

**Minutes of the meeting of Environment and Sustainability
Scrutiny Committee held at Conference Room 1 - Herefordshire
Council, Plough Lane Offices, Hereford, HR4 0LE on Wednesday
27 March 2024 at 2.00 pm**

Present: Councillor Louis Stark (chairperson)

Councillors: Dave Davies, Robert Highfield, Justine Peberdy (remote) Richard Thomas

In attendance: Ellissa Swinglehurst (Cabinet Member Environment)

Officers: Mark Averill (Service Director Environment and Highways), Ben Boswell (Head of Environment Climate Emergency and Waste Services), Simon Cann (Committee Clerk), Gareth Ellis (Sustainability & Climate Change Officer), Alfie Rees-Glinos (Democratic Services Support) Danial Webb (Statutory Scrutiny Officer)

72. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillor Rob Owens and Ross Cook (Corporate Director Economy and Environment).

73. NAMED SUBSTITUTES

None.

74. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None.

75. MINUTES

The minutes of the previous meeting were received.

Resolved:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 22 January 2024 be confirmed as a correct record and be signed by the Chairperson.

76. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC

None.

77. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE COUNCIL

None.

78. MEETING NET ZERO CARBON IN HEREFORDSHIRE

The Committee received and took the the 'Meeting Net Zero in Herefordshire' report as read. Committee members were invited to discuss the report with The Sustainability & Climate Change Officer and The Head of Environment Climate Emergency and Waste Services. The Cabinet Member for the Environment was also in attendance.

1. The Committee enquired as to what the council officers in attendance understood by the term Net Zero.
 - The Sustainability and Climate Change Officer responded that Net Zero could be defined as zero emissions of greenhouse gases from operations and activity. This did not necessarily mean that emissions were zero, but that the net result was zero. Any emissions that were produced were offset or 'inset' in some manner, usually from the natural environment being able to remove carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. The goal was that emissions would be offset or eliminated resulting in zero overall greenhouse gas impact emissions.
2. The Committee wished to highlight that Net Zero was not the point at which the population was no longer warming the atmosphere, but was actually the stage at which the population exerted the maximum warming on the atmosphere.
3. The Committee asked officers if the council had given any consideration to what would happen beyond 2030 and how it would continue working in terms of trying to have a positive impact on the environment in Herefordshire.
 - The Head of Environment Climate Emergency and Waste Services stated that the Herefordshire target of 2030 was extremely ambitious and that the national target was lower. The council's carbon management plan was set out in five year blocks. It was currently in the middle of its third carbon management plan and would be developing the fourth one later in 2024, which would take it up to Net Zero. Beyond 2030 would involve looking at how the council and county might become carbon negative, but no targets had been set on this as the focus was currently on achieving the Net Zero target.
 - It was pointed out that since 2008, when the council determined the original baseline, the focus had been on reducing consumption and improving efficiencies, but as work moved into the higher levels of the hierarchy of action the focus would shift to offsetting and becoming carbon negative.
4. The Committee enquired why there were long term plans and targets running up to 2050 for economic issues, but no equivalent for the environmental side of things.
 - The Cabinet Member for the Environment noted this an interesting point and explained that climate change was already embedded in plans, such as the council's Local Plan, that had long-term timelines. The Cabinet Member was open to the idea of giving consideration to a climate plan that was an extrapolation of existing plans.
 - The Head of Environment Climate Emergency and Waste Services pointed out that in addition to the climate strategy and delivery plans, the environment was also embedded via the council's environment policy and decision-making processes. The environment and climate was a wide-ranging golden thread, which touched on everything the council did.
 - The council's recent waste strategy was given as an example of where reaching Net Zero was a key consideration of the redesign and procurement within the strategy. The establishment of a Climate Nature Partnership Board

was also an example of the council's long-term commitment to working with its partners to reduce emissions within the county.

