Herefordshire Council

Minutes of the meeting of Environment and Sustainability Scrutiny Committee held at Conference Room 2 - Herefordshire Council, Plough Lane Offices, Hereford, HR4 0LE on Monday 24 March 2025 at 10.00 am

Present: **Councillor Louis Stark (chairperson)**
Councillor Justine Peberdy (vice-chairperson)

Councillors: Dave Davies, Helen Heathfield, Robert Highfield, Ben Proctor (substitute) and Richard Thomas

In attendance: **Councillor Elissa Swinglehurst (Cabinet Member Environment)**

Officers: **Ben Boswell (Head of Environment Climate Emergency and Waste Services), Simon Cann (Committee Clerk), Daniel Lenain (Principal Sustainability and Climate Change Officer), Nicola Percival (Waste Services Manager), Alfie Rees-Glinos (Democratic Services Support), Richard Vaughan (Sustainability and Climate Change Manager) and Danial Webb (Statutory Scrutiny Officer).**

121. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies had been received from Cllr Rob Owens.

122. NAMED SUBSTITUTES

Cllr Ben Proctor was the named substitute for Cllr Rob Owens.

123. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

124. MINUTES

The minutes of the previous meeting were received.

Resolved: That the minutes of the meeting held on 20 January 2025 be confirmed as a correct record and be signed by the Chairperson.

125. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC

No questions had been received from members of the public.

126. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE COUNCIL

No questions had been received from members of the council.

127. ENERGY EFFICIENCY AND RETROFITTING

The report was taken as read and the committee Chair outlined the three main objective around the item.

- Understand the outcomes of the building retrofit and supply chain development funded by Climate Reserve fund.
- Evaluate progress on Keep Herefordshire Warm and HUG initiatives.
- Consider an update on the impact of the new rented property sector energy efficiency regulations.

It was noted that the third objective around the Renters' Rights Bill went much wider than the committee's remit for the meeting and it was advised that the committee should constrain itself to the living conditions element of the topic.

1. The committee noted that one of the main drivers of the push for retrofitting was the council's net zero ambition across the county.

2. The committee noted that nationally and internationally there had been increased pessimism around achieving net zero targets and asked the Cabinet Member Environment if Herefordshire Council was still aiming for Net zero across the county by 2030 and how achievable the ambition was.

    - The Cabinet Member Environment stated that the executive hadn't changed its target on et zero and was confident that it could be achieved at a council level by 2030, however achieving the target on a county wide level would be more challenging due to the lack of direct influence the council had over all the emitters within the county.

    - The Cabinet Member expressed doubts as to whether net zero across the county would be achieved by 2030, but stressed that this should not discourage ongoing and future activity related to achieving that target and that everything possible should be done to try and meet the objective.

3. A committee member stressed the need for sequestration and finding ways of removing warming gas from the atmosphere.

4. The Cabinet Member for Environment said it would be a challenge to meet net zero with over 14000 households in fuel poverty, although the committee said retrofitting was also about the well-being and comfort of some of the County's poorest residents.

5. The committee noted the problems arising from labour shortages and skill gaps in specialised retrofitting work and the expenses involved converting older buildings.

6. The committee noted regulatory hurdles causing approval delays and the outright refusal to provide funding/grants for certain projects based on means testing around property size. It was asked whether an alternative capping system could be used to allow for partial funding of larger property conversions.

    - The Head of Environment Climate Emergency and Waste Services explained that the authority did not set the criteria of the grant/funding schemes, but it did try to lobby and work closely with the government departments involved to try and help shape them. Herefordshire's housing stock presented unique challenges that didn't always align with national schemes. These were typically one or two year programmes, which hampered funding for longer-term projects as the criteria of obtaining funding was regularly changing before progress could be made.

- The Sustainability and Climate Change Manager explained that outside of and complementary to the government grant funding, sat the relatively limited climate reserve funds available through the able to pay retrofit schemes. The authority had greater control and influence over these in comparison to the government run schemes.

- The Sustainability and Climate Change Manager provided an assurance that consideration would be given to ensuring that allocation of funding from climate reserve retrofitting schemes would not be restricted by factors such as property size.

7. The committee raised concerns that there was no clear pathway for how the council would deliver progress on energy efficiency and retrofitting across Herefordshire in line with its ambitions on net zero. It was asked if there was any information showing the gap between what needed to happen in the county and what the council anticipated was actually going to happen.

