference to carbon neutral.

Answer

In the current Climate Emergency Action Plan (CEAP), the term 'net-zero' (with a hyphen) is mentioned once, 'net zero' (without a hyphen) is mentioned 36 times, 'carbon neutral' is mentioned 14 times and 'carbon neutrality' is mentioned 9 times. There is a danger that the terms are used interchangeably, when they should not be and I am sure the officers

will now examine the CEAP to ensure the use of the term 'net-zero' in the CEAP is appropriate to those parts of the CEAP where it is used.

Other papers prepared for scrutiny committee meetings are often prepared by subject specialists rather than by climate emergency specialists, so it is possible that in this process an inappropriate mention of 'net-zero' has crept in.

As with the CEAP as whole, it may well be that net-zero is appropriate for some areas of the plan but carbon neutrality is appropriate for other areas.

Having said that, I am sure the officers and Executive Member would prefer net-zero, but simply recognise that even achieving carbon neutrality by 2030 is not going to happen without a step change in financial and legislative support for local authorities from central government.

It is also worth mentioning that the original goal 2030 was ridiculously ambitious and set for political messaging purposes rather than planning purposes.

Thank you for drawing this to our attention – we will draw it the attention of the officers and the Executive Member.

Supplementary Question

I'm sure you will agree that providing intentionally or unintentionally misleading information reduces the credibility of that information and also the group publishing it.

The difference between net zero and carbon neutral, as an example, is taught to Geography students in school and any students would know that stating net zero for 2030 is unrealistic and unachievable. It should immediately in their minds bring doubt about the plans.

There are housing developers, even in Wokingham borough, using "sustainable development" as a description of their developments in order to sell them, probably for more money. An EV charger on the front of a house does not make it sustainable, nor the odd bug box scattered about. A house with solar panels is not carbon neutral let alone net zero or sustainable. A sapling planted now will not capture significant carbon for 20 years (if it even survives).

It's important that WBC get their message right and that these very emotive terms are used correctly, especially where others play fast and loose with these terms.

Can you explain what controls are in place and what scrutiny is made of policy, documents and newsletters to ensure they are accurate, that they are not misleading, that they are even achievable, and that the correct terminology is used to ensure everyone is on the same page with regards to the aims of the climate emergency committee. If you believe that the oversight and scrutiny is not responsible for this, then who should be?

Supplementary Answer

I agree entirely with the statements made in your first paragraph.

As I said in my answer to your question, the Overview and Scrutiny Committee does not own, and is not responsible for, the Climate Emergency Action Plan (CEAP). Nor does the Committee have any executive powers. The Committee can and does make recommendations for improvement.

The aim of the Committee is to scrutinise the CEAP and in doing so, make the CEAP a more robust plan, and that includes the correct use of the terminology. The Committee ensures the Plan is credible by scrutinising the actions contained in it to assess if the actions are deliverable and if the actions described will generate the carbon savings described.

In relation to your suggestion about a vocabulary check I understand that, after July's Overview and Scrutiny meeting, officers did carry out a check on the CEAP. The CEAP fourth progress report, to be published after Council approval in September 2023, will properly refer to carbon neutrality and net zero. We cannot simply delete all reference to net zero as some actions, particularly around Planning do need to refer to net zero/zero carbon, to be aligned with current regulations. But officers have done a vocabulary check to ensure we have properly referenced carbon neutrality in the CEAP. When instances of incorrect use of the terms (e.g. on our website) occur, officers will aim to correct this. Having said all that, the CEAP itself makes clear that even carbon neutrality by 2030 is not going to happen, so whether or not an inadvertent use of "net zero" remains lurking in some document somewhere is somewhat beside the point. However, I do believe that officers and the Executive Member have taken on your point and will be even more careful about the use of the terms in future.

Once we are on a solid journey to carbon neutrality, then I would be more minded to start worrying about the difference between net zero and carbon neutrality, but I would want to do this as part of a plan that aspired to net zero rather than one that just aspired to carbon neutrality.