5. The Committee suggested that it might be helpful to set a net-minus target to steer projects that would likely cross over beyond 2030 such as the proposed bypass.
 - The Cabinet Member for the Environment acknowledged that the original target had been set by councillors back in 2019 and were they to change to a net negative target Council would be the appropriate mechanism to achieve this.
 - The Cabinet Member suggested that it might be wise to hold off on considering a net minus target until Net Zero had been achieved, as this was already an ambitious target.
 - The Cabinet Member suggested that were Herefordshire to hypothetically go to net minus straight away, the impact on global climate change would be minimal, but it would have an adverse impact on the local economy, how the county functioned and the capacity of the council to function.
 - It was suggested that there was a need to consider how targets impacted on things as a whole and to time their deadlines accordingly. It was also pointed out that the current target would be reviewed as part of the ongoing five yearly carbon management planning process.

6. The Committee acknowledged the potential for climate change measures to adversely impact certain businesses and concerns around the county, but felt that the County Plan and Local Plan neglected to take advantage of showcasing how the work done on improving the environment would have a positive impact on the economy, particularly for businesses that relied on tourism for their profits. The committee felt that that the County plan and the new Local Plan should be explicit about what the council's Net Zero ambitions were.
 - The Cabinet Member for the Environment agreed and pointed out that a lot of the unique selling points of the county sat with the environment and cited glamping as an example of sustainable low impact tourism and how there was a need to promote the message and communicate the story that Herefordshire was a forward thinking county that valued, protected and enhanced the environment and was looking at sustainability in all things.

County of Herefordshire Greenhouse Gas Emissions

7. The Committee asked officers to provide an overview of the how the council had divided up its Net Zero plan into three 'scope' areas and for some background on progress being made in this area.
 - The Sustainability and Climate Change Officer explained that the council had been producing a report in a similar format since 2008/09 and that the purpose was not just to quantify data from a particular year, but to track the change over time. This was done in line with the Greenhouse Gas Protocol, which was an international standard that outlined how organisations, businesses and councils should report their greenhouse gasses by dividing them into scopes. The three scopes, as detailed in the report were:
 - Scope One - Fuels that the council burned directly, such as gas, petrol and diesel.
 - Scope Two - Power that the council bought-in, such as electricity, which it consumed but was generated elsewhere. This had seen the

- biggest change due to the council having moved to 100% renewable, which allowed electricity units to be counted as zero emissions.
- Scope Three - was part of the council's emission chain, which included partners and principal contractors, but also included staff commuting and working at home. This presented the biggest challenge, as where scope one and two could be dealt with directly, the nature of scope three made it more indirect in nature and more challenging to manage.
8. The Committee enquired as to how many tonnes of CO2 were allowed to be emitted as a county that would equal Net Zero.
- The Sustainability & Climate Change Officer explained that the county figures provided by the UK government showed that the rural nature of the land use in Herefordshire had a very significant carbon sequestration value of about 150,000/160,000 tonnes of carbon, it could be argued that the county could produce that much and it would be offset by the land area of the county, which Herefordshire afforded.
9. The Committee asked if there was a specific figure of CO2 tonnage that could be put into the air, were their figures for both the emissions and sequestration.
- The Head of Environment Climate Emergency and Waste Services explained that the council had strategies such as Local Nature Biodiversity Net Gain that it wanted to grow. The council wanted to enhance wildlife and regenerate wildlife sites as a way of increasing the offsetting figure naturally and did not have a number that stated what an acceptable amount of carbon to permit would be, but that was something that could be looked at via a modelling process.
 - The Head of Environment Climate Emergency and Waste Services pointed out that in terms of achieving carbon negative status there was a need to focus on minimizing consumption and being as efficient as possible by having renewable sources of energy that would enable the council to meet as much of that need with the minimal amount of carbon. The focus would then be on what was left after that and how to offset the remainder.
10. The Committee noted that the biggest challenge in reducing emissions lay in scope three and asked what was being done to encourage council providers and contractors to reduce emissions.
- The Sustainability & Climate Change Officer explained that the plan to achieve these reductions was partly laid out in the current management plan and would need to form an important part of the next carbon management plan for the county.
11. The Committee enquire as to whether the aims of the carbon management plans were being reflected in overarching plans such as the County Plan.
- The Head of Environment Climate Emergency and Waste Services, pointed to the recent waste contract as an example of how, through the council's commissions, it was building its Net Zero and emission targets into contracts. This was an approach that would be running through all of the council's commissions when agreeing contracts with providers and contractors.
 - The council was constantly working with its partners to promote energy efficiency and supporting them with grant funding applications to allow them to invest in reducing emissions.

