

Working Group on the Climate Crisis

Monday, 16th September, 2019

MEETING OF THE WORKING GROUP ON THE CLIMATE CRISIS

Members present: Councillors Baker, Ferguson, Hutchinson and Smyth.

In attendance: Ms. G. Long, Commissioner for Resilience;
Ms. C. McKeown, Sustainable Development Manager;
Ms. C. Shortt, Policy and Data Analyst;
Mr R. McLernon, Project Coordinator and
Mr. G. Graham, Democratic Services Assistant.

Apologies

Apologies were reported on behalf of the Chairperson, Councillor de Faoite, and Councillor McReynolds and Alderman Copeland.

Vacant Position Chairperson

In the absence of the Chairperson, the Working Group agreed that Councillor Smyth take up the position of Chairperson for the duration of the meeting.

Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of 12th August, 2019 were taken as read and signed as correct.

Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were declared.

Presentation – NI Climate Risk Assessment

Professor John Barry, Professor of Green Political Economy, Queen's University Belfast, attended in connection with this item and was welcomed by the Chairperson.

Professor Barry provided the Working Group with an outline of the work undertaken by the Place Based Climate Action Network (PCAN), of which Belfast City Council was a partner, including its sources of funding, budget allocation and city project partners. The Working Group was advised that the role of PACT was engagement, impact including the engagement and sharing of knowledge in respect of climate action.

Professor Barry referred to the need for integration of action in respect of climate change and of the need to ensure a multi-agency approach in tackling the associated problems of climate change. He referred specifically to the role of Belfast City Council (BCC) in informing policy in the matter and of taking a lead in ensuring that climate change was placed firmly at the top of the agenda. The Working Group was advised that the target of ensuring zero emissions by the year 2050 was not sufficient to ensure that the most severe impact of climate change was avoided. He suggested that a revised target of zero emissions by 2030 should be adopted.

The Working Group was provided with an outline of the work of the Belfast Climate Commission including, amongst other things, making a positive choice on issues

pertaining to energy, carbon, weather and climate change by working collaboratively with a range of organisations and stakeholders across the city including public, private and third sectors. He referred also to its role in monitoring progress in regard to the city meeting its carbon reduction targets including the assessment of climate-related risks and the assessment of opportunities to affect climate resilience.

The Professor provided the Working Group with a number of key statistics in regard to projected future temperature increases and other climatic variables. This included the projected rises in sea level and the overall impact associated with climate breakdown. The Members were informed of their possible role in averting the impact of climate change by working in partnership with other organisations and by incorporating initiatives through the Belfast Agenda including its local development plans. He referred to the link between energy and spacial planning and of the need to develop improved community engagement to ensure a just transition so that the most vulnerable communities were not adversely affected by approaches to minimise climate change.

The Members were advised of the levers available to the Council to minimise the worst effects of climate change. These levers included a strategic focus on climate resilience and ensuring that the Belfast Region City deal embedded principles of climate resilience by amongst other things the use of technology and improvements to infrastructure including the transportation network.

Several Members referred to their concerns in regard to the lack of investment by central government departments in relation to resources being provided by DfI to deal with investment in water resources, including flooding and associated drainage systems. Concern was raised also by the Members in regard to the lack of alternative and affordable transport within the city to provide for a suitable alternative to the car as a means of transportation. A Member voiced specific concern in regard to the U.K. Government's commitment to honour emission targets, following Brexit, and the possible consequences for the province and island of Ireland as a whole.

The Commissioner for Resilience referred to the recent decision by the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee that she would bring a report to its December meeting with an outline plan for prioritising adaptation and mitigation measures and would provide an outline in respect of associated implementation costs. She reported also that Mr. C. Conway, representing Translink, had been invited to the next meeting of the Working Group to address the Members' concerns in respect of the city's public transportation system.

The Working Group thanked Professor Barry for his detailed and informative presentation and he retired from the meeting.

Presentation – NI Strategic Energy Framework

Ms. M. Cormacain, SIB Energy Advisor, Department for Enterprise DfE, attended in connection with this item and was welcomed by the Chairperson.

Ms. Cormacain provided the Working Group with an overview of the process to adhere to the emissions targets as contained within the Paris Agreement. She referred to the long term goal to keep global average temperatures increases to below 2c incorporated within a low-carbon agenda. The Energy Advisor referred specifically to the development of a new energy strategy for Northern Ireland and the fact that the province had been successful in meeting its targets for the production of renewable energy. She stated that the United Kingdom target for net zero carbon emissions, enshrined in legislation, was 2050 and referred to the Northern Ireland's economic dependence on oil as a severe impediment to reducing current carbon emissions.