In the meantime, I know that the Council's Climate Emergency team works closely with all departments, including the communications team, to ensure that official documents and communications are aligned with, or make references to, the Council's 2030 goal. This is part of the Council's ongoing work to ensure Climate Emergency is embedded at every level across the organisation. This is the only way to achieve carbon neutrality. There is still a long way to go to ensure this is done properly and the Climate Emergency team is consulted on all decisions that affect the Council's journey to carbon neutrality. This is why the work of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee is key to ensure that not only the CEAP, but all the Council's work, is properly scrutinised and where appropriate challenged, so that decisions are taken with the Council's 2030 goal in mind.

15 MEMBER QUESTION TIME

There were no Member questions.

16 WBC CLIMATE EMERGENCY ACTION PLAN (CEAP) - FOURTH PROGRESS REPORT

The Committee considered a report, set out at Agenda pages 13 to 178, which comprised the fourth progress report on the Council's Climate Emergency Action Plan (CEAP). The report summarised the Borough's current carbon emission profile and progress towards its 2030 carbon neutrality goal achieved in 2022/23.

Sarah Kerr (Executive Member for Climate Emergency and Resident Services) attended the meeting to present the report and answer Member questions. Councillor Kerr was supported by members of the Council's Climate Emergency team and officers from a range of different technical and service areas.

The report stated that the CEAP contained 10 key priority areas for carbon reduction together with over 100 actions. The latest assessment stated that the Borough's carbon

footprint was 505 ktCO₂e, with a current projected shortfall in 2030 (after all the actions had been delivered) of 240ktCO₂e. Consequently, in order to meet the 2030 carbon neutral goal, further actions and resources, as well as strategic embedding of Climate Emergency considerations, would be needed.

Sarah Kerr stated that the fourth iteration of the CEAP looked significantly different to earlier versions. Councillor Kerr thanked the Members and officers who had worked to deliver the latest iteration of the CEAP. For the first time, an action plan had been included in the CEAP to support the development of an Adaptation Plan for the Borough. The CEAP would also be improved to make it more accessible for residents with visual impairments. The final version of the CEAP would be submitted to full Council in September 2023.

Andy Croy suggested that questions and comments on the CEAP be grouped into the 10 priority areas.

In the ensuing discussion, Members raised the following points and questions.

In relation to the Emissions Trajectories diagram on page 26, what tools were used to measure if progress was being achieved? It was confirmed that the CEAP was the monitoring tool. Progress against the 100+ plus actions was set out in the Annual Progress report. The RAG rating indicated progress and areas requiring further improvement. It was confirmed that the data in Figure 1 – WBC 2020 Emissions – was based on three year old data provided by the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero (DESNZ).

Figure 2 (page 26) – WBC 2030 Emissions Trajectories – used the acronym BAU (Business as Usual). This was a business term which could be misleading for the wider public. Could a more meaningful term be used? It was confirmed that officers would review the content of the chart.

Priority 1 – Transport

Feedback from residents indicated interest in the three cargo bikes purchased by the Council and available for deliveries. How did residents/businesses go about hiring the cargo bikes? It was confirmed that details of the cargo bikes had been included in the Business Matters newsletter. Further consideration would be given to additional communications about the cargo bikes.

CEAP 1A.3.5 – Bus stop infrastructure works to support North Arborfield SDL Bus Strategy – the descriptor need to be amended – there wasn't a North Arborfield SDL. Officers confirmed that the wording would be corrected.

CEAP 1A.4.5 – Develop the Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan (LCWIP) – could more be done to improve the provision of cycle racks in parking areas? More people would be encouraged to cycle if they were confident that their bikes would be safe. Officers confirmed that there was a limited budget but they would be happy to consider any suggested sites put forward by Members. It was also suggested that consideration be given to ways of encouraging schools to install more cycle racks.

CEAP 1A.1.6 – Promote the uptake of EVs – greater use of electric vehicles was welcomed, but it was worth noting that these vehicles were much heavier than petrol/diesel equivalents. Consequently, there may be implications for road bridges such

as the bridge at Sonning. It was confirmed that this was an issue on the risk register and officers would be monitoring the situation.