12. The Committee asked if there was a specific plan in place to achieve the outstanding 70% target reduction in emissions from partners as detailed in the [CHG Emissions from each organisation pie chart at page 3 of the report](#).
 - The Head of Environment Climate Emergency and Waste Services explained that the current carbon management plan relied on different modelling scenarios to arrive at a realistic target level for reductions. Detailed plans and spreadsheets informed the strategic interventions in each year that would allow the council to arrive at its targeted reductions over the five year period of the plan. The current challenge would be developing the plan for the next five years.
13. The Committee pointed out that the environment assessment sections in decision making reports rarely talked about the council's Net Zero ambitions and there was generally very little mention about the targets that needed to be met over the next five years. The committee voiced concerned that Net Zero was not a significant influencer on the decisions that the council and cabinet made and that there was a risk that decisions made within certain sections of the council could have an adverse impact on the positive work being done to meet Net Zero targets.
14. The Committee suggested that the environmental assessment impact section of reports should contain a paragraph on the Net Zero implications of a decision and how to mitigate them - especially for decisions related to outsourcing contracts.
15. The Committee raised concerns about the costs involved in achieving Net Zero ambitions.
 - The Head of Environment Climate Emergency and Waste Services pointed out that since 2008 the council had reduced its emissions by 60% and that this had had a significant benefit in terms of financial savings for the authority. Many environmental investments - such as solar panels on suitable estates - had paid back within five to eight years depending on their location.
 - The council had invested in energy efficient measures on a business case basis and environmental business was good business. It wasn't always the case that reducing carbon cost lots of money.
16. The Committee stressed the importance of recognising the difference between pollution and global warming.
17. The Committee enquired if there were any plans to increase land use for renewables within the county.
 - The Cabinet Member for the Environment stated that the council had put and would continue to put solar panels on roofs when it was in a position to do so, although not all land and property was within the council's gift.
 - The Head of Environment Climate Emergency and Waste Services explained that recommendations from the the Citizen's Assembly of two years ago had allowed for the development of up-to-date renewable energy feasibility mapping, which had been put on the council website and would assist people in understanding where renewable energy could present opportunities for them.

18. The Committee suggested an action to capture the cost benefit analysis of Net Zero work being done by the council, and noted there was still work to be done on promoting Net Zero to the public.
- The Head of Environment Climate Emergency and Waste Services highlighted that there had been great success in obtaining external grants for the county to fund a lot of the Net Zero activity, including grants for business energy efficiency to support businesses to undertake free audits and to have capital grants of 50% towards energy efficiency and renewable energy measures.
 - Grants had assisted with the electric vehicle charging point infrastructure within the county and funding for home owners with energy efficiency measures in the home.
19. The Committee asked for an overview of county wide emissions and the challenges within this area.
- The Sustainability and Climate Change Officer pointed out the consistent downward trend for emissions, with the exception of a Covid-related spike in 2020. In a rural county such as Herefordshire livestock continued to present a significant challenge in reducing emissions, as did old housing stock, which often depended on oil-fuelled heating, which was more polluting than gas.
 - People living in rural areas presented a challenge in terms of them often being unable to switch to electric vehicles due to charging point infrastructure issues.
 - The challenges faced by the county were similar to other rural authorities in the UK and Europe, and there was key work to be done on selling the benefits of climate change measures to a resistant public and having conversations about what were acceptable costs.
20. The Committee discussed the impact of traditional agricultural farming on the environment and considered a recommendation calling for more work to be done on what the impact of agriculture was on Net Zero.
21. The Committee discussed a report from New Zealand detailing an apparently carbon neutral sheep farming business.

The Herefordshire Climate and Nature Partnership Board

22. The committee discussed how the council could support the Herefordshire Climate and Nature Partnership Board to assist in getting the county's Net Zero ambition back on target.
- The Head of Environment Climate Emergency and Waste Services explained that the board was made up of representatives from different sectors including: business, agriculture, higher education and community groups. The board was currently considering key themes and actions and was developing a high-level matrix consisting of the most impactful priority actions to be carried out over the next 12 months.
 - The Cabinet Member for the Environment pointed out that a lot of the partners within the group were doing work within their own organisations. Coordinating and measuring the impact of work was complicated and it was difficult to construct a matrix showing how any one action was producing a particular outcome. The board itself would not necessarily directly implement

change. but would be instrumental in starting a ripple effect to bring about positive change.

