

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

**Committee Members Present**

Councillors: Andy Croy, Chris Johnson, Catherine Glover, Graham Howe, Norman Jorgensen, Charles Margetts, Alistair Neal, Ian Pittock and Shahid Younis

**Other Councillors Present**

Stephen Conway and Sarah Kerr

**Officers Present**

Neil Carr, Democratic and Electoral Services Specialist  
Andrew Collins, Climate Emergency Specialist  
Rhian Hayes, Assistant Director, Economic Development and Housing  
Andrea Jenkins, Communications, Engagement and Marketing  
David Smith, Development and Planning Manager  
Resh Thorpe, Climate Emergency Officer

**27 APOLOGIES**

Apologies for absence were received from Michael Firmager.

Shahid Younis attended the meeting as a substitute.

**28 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING**

The Minutes of the meeting held on 25 September 2023 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

**29 DECLARATION OF INTEREST**

Andy Croy and Ian Pittock declared personal interests in Item 34 – Barkham Solar Farm Update – as they were both members of the Solar Farm Programme Board.

Sarah Kerr declared a pecuniary interest in Item 34 – Barkham Solar Farm Update – as she was employed by SSEN.

**30 PUBLIC QUESTION TIME**

There were no public questions.

**31 MEMBER QUESTION TIME**

There were no Member questions.

**32 CLIMATE EMERGENCY ENGAGEMENT & COMMUNICATIONS PLAN**

The Committee considered a report, set out at Agenda pages 13 to 27, which gave details of the emerging Climate Emergency Engagement and Communications Plan.

Sarah Kerr (Executive Member for Climate Emergency and Resident Services) attended the meeting, supported by officers, to present the report and answer Member questions.

The report stated that effective communications and engagement with local communities was essential in making people feel empowered and invested in the Climate Emergency and the targets in the Council's Action Plan. The aim of the Engagement and Communications Plan was to ensure that residents and visitors to the Borough were aware

of the journey to a carbon-neutral future. The Plan would sit alongside the Climate Emergency Action Plan (CEAP) and would be a guide to working with stakeholders on communication and engagement initiatives.

The Council's Climate Emergency Team would coordinate delivery of the Plan, working alongside Council services and would provide quarterly reports against relevant Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). This would include updates on the aim to prioritise engagement with under-represented groups who were likely to experience the more immediate impacts of climate change. It was also proposed to provide a six-monthly update report to the Committee.

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

What progress was being made in relation to engagement with the business community? It was confirmed that the Council's business team worked with the Climate Emergency team to engage with local businesses. Two business engagement events had been held and a business newsletter had been developed. An event had also been held for registered housing providers to consider the retrofitting of homes. The Council carried out an annual business survey which asked about business needs and the steps they were taking to address the Climate Emergency. The Berkshire Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) had also established a Net Zero taskforce.

In relation to measuring success, when would KPIs relating to the Action Plan be submitted to Members? It was confirmed that progress against the targets in the Action Plan would be reported on a quarterly basis. This included data on social media hits. The data would be used to highlight areas in the CEAP requiring greater focus. Progress against the KPIs would be submitted to the Committee. It was also noted that the Climate Emergency Newsletter included case studies giving details of local groups who were reducing emissions.

Members noted the difference between "push" and "pull" communications and asked for details of the Council's approach. Push communication involved sending out information such as leaflets and social media posts. Pull communication involved information that residents could passively access at any time, such as the Climate Emergency content on the Council's website. The Council was keen to use new techniques and to think outside the box, for example in engaging with hard to reach groups such as residents without access to the internet.

It was important to raise the profile of the Council's actions and to give examples of local leaders acting as role models. What checks and balances were in place to ensure consistent messaging and avoid "green-washing" (overstating the evidence to make the organisation appear greener than it actually is)? It was confirmed that all communications were checked to ensure consistency and to avoid green-washing.

Members gave an example of individuals and families who had developed their own Climate Emergency action plans. It was suggested that this could be developed into a public competition with prizes and lots of positive publicity. Officers agreed to take this suggestion away for further discussion.