CEAP 1A.3.1 – Bus Service Improvement Plan – increased investment to improve infrastructure and demand for buses. Was this investment realistic and sustainable? Officers confirmed that the move from private to public transport was a key element of the CEAP. The Government was providing funding to support the move back to buses. Work with bus operators and key stakeholders had been ongoing in order to develop the Bus Enhanced Partnership agreement.

The cycling efficiency programme (Bikeability) was currently delivered to children in Year 6 at the Borough's primary schools. Could this be extended to children in Year 5? Officers confirmed that this suggestion could be examined. One issue was any limitations attached to the Government funding for this scheme.

Action 1A.3.1 (page 156) – The average km per passenger per year is 0.79km. This appeared to be a low figure, i.e. less than 800 metres. Officers confirmed that the calculation would be checked.

Action 1A.4 – 10% reduction from increased Active Transport use – the report stated that 10% of the total 68,117.12 was 13,623.42 tCO₂e per annum – could this calculation be checked. Officers confirmed that the calculation would be reviewed.

The CEAP proposals relating to schools had little focus on safety issues. Safety considerations should focus on the entire home to school journey, not just the immediate area around local schools. Officers confirmed that the LCWIP contained provisions relating to speed limits, road markings and roundabouts. There was also a separate Safer Routes to School budget.

A Borough-wide review of speed limits was undertaken in 2019. Members were not aware of any outcomes from this review. Could any outcomes be shared? It was confirmed that officers would investigate and report back to Members on this review.

The CEAP Transport headline was a 50% reduction in internal combustion engine private car mileage, 10% of this from an increase in Active Transport. How realistic was this target? It was confirmed that the target was challenging. Progress would be reported through the annual CEAP update reports.

Priority 2 – Renewable Energy Generation

CEAP 2.1.2 – Solar Farm in Site 2 – when will the location of Site 2 be made public? It was confirmed that work on solar farm projects had been paused pending clarification on the grid connection issue. Discussions had taken place with SEN and National Grid and progress was being made.

In relation to the Barkham Solar Farm, was WBC in a contractual situation and were there any financial penalties for withdrawal? It was confirmed that the Council had signed a contract, but that work had been halted for the time being. The contractor had seen this situation arise across the UK and was only billing WBC for completed work. There had been no changes to agreed prices for the work.

The Winnersh Park and Ride site was currently unused. Was there potential for installing solar panels on the roof? It was confirmed that part of the work on solar farms involved the feasibility for adding solar panels to park and ride sites. Again, this work would be progress following more certainty about grid connections.

CEAP 2.2.1 – Set up a Community Energy Fund – in relation to potential buildings that could be considered for the scheme, did this include academies? It was confirmed that the WBC energy team were looking at all potential sites, including academies. WBC was recognised as a leader in the Thames Valley in relation to the introduction of solar panels in schools. The cost of investment by WBC could be recouped by a slight reduction in the energy price on non-WBC sites.

CEAP 2.2.2 – support residents to reduce their energy usage – it was noted that the Solar Together Scheme was up and running.

Carbon savings from renewable energy generation – was there an inconsistency between the total renewable energy from solar farms – page 31 stated 12,524 tCO₂e – page 60 stated that carbon saving as 10,342 tCO₂e? Officers undertook to check these pages and check whether the totals fed into the graphs/charts at the start of the CEAP update.

CEAP 2.2.2 – Support residents to reduce their energy usage – the report stated that the scheme aimed to reach approximately 15,000 properties. Was this achievable? It was confirmed that the figure of 15,000 properties dated from 2020. Officers also confirmed that several schemes had been set up and there was a large appetite in the private sector for this work. To date almost 4,000 households had registered for the Solar Together scheme.

Priority 3 – Retrofitting Domestic and Commercial Buildings

CEAP 3.4.6 – Street Lighting Project – re the introduction of part-night street lighting – were Thames Valley Police consulted about the implications of this proposal? It was reported that officers would confirm the police feedback on the part-night proposal. As an alternative, could sensors be installed in the carriageway to enable lights to be switched on when vehicles passed by? Officers confirmed that this suggestion would be considered.

CEAP 3.1.1 – Gorse Ride Regeneration Project – would residents receive adequate support to ensure that they were achieving maximum efficiency from the measures installed into the new properties? It was confirmed that support and advice would be provided to residents. It was noted that the total cost of the Gorse Ride project was £105m – energy efficiency measures accounted for part of this expenditure.

