

## MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE CLIMATE EMERGENCY OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE HELD ON 25 SEPTEMBER 2023 FROM 7.00 PM TO 8.45 PM

### **Committee Members Present**

Councillors: Andy Croy (Chair), Chris Johnson (Vice-Chair), David Cornish, Michael Firmager, Catherine Glover, Norman Jorgensen, Charles Margetts, Ian Pittock and Anne Chadwick

### **Other Councillors Present**

Councillors: Sarah Kerr and Imogen Shepherd-DuBey

### **Officers Present**

Neil Carr, Democratic and Electoral Services Specialist  
Rob Bradfield, Head of Procurement, Contracts & Commercialisation  
Andrew Collins, Climate Emergency Specialist  
Ian Gough, Energy Manager  
Rhian Hayes, Assistant Director, Economic Development & Growth  
David Smith, Development & Planning Manager - Commercial Property

### **18 APOLOGIES**

Apologies for absence were received from Graham Howe.

Anne Chadwick attended the meeting as a substitute.

### **19 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING**

The Minutes of the meeting held on 11 July 2023 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

### **20 DECLARATION OF INTEREST**

Andy Croy and Ian Pittock declared personal interests in Item 25 – Barkham Solar Farm Update – as they were both members of the Solar Farm Programme Board.

### **21 PUBLIC QUESTION TIME**

There were no public questions.

### **22 MEMBER QUESTION TIME**

#### **22.1 Councillor Gary Cowan asked the Chair the following question:**

#### **Question**

The Climate Emergency Overview and Scrutiny Committee is set up to scrutinise the Council's Climate Emergency Action Plan and reports to the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee.

I asked the Head of Planning and Policy by email if a blanket temporary Tree Preservation Order could be put on Hall Farm while the proposals for the site are evolving. The answer was a definite no, but he did add that any trees on the boundary that warranted protection might be considered in their own right.

This would suggest that houses are more important than the protection of our trees including our environment. Flora, fauna and the risk of flooding all play second fiddle to housing, putting trees within any proposed development site in Wokingham all at risk.

There are many examples to date, where the lack of urgency by the Council's Planning, Tree and Landscape Departments has led to the wholesale destruction of many trees and the consequences of that on the climate emergency is immeasurable. Houses first, trees and the environment second.

My question is: will the Climate Emergency Overview and Scrutiny Committee request that the Local Plan Update emerging policy adds such a policy to the plan as it will be a significant move designed to protect our environment against climate change?

To do so will show a genuine commitment to fighting climate change and not to do so will indicate to our residents that Wokingham Borough Council's Lib Dem administration can talk the talk, but not walk the walk.

### **Answer**

Thank you for your question. I appreciate, and I hope your residents do too, your stout defence of your community.

The Climate Emergency Overview and Scrutiny Committee (CEOSC) recognises the importance of the Local Plan Update and that is why we had a session earlier this year where we engaged extensively with the responsible officers and the Executive member on the LPU's importance to our Climate Emergency response. I do not think blanket TPOs for any part of the Borough came up.

I would be reluctant to recommend a blanket bank TPO for Hall Farm, the Borough as a whole or any other area, for this Committee to discuss. The Borough, at your instigation I think, adopted a Tree Strategy in June 2023 - just three months ago and the feasibility of implementing Borough-wide blanket TPOs was discussed and considered by officers, councillors and consultants working on the development of the strategy. A recommendation such as the one you requested would effectively overwrite the Tree Strategy.

Even if every tree in Hall Farm had a TPO it would not, as you assert "be a significant move designed to protect our environment against climate change" as there are simply not enough of them in that area. For comparison, the total impact of all the tree and hedge planting aimed for in the plan (170 hectares) brings a carbon saving of just 1% of the total carbon savings in the plan.

This Committee prioritises its work by the relative importance of any item on the whole plan and our climate emergency response as a whole and I cannot see the impact of any trees lost at Hall Farm being of significant climate emergency magnitude to justify the Committee's time to examine this issue. There are, bluntly, more, bigger issues to look at.

I do appreciate the amenity, social and scenic value of trees but the Tree Strategy and current TPO policy must be the way of protecting trees of value.

It may be that you wish to ensure particular trees are protected so the link to the TPO process is here:

<https://www.wokingham.gov.uk/roadworks-and-outdoor-maintenance/trees-hedges-and-grass-cutting/tree-preservation-orders-tpos>

In the CEAP, trees come under Priority 4: Carbon Sequestration should you want to follow up on this area. The 4th report of the CEAP should soon be available here:

<https://engage.wokingham.gov.uk/en-GB/folders/taking-action-climate-emergency>

The Tree Strategy is here:

<https://engage.wokingham.gov.uk/en-GB/projects/creating-a-tree-strategy>

Finally, this Committee is not a part of the administration. Officers and Executive Members are subject to robust scrutiny and I invite you to review past videos of our work and to tune into future meetings to assure yourself of this.