23. The Committee considered the question of who owned the Net Zero ambition and who would be responsible if it wasn't met.
24. The Committee considered a potential recommendation for the executive to restate its commitment to Net Zero - not just in relation to the council's own delivery and functions, but for the countywide Net Zero ambition.
25. The Committee enquired as to what instruments and powers could be used to get the Net Zero ambition back on target
 - The Sustainability and Climate Change Officer explained that Net Zero wasn't necessarily a top priority for many citizens going about their lives. The council couldn't insist people drive electric cars, but it could put in place an electric charging point infrastructure that might encourage people to start buying and using electric vehicles. Likewise, people couldn't be forced to leave their cars and walk/cycle, but an improved infrastructure of cycle paths and walkways might encourage people to consider alternative travel options.
 - People were free to make their own dietary choices and this impacted on agriculture and associated emissions.
 - Work needed to be done on winning the hearts and minds of people by convincing them of the benefits Net Zero could bring
26. The Committee raised disappointment and frustration that The Herefordshire Climate and Nature Partnership Board could advise and encourage but not enforce certain behaviours.
27. The Committee asked why the council had signed up to a Net Zero ambition for 2030 when it knew it was going to miss it by years.
 - The Cabinet Member for the Environment point out that it was full council that signed up to the commitment and that constantly reaffirming commitment to the ambition could become somewhat repetitive.
 - The Cabinet Member noted that a target was ultimately just a target and that every effort should be made to hit it, but even getting part of the way there would be a positive change.
 - The Cabinet Member pointed out that some of the change would occur irrespective of the council's ambitions, as more people switched to electric vehicles and modernised their homes, but in the meantime there was no harm in setting an ambitious target.
28. The Committee asked how Herefordshire stood against other counties and whether Herefordshire used benchmarking against other counties.
 - The Sustainability and Climate Change Officer pointed out that benchmarking in this area was challenging as each county was different, but felt that generally Herefordshire was doing relatively well compared with other counties.
29. The Committee considered whether the council could do more under planning regulations to encourage renewable energy sources.

30. The Committee considered whether more needed to be done as a council in terms of communications and marketing to promote Net Zero across the county.
31. The committee asked who would be driving forward Net Zero within academies inside the county, as the message should be being communicated to children.
- The Sustainability and Climate Change Officer explained that the council's capacity to influence academies was limited - they were not included in the council's sphere of influence and essentially governed themselves. However larger academy trusts such as those linked to the Church of England would likely follow their own bespoke guidance such as the Church of England Greenhouse Gas Report for operations.
32. The Committee expressed concerns around the impact of school runs on transport emissions.
33. The Committee enquired about who, within academy schools, was engaging with children around issues relating to Net Zero and climate change.
34. The Committee noted that schools would play a key role in terms of tackling transport emissions and educating children - who would then potentially cascade this information to their parents – on Net Zero.
- The Head of Environment Climate Emergency and Waste Services explained that historically the council had operated a number of successful environmental energy programmes encouraging schools and academies in the county to engage in energy efficiency audits and apply for grants.
 - Currently there was a dedicated school travel plans officer visiting schools and supporting them with travel plans, carbon reduction guidance and bikeability behavioural change advice.

Factors Outside of the Council's Control

35. The Committee asked about the national grid infrastructure and what the council was doing to engage in this sector to achieve the county's ambitions.
- The Head of Environment Climate Emergency and Waste Services explained the team had been working with relevant agencies to help shape the aspirations of decarbonisation of transport and the shift of electrification of vehicles. Discussions were taking place in relation to unlocking capacity within the existing grid and forward investments programmes.
 - The Sustainability and Climate Change Officer explained that the Monmouthshire and Powys partners within the Marches Forward Partnership were working on local areas energy plans, these plans future-cast the idea of what the energy system would look like in 2030 and were looking at future energy consumption, production and storage.
 - Ofgem (The Office of Gas and Electricity Markets) was now very keen that network operators engaged more with councils. The model that had been trialled in Wales was now being widely championed and it was hoped there were learning opportunities that could be taken from this.