Target 3.4 (page 162) – 75% of homes to be EPC C rating or above – this target aimed at improving the EPC rating on 18,900 homes. Was this realistic? Would local businesses have the capacity/skills to support achievement of this target? It was confirmed that the target was challenging. WBC officers were working with local businesses, universities, colleges and the wider sector to address the issue of capacity and skills. Officers confirmed that further consideration would be given to this issue.

Priority 4 – Carbon Sequestration

No comments or questions.

Priority 5 – Schools and Young People

No comments or questions.

Priority 6 – Waste and Recycling

The target headline (page 33) was to achieve a 70% recycling target. Current performance was 53%. Was the 70% target realistic/achievable? It was confirmed that this was a challenging/stretch target. It depended on new initiatives coming on stream such as the use of flexible plastic packaging.

Action 6.1.2 (page 165) – Improve residents' engagement with waste and recycling initiatives via partner Green Redeem – it was confirmed that the Green Redeem scheme had finished. The report should be updated accordingly.

Priority 7 – New Development

CEAP 7.6.1 and 7.6.2 – all new Council properties (homes and non-residential will be built to the highest efficiency standards – these indicators had a RAG status of Red. What progress was being made? It was confirmed that discussions were ongoing about WBC assets.

CEAP 7.2 – Require major non-residential development to achieve BREEAM excellent standard – what was BREEAM? It was confirmed that BREEAM was the Building Research Establishment Environmental Assessment Method, a sustainability assessment method used to masterplan projects, infrastructure and buildings. Officers confirmed that the acronym would be clarified in the CEAP.

CEAP 7.3.1 – Minimise unnecessary travel from new development – Arborfield was given as an example with one Co-op serving 1,000 new houses. Agreed community facilities, pharmacies and shops had to be built on time within new developments in order to minimise travel and develop local communities. The situation at Arborfield could easily happen again. Officers confirmed that this was an important issue. In relation to shops, operators were only interested in moving in when there were enough new residents to generate demand for goods and services. As discussed previously at Scrutiny, it was important that broadband services were delivered as quickly as possible into new developments.

Priority 8 – Procurement

It was noted that Government legislation was being developed relating to procurement which would impact on local authorities. Further details would be reported to Members when the legislation was approved.

Priority 9 – Engagement and Behaviour Change

No comments or Questions.

Priority 10 – Council Specific Actions

CEAP 10.1.2 – Promote homeworking and remote working practices amongst Council staff – the contrast between this action and the Government's pressure on civil servants to

return to the office was noted. Officers confirmed that they would clarify if the Government had any influence in local government working arrangements such as homeworking.

CEAP 10.3.1 – Improve energy performance of Council owned buildings to carbon neutral standards – was this just buildings used by WBC? It was confirmed that this action related to buildings across the estate, some used for Council services and some tenanted properties.

In relation to the feasibility assessment on Woodley library – it was confirmed that this project had been completed.

In relation to WBC owned vehicles, was there scope for EV fleet vehicles available for use by staff? Officers confirmed that this issue was under consideration. An upcoming staff travel survey would help to inform and clarify the discussion.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) Sarah Kerr and supporting officers be thanked for attending the meeting to present the report and answer Member questions;
- 2) progress made on the CEAP during 2022/23 be noted;
- 3) comments and feedback from the Committee be used to modify the draft CEAP update prior to its submission to Council in September 2023;
- 4) officers be thanked for their excellent work in making the fourth CEAP update more accessible and streamlined.

17 WORK PROGRAMME 2023-24

The Committee considered its work programme for 2023/24. The Chair stated that the discussion on the draft CEAP would help to generate issues for inclusion in the work programme.

It was suggested that progress on the delivery of Solar Farms be a standing item for future meetings.

The Chair suggested that Members consider progress on the CEAP and suggest items for inclusion in the work programme after the meeting.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) progress on the delivery of solar farms in the Borough be a standing item on future Agenda;
- 2) Members submit ideas/issues for consideration at future meetings to Andy Croy or Neil Carr (Democratic Services).