### **Supplementary Question**

I am disappointed in that, in the sense that in the past the Council has put blanket TPOs on proposed developments because the basic policy on trees is that, if trees are at risk, the Council will put TPOs on them as a means of protection while the development moves forwards. To imply that a TPO on 170 hectares of land would only impact on 1% of trees – I would say that 1% is better than 0%.

I do not wish to be critical of the Committee and do recognise that it is not part of the administration, but I was hoping that you would look beyond narrow boundaries. By not agreeing to this principle, not specifically for Hall Farm, but the principle of TPOs on large developments while work is constructed, you are really saying “houses before trees” – trees don’t matter. This is more a comment than a question and I am happy to leave it at that, but thank you for your answer.

### **23 PROCUREMENT REPORT ON CEAP ACTIONS**

The Committee considered a report, set out at Agenda pages 13 to 20, which gave details of the actions taken by the WBC corporate Procurement team to enable and support the CEAP Action Plan.

Rob Bradfield, Head of Procurement, Contracts and Commercialisation, attended the meeting to present the report and answer Member questions.

The report stated that the CEAP included the following Procurement-related actions:

- Action 8.1: By the end of 2024, achieve sustainable procurement practice throughout the Council as part of Corporate Procurement Strategy.
- Action 8.1.1: Include a drafted approach to sustainable procurement within review of the Procurement Strategy.
- Action 8.1.2: Develop a sustainable procurement culture and associated skills for green procurement.
- Action 8.1.3: Assess suppliers on sustainable procurement standards.
- Action 8.1.4 Implement sustainable procurement KPIs amongst suppliers.
- Action 8.2: By the end of 2024, the Council will consider social value, including carbon neutrality, in all its procurement cycles.
- Action 8.2.1: Adopt a WBC Social Value Policy.
- Action 8.2.2: Promote local skills and employment.

The report stated that the carbon savings associated with the above set of actions were neutral within the CEAP as they applied to future contracts. It was difficult to change the terms of existing contracts, so these changes did not deliver identifiable additional savings, but instead aimed to minimise any 'new' emissions being generated.

The report gave details of completed actions and progress against the remaining actions, including:

- Introduction of the Corporate Strategy for Procurement, Commissioning and Contract Management – approved in July 2021.
- New governance process, involving oversight of all procurements by a Strategic Procurement Board.
- Introduction of a Procurement business partnering module – this provides more frequent contact between services and procurement specialists.
- Introduction of a new governance and approval process – providing more sign-off and approval levels.
- Involvement of the CEAP team in market engagement activities relating to contracts.
- Involvement of the CEAP team in the development of KPIs underpinning contracts.
- 30% of tender evaluation to focus on quality including climate emergency as an element of social value – the climate emergency element to be at the discretion of officers.

The report stated that work was ongoing to establish a social value policy for the Council which would include climate emergency consideration. Procurement officers were also supporting the CEAP team in the development of e-learning modules for staff and new starters through the induction process.

In the ensuing discussion, Member raised the following points and questions:

Had any significant procurement exercises taken place since the approval of the Climate Emergency Action Plan? If so, was there any evidence that the Procurement related provisions led to an increase in cost? It was confirmed that officers would review recent Procurement activity and provide feedback for Members.

As tender evaluation was 70% on cost and 30% (including Climate Emergency provisions) on quality, it should not be assumed that sustainability led to increased costs. The benefits of sustainable service delivery should be emphasised as part of the Procurement process. If Procurement was seen as a toolkit then the CEAP provisions should be embedded throughout the process.

In relation to the tendering process, how were the CEAP provisions highlighted? It was confirmed that the CEAP provisions were included in the specification, KPIs and the contract management process.

In relation to the Corporate Strategy for Procurement, Commissioning and Contract Management – the report stated that officers were “prompted” to consider Climate Emergency as part of every procurement. Should this language be strengthened to “require” rather than prompt.

In relation to meetings held by officers with contract responsibilities to discuss best practice, including Climate Emergency measures – the report stated that the CEAP team

attend some of these meetings. Should the CEAP team attend all relevant meetings? It was confirmed that the CEAP team was small and, consequently, had to focus on attending discussions relating to the more significant contracts.

When was the 70/30 split in tender evaluation approved? It was confirmed that the 70/30 split was included in the 2021 Corporate Strategy for Procurement, Commissioning and Contract Management. The Strategic Procurement Board was able to adjust the price/quality balance in relation to specific projects. So, for example, the Barkham Solar Farm evaluation was based on 45% price, 45% quality and 10% social value.

Were Procurement and Contract Management staff trained in sustainability? It was confirmed that officers were trained in sustainability issues as part of their professional development. The CEAP team were brought in to support the process as and when necessary.

The report stated that suppliers were becoming more enthusiastic and committed to addressing the Climate Emergency. How was this measured? What assessment was carried out to confirm that suppliers carried out their stated behaviours? It was confirmed that suppliers were required to provide supporting evidence as part of the procurement process. This included any “carbon neutral” claims and the use of electric vehicles.

Members discussed the potential relevance of the ISO 14001 environmental management system. ISO 14001 set out a framework to provide assurance that environmental impact was being measured and improved. Did WBC request evidence of ISO 14001 from potential suppliers and contractors? It was confirmed that ISO 14001 could be required depending on the type and size of contract under consideration.