    - The Sustainability and Climate Change Manager explained that new 'Parity Projects' software would be able to provide a relatively crude indication of the scale of the challenge and amount of funding required to meet it.

    - The Head of Environment Climate Emergency and Waste Services pointed out that a number of strategy pieces had been explored to establish how the overall challenge could be broken down into different elements, so that relevant interventions could take place.

    - The Head of Environment Climate Emergency and Waste Services detailed how the service's 'Keep Herefordshire Warm' initiative had aimed to provide a kind of 'one stop' advice shop providing free impartial advice to anybody, regardless of their means. Keep Herefordshire Warm would signpost people to any potential opportunities available to them and help facilitate with what funding/assistance was available at that point in time.

8. The committee acknowledged the relatively low amounts of government grant funding available for retrofitting schemes and raised concerns about the apparent lack of capital funding being made available by the council to help meet the challenge.

    - The Cabinet Member Environment acknowledged that historically capital funding had been limited, but that the executive would be taking another look at it.

    - It was suggested that nationally and locally a key factor would be mobilising private markets, but there were issues within the industry in making that a reality.

    - The Cabinet Member Environment stressed the need to focus and direct funding in an effective and efficient manner, which targeted troublesome and thermally inefficient properties. It was suggested a 'house must pay' style approach might be productive, but would need careful consideration before being adopted.

9. The committee stressed that there was significant need for a plan to be put in place to determine how energy efficiency retrofitting could achieve co-benefits in terms of climate, public health and cost of living.

10. The committee asked what could be done to promote the development of retrofitting skills and training pathways to bolster labour shortages within the industry.

    - The Sustainability and Climate Change Manager pointed out that the council had been working with the Herefordshire Low Carbon Technology Training Centre, which had received grant funding from the council to provide retrofit training for installers. The council had also been working with local partners to provide training and top-up funding for installers, but the landscape continued to be very challenging.

    - The Sustainability and Climate Change Manager pointed out that the service did its best to promote training activity and opportunities through communications, but there was always a need to promote things more widely.

11. The committee enquired whether the council had investigated models of partnership used by other local authorities, with private enterprise funders, to offer low interest finance to support the able to pay sector to retrofit within an able to pay strategy.

12. The committee considered investigating a mechanism whereby homeowners who were able to pay could use their own trusted suppliers and contractors to carry out work rather than being restricted a to a council approved one.

13. The committee considered whether the publicly available specification (PAS 2035) standard was a barrier to entry for some people wishing to have work carried out on their property.

    - The Sustainability and Climate Change Manager pointed out that PAS 2035 was not just used to ensure that a certain energy performance certificate (EPC) rating was achieved, but to prevent cowboy operators without PAS 2035 registration from being able to enter the market without any barriers to entry and carry out poor quality work. It was acknowledged that there were pros and cons to the current approach and that it was possible that smaller local installers may not get involved because there was too much time and cost involved in gaining PAS registration.

    - It was explained that the PAS 2035 requirement ensured that any council funding given to a homeowner would end up going through a reputable builder/retrofitter and would not need to be recovered due to inadequate work having been carried out.

    - The Sustainability and Climate Change Manager stated that if there were any alternative approaches to using only PAS 2035 registered retrofitters then the council would give consideration to them.

14. The committee enquired as to whether PAS 2035 standards were applied to commercial properties, especially in relation to the council's estate.

    - The Sustainability and Climate Change Manager explained that the equivalent standard for commercial properties was PAS 2038, but in relation to council led projects/retrofits involving commercial buildings - such as the Hereford Museum - a much higher standard was employed.

- It was stated that retrofit assessments had been carried out across the entirety of the council's estate in order to establish and understand what was possible and where to invest funds on a site by site basis.

15. The committee suggested that a focus on a specific market stimulation strategy around the able to pay market could be worth investigating.

16. The committee enquired if the council and energy companies could widely promote information providing a summary of all the sources of advice, help, and finance in relation to energy efficiency.

17. The committee asked if the council could fund activity to help and encourage home owners, businesses and landlords to implement small improvements to properties for 'easy wins', enabling disproportionately larger improvements to a property's energy efficiency.

    - The Principal Sustainability and Climate Change Officer stated that the council was keen to increase the number of energy advice home visits taking place, these typically involved intensive interviews with the homeowner, with energy efficient products being sent out to those who could not afford or were unable to implement changes themselves.

