

Working Group on the Climate Crisis

Monday, 19th October, 2020

MEETING OF THE WORKING GROUP ON THE CLIMATE CRISIS

- Members present: Councillor Smyth (Chairperson);
Alderman Copeland; and
Councillors Baker, Bunting, de Faoite and
Hutchinson.
- In attendance: Ms. G. Long, Commissioner for Resilience;
Ms. C. McKeown, Sustainable Development Manager;
Mr. R. McLernon, Resilience Co-ordinator; and
Mr. G. Graham, Democratic Services Assistant.
- Also attended: Ms. A. Wright, Market and Communications
Coordinator Brand and Marketing.

Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of 14th September were taken as read and signed as correct.

Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were declared.

Belfast Climate Adaptation Plan – Presentation from Climate NI

Mr. S. Jones (Climate Northern Ireland Officer) attended in connection with this item and was welcomed by the Chairperson.

The Commissioner for Resilience provided the Working Group with a timetable by which Belfast City Council was required to develop its Climate Plan. She stated that the Climate Plan would include such things as, how the Council would develop its decarbonisation programme, including the investment required to protect its assets to ensure that it was climate resilient. She referred to the three components of the Climate Plan comprising:

- A Climate Adaptation Plan, with Climate NI
- A Comprehensive Sustainability Review and
- An Energy Review.

She referred to the collaborative work undertaken with Climate N.I. to develop a climate adaptation plan for Belfast City Council and stated that the evidence from this work would be fed back to the Working Group, with recommendations for a comprehensive Climate Plan for the Council.

The Climate NI Officer provided the Members with some background information in regard to the funding including the aims and objectives of Climate NI, a body funded by the Department for Energy and Rural Affairs (D.E.R.A.). He referred to two specific areas including, Climate adaptation and mitigation, the latter of which focussed on the impacts of unfettered climate change. He reminded the Members that, under the Paris agreement, we were committed to maintaining global temperature under 1.5c and outlined the impacts for climate change and sea level should these limits fail to be adhered to.

He referred to work undertaken within the Northern Ireland's Executive policy framework on Climate change and referred specifically to the "New Decade, New Approach" document, including the 2008 Climate Act, both of which recognised the need for a coordinated and strategic approach to tackle the impact of climate change. He referred also to the importance of the adoption of a Climate Adaptation Plan, by all Councils, and the fact that Northern Ireland was provided with a risk assessment in terms of the threats to its infrastructure, natural environment, buildings, industry etc. as a result of climate change.

The Climate NI Officer referred to the creation of a Local Government Climate Action Network which had evolved from the first Climate adaptation plan, developed in partnership between Climate NI and Derry City and Strabane District Council. He stated that the role of the Climate Action Network was to develop an adaptation Plan for each Council area within the province. He emphasised the role of an adaptation plan in the identification of priority areas for action and referred to the local knowledge that Councils could provide, to affect central Government policy, in regard to climate action. He referred also to the positive attributes associated with the development of a Climate adaptation plan including, amongst other things, the identification of risks and the need to build reporting mechanisms and capacity to deal with the negative aspects of climate change.

The Working Group was provided with an outline of the support and guidance offered by the Local Government Climate Action Network and the fact that it provided a catalyst for the development of other climate change initiatives. The Climate NI Officer referred to the provision of area specific service fact sheets and guidance on climate action which could be used as a tool-kit, by local authorities. He referred to other developmental work including, the creation of a climate risk register, vision and action plan, to support local authorities, in regard to their work on climate mitigation.

The Climate NI Officer highlighted work undertaken by the adaptation sub-group, comprising officers from across Council, in assisting with the development of policies and the incorporation of those policies within the climate mitigation process. He encouraged the Members, when making policy decisions including corporate planning, investment and insurance decisions, to consider climate risk and consider development opportunities associated with protecting the Council, by making it resilient to the most serious impact of climate change.

A Member requested that the Council might wish to consider the impact of climate change in its decision-making reports as a matter of routine. He suggested further that, as he had undertaken some work with Camden Borough Council, who had implemented a similar strategic approach, he considered that it might be useful to invite Members from that Council area to inform the Working Group on how that policy had been implemented and how successful it had been in informing policy decisions around climate change.

In response, the Commissioner for Resilience stated that she would be happy to follow on the matter raised by the Member and examine similar work undertaken by other local authorities, including Camden, and would provide a further update in the matter to a future meeting of the Working Group.

In addition, the Commissioner referred to the need to identify not only risk but also, the costs associated with weather related events and climate change. She stated further that the Council was exploring the possibility of securing external funding opportunities to undertake essential research in that area.

A Member raised the issue of flood risk in respect of the city and asked what work could be undertaken to identify future areas at risk and preventative measures to reduce the impact of flooding and the costs associated with mitigating that risk. In response, Mr. Jones stated that river flooding and rises in sea level were areas of concern and stated that use of the Rivers Agency flood maps could be used to identify area of risk and assist with the decision process around future infrastructure projects. The Sustainability Manager referred to work which had been undertaken in the Lower Ormeau Road to alleviate surface flooding and highlighted the potential costs associated with inflated insurance premiums associated with future development in areas identified to be a risk from surface flooding and a projected rise in sea level.

The Working Group noted the information which had been provided, including the process underway to develop a Climate Adaptation Plan for Belfast City Council, and thanked Climate NI Officer for his detailed and informative presentation.