Did the Council have an overarching policy relating to the Climate Emergency elements of the Procurement process? It was confirmed that a statement was included in the Corporate Strategy for Procurement.

What could the Council do to incentivise greater innovation from suppliers and contractors on Climate Emergency issues? It was confirmed that officers could explore greater incentivisation in the tendering process.

It was noted that a number of the CEAP KPIs relating to Procurement were currently showing a RAG status of Red. What was the Procurement team doing to improve these indicators? It was confirmed that officers were aware of the Red status and were confident that progress would be made in the next CEAP progress report in 2024.

**RESOLVED** That:

- 1) Procurement officers report back to the Committee, within 6 months, with examples of success in embedding the Procurement actions in the CEAP;
- 2) Procurement officers provide a specific update on CEAP Action 8.1.1. – include a drafted approach to sustainable procurement within the review of the Procurement Strategy;
- 3) Procurement officers provide a general update on the remaining CEAP actions, including actions and timeframe to improve the targets with a Red RAG status;

- 4) officers investigate the impact and suitability of the Council adopting ISO 14001 to support the CEAP;
- 5) Procurement officers investigate measures to tighten up Procurement contracts and report back to the Committee;
- 6) Procurement officers seek to develop a specific overarching Procurement Climate Emergency policy to underpin the Procurement and Contract Management process;
- 7) the language in the report be strengthened so that the CEAP team “requires” action rather than “encourages” action.

## **24 BARKHAM SOLAR FARM UPDATE**

The Committee considered a report, set out in the Supplementary Agenda, which provided an update on the delivery of the Barkham Solar Farm.

David Smith (Development and Planning Manager – Commercial Property), and Ian Gough (Energy Manager) attended the meeting to present the report and answer Member questions.

The report stated that delivery of the Barkham Solar Farm had previously been progressing on the basis of a formal offer received from SSEN in April 2022 to connect to the grid by 2026. In April 2023, Wokingham Borough Council was advised by SSEN that connection to the Grid could not now be achieved until 2037. This was due to upgrades required at the transmission level before the project could connect to the grid. The design and survey work for the solar farm project was, therefore, put on hold pending the resolution of the connection issue.

In the interim period WBC had been engaging with both SSEN and National Grid in tripartite meetings to better understand the situation and seek positive and significant improvements to the connection date. These meetings had been at Chief Executive and Director level. The discussions were ongoing, but WBC had now received a verbal commitment that the connection date would now be more closely aligned with the original 2026 offer. It was likely that formal confirmation would be received in the next two weeks.

In light of the positive nature of the meetings with SSEN and National Grid, initial discussions with the Council’s contractor, Bouygues E&S, had commenced regarding remobilisation for the survey and design work. Bouygues E&S remained committed to the project and, mindful of the on-going discussions regarding the connection date, were keen to work with the WBC Project Team to devise a programme of remobilisation that best safeguarded the interests of the Council and the project delivery. Within the programme there was approximately 6-9 months of design and survey work to be undertaken before any construction work could begin. Updated costings for the solar farm project would be provided once the design and survey work was completed.

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

There was concern that the construction of the solar farm would take place alongside other significant construction projects in the area, such as the development of two new SEND schools, housing developments and works at the California crossroads. It was confirmed that coordination of these projects was essential and that a community liaison group would

be established to ensure that residents were aware of the various projects in the area and were able to provide input.

It was suggested that the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee be asked to consider the arrangements for future scrutiny of the Barkham Solar Farm, i.e. scrutiny to remain with this Committee or be shared with the other Scrutiny Committees.

It was suggested that contractors working on the construction projects in the area be asked to provide details of their plans for moving materials in and out of the area as part of the wider assessment of the impact on the local road network.

**RESOLVED** That:

- 1) the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee be asked to consider arrangements for future scrutiny of the Barkham Solar Farm project;
- 2) officers be asked to develop an overarching view of the impact of the solar farm and other construction projects in the area, involving local Members and the community liaison group;
- 3) the Community and Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee scrutinise the impact of the relevant construction and transport plans on the local area;
- 4) the relevant contractors be requested to share details of the plan/s for bringing materials to the relevant sites, taking into account the impact on the local road network and, in particular, information on the size of the vehicles that would be used and whether smaller than normal vehicles would be used;
- 5) the revised timeline for the Barkham Solar farm project be reported to the Committee as part of the regular update report.

## **25 WORK PROGRAMME 2023/24**

The Committee considered its draft work programme for 2023/24, as set out at Agenda pages 21 to 23.

**RESOLVED** That:

- 1) the draft work programme be noted;
- 2) the next meeting consider an update on the “ongoing” items in the Action Tracker report;
- 3) the Chair discuss potential future Agenda items with the Executive Member.

## **26 ACTION TRACKER**

The Committee considered the regular Action Tracker report, as set out at Agenda pages 25 and 26.

**RESOLVED:** That the Action Tracker report be noted.

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