

Minutes of the meeting of the **CLIMATE CHANGE PROJECT ADVISORY GROUP** held remotely on Tuesday, 22 June 2021 at 6.00 pm.

Present:

Chairman: Councillor T J Bartlett

Councillors: C A Vinson
M Bates
N S Kenton
K Mills
O C de R Richardson
H M Williams

Officers: Strategic Director (Operations and Commercial)
Head of Commercial Services
Head of Assets and Building Control
Planning Policy and Projects Manager
Climate Change and Energy Conservation Officer
Democratic Services Officer

1 APOLOGIES

It was noted that an apology for absence had been received from Councillor S H Beer.

2 APPOINTMENT OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS

There were no substitute members appointed.

3 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

4 TERMS OF REFERENCE

Members commented that there was a need to be open and transparent about what the Council was doing in relation to climate change. With a cautionary note from the Head of Assets and Building Control who highlighted the need for the Group to be able to have frank discussions, it was agreed that the minutes of the Group's meetings should be made publicly available.

AGREED: (a) That the notes of the Project Advisory Group's meetings be made publicly available.

(b) That the Group's Terms of Reference be noted.

5 NATURAL SOLUTIONS REPORT

The Project Advisory Group received a presentation from Kent County Council's (KCC) Natural Environment and Coast Manager (NECM). Following KCC's stated aim of establishing 1.5 million trees to support its strategy of achieving a net zero carbon emissions target, the authority had commissioned further work to look at alternative ideas such as nature-based solutions that would tackle climate change in the county as well as offering social, economic, health and wellbeing benefits.

The NECM advised that there were five habitat areas present in the county which were set out in the report. Woodland was the most abundant, semi-natural habitat present. There were major challenges in harnessing the benefits of grassland habitats, not least because they were fragmented. The potential for using inland wetlands and waterways for carbon capture and storage was probably limited. She emphasised the need to make the correct interventions in the right places.

In response to Member queries the NECM advised that, whilst the idea of residents planting trees in streets was commendable, there could be highways and maintenance issues, the latter being labour intensive for the first few years and hindered by the county being prone to water scarcity and drought. There was a number of schemes that supported the planting of street trees. Whilst these offered funding opportunities, they were often subject to tight timescales which made it difficult for KCC to respond in time with its limited resources. KCC was in the process of drawing up a tree strategy that would set out an action plan to deliver its tree target. A tree strategy officer would be recruited to develop the strategy in consultation with partners, including the Highways team and district councils. It was anticipated that the strategy would be finalised and adopted by the end of 2021. One of the key principles of the strategy would be to review how existing trees were protected. Whilst the government was expecting every upper tier authority to have a strategy, it was for individual lower tier authorities to decide whether to have one or not. Whilst the target was for net zero carbon emissions by 2050, an ambitious interim target would be set for 2030 which included the objective of planting one tree for every KCC employee and household.

The Head of Commercial Services commented that there was a public perception that verges and other grassed areas such as churchyards were being left unmown in order to save money rather than because authorities wished to encourage biodiversity and help the environment. The NECM advised that a public perception survey had concluded in May, attracting 4,500 responses and with the majority of respondents being in favour of wilder verge management. She commented that Member support was needed for a policy of leaving verges unmown.

Councillor C A Vinson asked whether a cost-benefit analysis had been carried out on some of the proposed measures. He also stressed the importance of informing the public about the Council's policy of leaving grassed areas unmown (e.g. Marke Wood playground) as the public simply thought these areas had been left unmown due to neglect or to save money. He suggested that new residential developments offered some of the greatest opportunities for introducing nature-based solutions.

The NECM thought the idea of costing the measures was interesting and worth investigating. However, she cautioned that it was likely to be complex and sometimes impossible in practical terms. There was no doubt that delivering nature-based solutions was far from straightforward and there would be hurdles to overcome. She commented that social media was the best way of getting the Council's message out to the public. In response to the Head of Assets and Building Control, she advised that coppiced woodland had carbon capture potential, as well as biodiversity value and an economic benefit in terms of a saleable product and job creation. She added that carbon capture was an emerging field which was attracting a high level of interest.

AGREED: That the presentation and report be noted.

In response to a query from Councillor T J Bartlett, the Head of Assets and Building Control advised that the climate change element of Cabinet reports would be 'beefed up'. In preparation, the Principal Climate Change and Sustainability Officer (CCSO) had produced guidance notes for Officers. There was some debate about whether the Council's Action Plan should be included in the quarterly Performance Report or annually in the carbon emissions report.

The CCSO advised that some of the action points would be dealt with by KCC. The KCC document was a wish-list and it would not be possible for the Council to take forward all the actions included. It was suggested that a Council trees group/sub-committee be formed. However, Councillors Vinson and N S Kenton expressed the view that the initiative on trees should be taken forward at county level given the lack of land within the Council's ownership and the multitude of organisations and funding streams involved. Councillor Kenton commented that, whilst not common in east Kent, coppiced woodlands in particular could offer huge environmental benefits. The Head of Assets and Building Control reported that he was in touch with Officers working on the draft Local Plan in relation to biodiversity net gain and landholdings, with the aim of producing maps.

AGREED: That the update be noted.

7 DISCUSSIONS ON DIRECTION

The PCCSO advised that the Council was working towards net zero carbon emissions by 2030. Progress would be reported on a quarterly basis if that was what Members wished, with the 2050 targets reported on annually. She confirmed that shipping and motorways were not included in government datasets. She also confirmed that work on the Council's Action Plan had started. The Planning Policy and Projects Manager advised that the Green Infrastructure Strategy would be an evidence base for the draft Local Plan. Working with consultants, Officers were making every effort to bring the strategy forward as the document would form the basis for actions taken by the Council in respect of the natural environment. She undertook to update Members on progress at a future meeting.

AGREED: That the update be noted.

8 UPDATE ON CURRENT ACTION

The Head of Commercial Services advised that six of the forty-nine sites with electric vehicle charging points had been completed and were ready for use. Once all sites had gone 'live' the operational side would be finalised and their usage monitored.

The PCCSO advised that there was a number of funding streams to help households upgrade the fabric of their homes and decarbonise heating. The Home Upgrade Grant Scheme would make £150 million of funding available to upgrade the energy efficiency of properties that were not connected to the gas network. The Local Authority Delivery Scheme was for the upgrading of properties connected to the gas network and was expected to run until 2023. The Council had submitted a bid in respect of the latter which, if successful, would mean the receipt of significant resources. Bidding would open in the autumn for the Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund which would make £3.8 billion funding available to upgrade the worst houses in the social housing sector. The government was looking for local authorities and registered social housing providers to submit consortia bids.

AGREED: That the update be noted.

The meeting ended at 7.56 pm.