The Solar Together scheme was considered to be positive. Members noted that self-interest was important in nudging people to take action, e.g. helping the environment and saving money at the same time.

What support was WBC providing to Town and Parish Councils, for example in putting solar panels on the rooves of local buildings? It was confirmed that WBC was looking at solar panels on buildings and school properties. Progress on this could be reported to a future meeting of the Committee.

What was being done to harness the enthusiasm of young people for positive measures to tackle the Climate Emergency? It was confirmed that officers had attended school assemblies and the My Journey team continued to promote green travel options. The Council was also working on measures to reduce the use of cars in the school run. It was noted that the Government had asked all schools to develop a CEAP by 2025 and to identify a sustainability lead.

In relation to housing, it was noted that a sustainability event was planned at Gorse Ride. Would this be extended to other neighbourhoods? What steps were being taken to engage with private landlords? It was confirmed that the Council had good links with residents at Gorse Ride – the event would be open to all tenures. It was also intended to arrange events in other parts of the Borough such as Norreys. Officers were also exploring the options for engagement with private landlords on potential efficiency measures.

**RESOLVED** That:

- 1) Sarah Kerr and officers from the Climate Emergency team be thanked for attending the meeting to present the report and answer Member questions;
- 2) Member comments and suggestions be fed into the development of the Climate Emergency Engagement and Communications Plan.

### **33 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.

Stephen Conway (Leader of the Council) attended the meeting to present the report and answer Member questions supported by David Smith (Development and Planning Manager – Commercial Property), and Ian Gough (Energy Manager). Councillor Conway confirmed that Sarah Kerr was stepping away from the Climate Emergency Executive Member role as she had accepted a job with SSEN.

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. Following intensive negotiations, the Council was now in receipt of a connection offer from SSEN for August 2026. The latest connection offer represented a significant and positive step in delivery of the project. The Council's contractor (Bouygues E&S) had remobilised and, over the next few months, would be completing survey and design work ready for discharging the planning conditions.

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

The report stated that the business case for the project would be updated to reflect the new SSEN Grid Connection Offer together with the design progression and changes to the market. An update would be submitted to the Committee's meeting in February 2024. It was noted that, at this point, the project still looked financially healthy for the Council.

Members referred to the number of development projects in the Barkham area including the solar farm, two SEND schools and new housing developments. The Committee had requested an update report on the plans for coordinating and mitigating the impact of new development in Barkham at a future meeting.

In relation to Grid Connection Offer, were there any changes to the previous offer? It was confirmed that the offer was subject to due diligence by Council officers. The offer had to be accepted by 22 December 2023. Some points of clarification were being discussed including the cost of connection.

In relation to the future development of solar farms, what issues might impinge on the Council's plans? It was confirmed that the CEAP included the provision of further solar farms. Potential sites would be included in the Local Plan Update. Further update reports would be made to the Committee in due course.

**RESOLVED** That:

- 1) Stephen Conway, Ian Gough and David Smith be thanked for attending the meeting to present the report and answer Member questions;
- 2) progress on the delivery of the Barkham Solar Farm be noted;
- 3) an update on the Barkham Solar Farm business case be submitted to the February 2024 meeting of the Committee;
- 4) an update report on the coordination of new development projects in the Barkham area be submitted to the Community and Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee in early 2024.

**34 WORK PROGRAMME**

The Committee considered its work programme for the remainder of the 2023/24 Municipal Year.

**RESOLVED** That:

- 1) the scheduled meeting of the Committee on 9 January 2024 be cancelled;
- 2) an update on the emerging Local Plan be submitted to a future meeting of the Committee;
- 3) potential Agenda items for future meetings include engagement with the business community, domestic heating, retrofitting and CEAP KPIs;
- 4) further ideas for Agenda items be submitted to the Chair or Neil Carr in Democratic Services.

**35 ACTION TRACKER**

The Committee considered the regular Action Tracker report.

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

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