The Working Group was informed of the inter-dependencies between transportation, air quality and health and of the need to adopt a joined-up approach to develop an energy strategy to tackle the problems that contribute to global warming. Ms. Cormacain provided the Working Group with an outline of the targets agreed in respect of a reduction in emissions under the three categories of power, heat and transport, including a range of options under each heading which might be considered to meet the reductions required.

The Energy Advisor reported that it was the intention of DfE to produce a paper outlining a range of options pertaining to a comprehensive energy strategy which would ultimately require ministerial approval. A Member referred to the need to develop the circular economy and of the need to consider the issue of fuel poverty on any policy changes implemented to mitigate against the impact of climate change. The Working Group discussed the possibility of the Council's development of renewable energy on the North Foreshore, including the possibility of re-selling any additional power generated back to the national grid. Other issues discussed by the Working Group included regulations to ensure that all new dwellings met strict standards in terms of insulation and energy efficiency.

On behalf of the Working Group, the Commissioner for Resilience agreed to write to the DfE outlining some of the key principles on climate change measures which it might wish to incorporate within any future consultation paper on climate change.

The Working Group thanked Ms. Cormacain for her informative presentation and she departed from the meeting.

Draft Programme of Work

The Commissioner for Resilience reminded the Working Group that its report to the December meeting of the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee would be its major priority, however, alongside this, an outline of a programme of work was proposed. The Working Group was provided with a range of options which, it was proposed would be considered by the Working Group namely:

1. Emergency Planning and preparation for climate related events
2. The Circular Economy and job creation
3. Meeting with The Department for Infrastructure and Translink to reduce car dependency
4. Business Development and Sustainability Challenge
5. Fuel Poverty – NIHE
6. Sustainability Impact as a decision making element
7. Local development plan and Climate Resilience
8. Conference of parties COP26
9. Site Visit to the North Foreshore

The Commissioner for Resilience referred to the importance attached to undertaking a risk assessment in terms of mitigating against those areas of the city and citizens most at risk from climate change. She reported that Ms. C. Carlton and Mr. D. Neill would be addressing the Working Group, at a future meeting, to discuss the Council's Emergency Planning contingencies to deal with the predicted adverse impact

of climate change. She reported also that the Director of City and Neighbourhood Services, or his nominee, would be addressing the Working Group at a future meeting on the Council's development of the Circular Economy. The Commissioner highlighted the importance attached to assessing the impact of the Council's activities with particular reference to the impact those activities had on climate change. The Working Group was reminded that climate change considerations was required to be integrated into the fabric of any proposed Local Development Plans.

In response to a further question in respect of the impact of climate change, the Commissioner reported that much work remained to be completed by the Council in respect of the production of a Climate Adaptation and Mitigation Plan which required to be fully costed. The Members requested that the Commissioner investigate the possibility of having a climate change countdown clock erected in the City Hall as a means to focus attention on the urgent need to meet agreed climate change targets, subject to the approval of the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee.

The Working Group requested that the Commissioner produce a report to investigate the possibility of the Council holding a conference to highlight the threat posed by climate change, including the actions taken by the Council to influence government policy to reduce its impact and manage the consequences associated with the declaration of a climate change emergency. She stated that the proposed conference would include an invitation to all relevant stakeholders at which the Lord Mayor would be asked to address the Conference, subject to his availability, and the approval of the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee.

The Working Group agreed further that it would be making a recommendation to the September meeting of the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee that a climate emergency be declared. While that Committee had accepted that much more work was required to prioritise actions on a fully costed basis, however, given the urgency of the situation, it was important that the Working Group show its commitment to the issue. The Commissioner agreed that she would liaise with the Council's Corporate Communications team in relation to the Working Group's discussion in the matter.

Progress with Belfast Mini-Stern Report

The Sustainable Development Manager reported that the Council was on track in regard to the mini-stern review and that the necessary resources for delivery had been agreed.

Noted.

Progress on Belfast Climate Risk Report

The Sustainable Development Manager provided the Members with an update on the Climate risk report.

Noted.

Report on PCAN – Application Proposal for Spring 2020 Mini Conference

The Sustainable Development Manager referred to the work undertaken as part of the PCAN initiative which had an allocated fund across several cities for the lifetime of the project of £400,000. She reported that an application had been made by the Council for £15,000 to provide for a mini conference, a series of quarterly lectures and a youth event.

Sustainable NI Working Group

The Sustainable Development Manager reported that Sustainable NI had requested that two Members from the Working Group be appointed to sit on the Sustainable NI Working Group which would meet on a quarterly basis.

The Working Group considered the request and agreed that it be represented on the Working Group by Councillors Smyth and Ferguson and that the representatives be permitted to alternate to provide that any Member from the Working Group be permitted to replace the appointed Members, should they be unable to attend, subject to the approval of the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee.

Date of Next Meeting

The Working Group agreed that its next meeting would be held on Monday, 21st October at 4.30 p.m.

Chairperson