18. The committee noted the lack of a dedicated skills champion within the cabinet to drive forward upskilling across key business sectors.

19. A committee member suggested it wasn't just a matter of upskilling individuals, but also getting more people into the industry.

20. The committee noted that training courses were only of use if people actually enrolled on them and considered whether the council was doing enough to promote NMITE to facilitate its ability to attract students.

21. A committee member suggested it would be helpful if NMITE engaged more with local providers and companies to encourage them to invest in NMITE with a view to the providers being able to meet demand for retrofits on properties using new methods and systems.

    - The Cabinet Member Environment pointed out that the NMITE cohort was currently quite small and focused more on degree level engineering knowledge rather than practical skills training, however it was within NMITE's ethos to engage with local providers and it would from part of its journey to expand.

22. A committee member pointed out that NMITE had partnered with 80 local companies and was working with them to understand what industry needs and how to deliver it through appropriate courses.

23. The committee raised concerns that it was unsighted on how heavily the council was involved in trying to bring the private rental sector conditions of its own stock up to standard.

24. The committee suggested that once the Renters' Rights Bill came into law that a summit of interest groups, that represent landlords and tenants, should come together to consider how they could take forward the initiatives that were contained within the act.

25. The committee raised a concern that the bill only required a minimum rating of EPC E and would support a push for a minimum EPC C rating through lobbying and writing to government in relation to the matter.

26. The committee agreed that it would be helpful to approach the Environmental Health and Trading Standards teams to help establish and understand their relationships with registered providers.

At the conclusion of the debate, the committee discussed potential recommendations, and the following resolutions were agreed.

That Herefordshire Council:

1. **develops a plan to deliver progress on energy efficiency and retrofitting across Herefordshire, including targets, in line with their ambitions on net zero, to include the co-benefits that flow from this, including public health, wellbeing, and the cost of living;**
2. **appoints a skills champion on the cabinet to drive forward upskilling across key business sectors, including energy efficiency and retrofitting, to support their growth ambitions for Herefordshire;**
3. **promotes the Publicly Available Specification 2035 (PAS 2035) standard for council-funded retrofit delivery and investigates equivalent standards for private schemes to consider.**
4. **arranges a summit of interest groups of landlords and tenants, to explore how to implement the Renters Right (Reform) Bill, when in force, with a focus on energy efficiency and retrofitting and a goal of improving living conditions for renters.**
5. **develops an able-to-pay market strategy which will**
    - **identify the key barriers to able-to-pay investment**
    - **work with partners to overcome these barriers and**
    - **use the evidence of the growing market to encourage supplier investment in the retrofit market**
6. **investigates models of partnership with funders to offer private low interest finance to support the able to pay sector to retrofit within an able-to-pay strategy.**
7. **looks at ways to encourage small improvements and easy wins that would bring a disproportionate improvement to a property's energy efficiency.**
8. **ensures that council funding towards intervention on retrofit skills continues to be used for projects that are appropriate for and reaching all retrofit-related companies in Herefordshire and focusing on existing people working in the industry as well as current students.**
9. **considers promoting a summary of all the sources of advice, help, and finance more widely.**
10. **analyses what it would take to bring all private rented accommodation up to the EPC C standard and identify what the council would do to help as soon as the EPC C announcement is made.**
11. **writes and further petitions the Government to demand that the EPC C standard is introduced for the private rented sector.**

128. WASTE CONTRACT

The report provided the committee with an update regarding the delivery of the council's new recyclables and waste collection contract. The report was taken as read.

1. The committee expressed disappointment that the recycling rate across the county remained stubbornly low at 40%, but acknowledged that this figure would

potentially and hopefully rise in the near future, when gardening and food recycling streams were turned on.

2. The committee considered whether progress was stagnating and if there was a potential opportunity to increase the recycling rate through greater publicity, education awareness and household recycling centre activity.

    - The Cabinet Member Environment shared the committee's frustration and attributed some of the problem as being down to the way funding had been delayed in coming through.

    - It was important to consider that the waste hierarchy didn't begin with recycling, and that upstreaming and effective triaging of items going through household recycling sites could have a positive impact. It was noted that quite often what was called waste was actually resource and should not end up in a waste stream.