36. The Committee considered whether there was a need for the council to engage more proactively with all utility companies and rail networks to promote the council's Net Zero ambitions across the county.

National Highways

37. The Committee discussed the relationship between the council and National Highways.
- The Head of Environment Climate Emergency and Waste Services explained the team were very active and engaged with Highways England, National Highways and the Department for Transport.
38. The Committee asked whether enough attention was being paid to Net Zero when it came to the capital programme and revenue budget setting
- The Head of Environment Climate Emergency and Waste Services stated they had had tremendous success through investment from the capital programme, the example of spending £10 million on converting to LED street lights was given, and this had resulted in yearly energy costs of £500,000 being cut to £200,000.
 - The team was also very good at supplementing its budgets by successfully applying for grants. In relation to revenue budget, there was a well-established and well-resourced team in place that looked at sustainability and climate change. For the last three years the team had come top of a West Midlands sustainability benchmarking exercise.
39. The Committee raised concerns about how the council's new road strategy might adversely impact the Net Zero ambition of the county and how that would be mitigated.
- The Head of Environment Climate Emergency and Waste Services explained that the team did look at individual business cases and also annually considered the capital programme and what percentage of it was investing in low carbon and sustainability projects.
40. From this the Committee proposed an action – officers to assess Net Zero impact of 2025 capital programme.
41. The Committee suggested that the council might consider purchasing areas of land inside and out of the county with a view to using them as wildlife corridors and utilising them as a means of generating revenue from biodiversity credits.
- The Head of Environment Climate Emergency and Waste Services explained that the council was already giving consideration to such activity and pointed to the Wetlands development, which had generated significant biodiversity benefits. The council was currently looking at potential sites for similar opportunities.
42. The Committee suggested returning to the topic of wildlife corridors and land purchasing during the forthcoming tree management and hedgerow policy item scheduled for later in the year.

43. The Committee heard that an ecology professor was planning to hold a talk with councillors on best practice in hedgerow and verge management and this might inform the council's policy on this area.

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

Resolved: That Herefordshire Council ensure that:

1. The 'environmental impacts' sections of reports to Council and Cabinet include the Net Zero impact (both council and county wide) of the policy or service proposal.
2. The executive, in setting out its new road strategy, highlight what the impact will be on the Net Zero ambition for the county and how that might be mitigated.
3. Herefordshire Climate and Nature Partnership Board seeks school academy representation on its board.
4. The executive makes reduction and sequestration targets clearer in its future Carbon Management Plan.

The Committee then voted unanimously to forward the following actions to the lead Cabinet Member.

The lead cabinet member to:

1. Report on how the carbon management plan sets out the overall costs and benefits of Net Zero.
2. Report on the Net Zero impacts within the council's capital program
3. Identify opportunities within planning policy to maximize the opportunities for renewable energy production.
4. Ask the Herefordshire Climate and Nature Partnership Board to commission an evaluation of the true Net Zero impact of agriculture in the county.
5. Engage more proactively with utility and network rail companies that operate in Herefordshire
6. To draft a Communications plan to promote the need for and benefits of Net Zero to Herefordshire.

79. WORK PROGRAMME

The Committee had recently held a work programme planning session where it had identified a number of topics it wished to bring forward for 2024/25. These were:

- Public Rights of Way and Greenways
- Tree and Hedgerow Strategy and Management
- Energy Efficiency and Retrofitting
- Active Travel Measures including 20mph speed limits.
- River Lugg Pollution.

The Statutory Scrutiny Officer explained that there would be a session in early May for directors and members to discuss any topics and training required. By the end of May there would be a work programme in place for 2024/25 with commitments from directors and officers to deliver reports for the agreed topics.

80. CHAIR UPDATE

The chair informed the committee that he had spoken with the democratic services manager regarding outstanding executive responses to recommendations and that these would hopefully be available for discussion at the next meeting. The cabinet member for the environment stated that they would follow up on the progress of the responses.

81. DATE OF THE NEXT MEETING

Monday 22 July 2024, 2:00pm

The meeting ended at 12:46 pm

Chairperson