    - The current system was very pragmatic and was relatively easy for everybody to engage with, but certain elements were not being captured because they went into residual and were not identified as doing anything by being recycled. There were also problems with the contamination of waste streams and items being mixed.

3. The committee enquired if there was a need for a circular economy strategy to set out what the council was hoping to achieve in all of the related areas.

    - The Head of Environment Climate Emergency and Waste Services explained that there was a strategy in place, which set out very ambitious targets aligning to the government's circular economy strategy and the Environment Act. The council's new contract had been a very significant step in that journey and had laid a lot of the foundations for the big changes to come. Progress was not stagnating and the service would be bringing forward food waste and garden waste reports imminently, which would hugely impact the recycling rate.

    - It was pointed out that there had been a lot of change in government strategy over the past 12 months, but the contract represented excellent value for money for customers and provided the flexibility to drive continued improvement and turn on big changes swiftly.

    - The Waste Service Manager explained that press releases were being finalised to communicate the news that small electrical items such a hair dryers, toasters, kettles and batteries could be left on top of either type of waste bin for collection. These were items that would regularly end up in the bin and posed a potential health and safety, and fire risk.

    - The Waste Services Manager pointed out that nationally the recycling rate was falling, but Herefordshire had been able to stabilise its rate, which was notable given that certain services and streams had not been turned on yet.

4. The committee enquired about the visibility of resource that did not enter into the council's waste streams and whether this was significant.

    - The Waste Services Manager stated that if waste disappeared through external charity shops and other organisations then that would be

unquantifiable and would not be reflected in the council's total waste arisings.

5. The committee asked how the service would monitor the social value aspects of the contract.

    - The Head of Environment Climate Emergency and Waste Services explained that a series of annual reporting requirements had been placed within the contract to ensure reports were coming back detailing what had been done and what was being done to achieve positive outcomes. If certain KPIs were not being met, then a rectification plan would be put in place to attempt to resolve the issue over the next period. If matters weren't resolved oven an extended period, then the council and contractor would discuss and mutually agree slight changes and adjustments if necessary.

    - This was an innovative approach to monitoring social value and had been shared with other directorates and departments within the council in relation to contract procurement.

6. The committee enquired about feedback around the slot booking system used to access refuse sites.

    - The Waste Services Manager stated that some people did not like the booking system and found it restrictive, but generally the public feedback had been positive and people liked the fact that they were guaranteed access and that it was usually quite quiet, which gave them more space and time to separate items. It also helped to keep people from outside of the county from using them and illegal trade waste being dumped.

7. The committee asked for it to be recorded that it was impressed with the way the contract has been implemented and with the improvements that had been made across the service.

At the conclusion of the debate, the committee discussed potential recommendations, and the following resolution was agreed.

That Herefordshire Council:

1. **Commission a piece of work, exploring further options for improving current reuse and recycling rates across the county, in advance of any expansion of the waste collection streams to food and garden.**

129. RECOMMENDATIONS UPDATE

The committee agreed to consider a proposal for standardising a process for dealing with recommendations and the timing of responses which had already been discussed by other scrutiny committees within the authority. Details of the proposal would be circulated to members for comment via email after the meeting.

The committee discussed the responses that had been received on recommendations regarding the following topics:

- River Pollution
- Environment Act 2021

- Nutrient management Board
- Net Zero
- Active Travel Measures

The following outstanding actions were identified:

River Pollution:

Action: That Simon Evans (The Chief Executive of the Wye and Usk Foundation) be contacted to provide a breakdown of the 124 partners in the whole catchment process by governance area, for reference.

Nutrient Management Board:

Action: That the Asset Management Plan (AMP 8) be shared with the committee at the earliest opportunity.

Action: The Diffuse Water Pollution Plan (DWPP) be shared with the committee when it is published in April 2025.

130. WORK PROGRAMME

The Chair advised that the committee would need to consider the findings contained within the Statutory Scrutiny Officer's Scrutiny Review paper before mapping out a work programme for 2025/26.

The committee members and the Cabinet Member Environment were invited to propose and forward any potential topics for consideration to the Statutory Scrutiny Officer via email.

Resolved: That the committee consider the Scrutiny Review before mapping out a work programme for 2025/26.

131. DATE OF THE NEXT MEETING

Monday 12 May 2025, 10am

The meeting ended at 12:55 pm **Chairperson**