Update on Launch of Resilience Strategy and Mini-Stern Reports

The Commissioner for Resilience explained that the Mini-Stern had been developed as part of the Belfast Climate Commission in partnership with Queen's University. She stated that the Mini-Stern had been beneficial in the composition of a carbon roadmap for the city, including the development of a readiness assessment in respect of buildings and transport, being the two major contributors to greenhouse gases.

The Working Group was informed that the work on the Mini-stern was being undertaken in collaboration with Edinburgh and Leeds and it was the intention that all three cities would be in a position to launch their individual Mini-Sterns in November 2020, a year in advance of the UN Climate Change Conference, COP 26. She stated further that, the Mini-Stern would be available for inspection by Members in the near future and prior to its official launch.

In terms of the Resilience Strategy, the Commissioner stated that it comprised three separate documents including;

- A Risk Assessment;
- An Ambitions Document and
- A Delivery Plan.

The Commissioner provided an outline of the key elements of all three documents and stated that amendments to the strategy had been made following feedback from the public consultation exercise. She stated that it was her intention to present the amended Resilience Strategy for consideration by the Working Group, at its November meeting, prior to being presented to Council in December 2020.

Noted.

Update on Department of Economy Energy Strategy

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

Ms. Cormacain informed the Members that the energy strategy was a cross-cutting government strategy and was focused on evidence based research in its commitment to de-carbonisation. She stated that the energy strategy framework had been completed in 2020 and that DfE was examining options around a net-zero target for emissions. The Working Group was informed that the province had exceeded its target of producing 40% of renewable energy by 2020 and that the Minister was committed to achieving a target of 70% renewable energy by 2030.

The Working Group was advised that DfE's Call for Evidence period had ended in April 2020 and that it was currently undertaking an options consultation period for potential incorporation within the strategy. In this regard, she stated that five thematic Working Groups had been created to take forward the key themes within the strategy and that DfE was evaluating the cost of various options aimed at achieving de-carbonisation by 2050. It was reported that it was intended to publish the final energy strategy by November 2021.

Ms. Cormacain referred to five thematic Working Groups which had been developed to frame the strategy namely;

- Consumers
- Energy Efficiency
- Heat
- Power and
- Transport.

She referred the diverse composition of the Working Groups to ensure that they were both relevant and representative and of their role in the development of evidence based options. The Working Group was informed of the various themes being considered within the five Working Groups and of the need to secure public buy in on the various renewable energy schemes under consideration. The Energy Advisor stated that a primary need identified by consumers was the provision of a one-stop shop, which could provide a range of guidance and advice on renewable options.

The Commissioner highlighted the important role that local authorities could offer in terms of the delivery of the energy strategy. She stated that this could be beneficial once the department had indicated the options within the energy strategy. This would allow local authorities to play an active role through DfE's future consultation exercises.

The Working Group noted the information provided by the Energy Advisor and thanked her for her comprehensive and informative presentation.

Report on Permitted Development Changes with respect to Licensing for Oil and Gas Extraction

The Sustainable Development Manager submitted a report in order to provide the Working Group with a historical context around the issue of petroleum licensing in respect of on-shore oil and gas extraction.

The Members noted the proposed 'Next Steps' in the paper; that representatives of the Department of the Economy have agreed to present at the next meeting of the APWGCC to give more detailed explanation of the policy and legal frameworks which affect this issue, this includes reference to the new Strategic Energy Framework which is being developed within the department. Representatives from the Council's Planning Department will also attend the meeting to discuss implications for the Council with respect to planning.

Noted.

Update on Assembly All Party Group on Climate Action

The Working Group was provided with an update on the Assembly All Party Group on Climate Action. The Sustainable Development Manager stated that the previous meeting of the Assembly All Party Group had been held in August 2020 at which, the Youth Forum had been in attendance. She stated that the Youth Forum had raised a number of issues with the Climate Action Group and that there was a sharp focus on the Climate Change Act. The Members were advised also that, letters had been sent to all Ministers requesting updates on the work of their individual departments in regard to the achievement of net-zero carbon emissions. She stated that information had been received back from many Ministers. She stated further that their next meeting was scheduled to take place on 28th October, 2020 and that topics on the agenda were, the Belfast Climate Commission, the UK Climate Assembly and the Northern Ireland Climate Coalition.

Noted.

Update on Sustainability Index for Belfast City

The Commissioner for Resilience provided the Working Group with an outline of the work undertaken to assist the tourism industry to incorporate sustainability issues into their tourism strategy. She stated that the Council was working in partnership with Visit N.I. and the tourism industry in general in what was very difficult trading times for that industry, due to Covid-19. She stated that there were still opportunities available to support the tourism industry to develop green tourism. She referred to the Global Sustainability Index which was available to draw comparisons between cities and between various sectors on their particular sustainability credentials. The Commissioner stated that use of the Global Sustainability allowed cities to examine where the sustainability challenges lay for individual sectors and that all the data to feed into the index had been collated, the results of which would be available in the near future. The Members were informed that once the information was received in relation to our performance, as a city and for the tourism sector in general, the Working Group would be provided with an update in relation to the findings.

Noted.

Update on Belfast One Million Trees

The Resilience Coordinator provided an overview in relation to the one million trees programme. He stated that it was his intention to bring a more detailed report in the matter to the next meeting of the Working Group. He referred to the partnership working with other external organisations including landowners and conservation bodies and provided the Working Group with an outline of the process involved to secure sites that were suitable for tree planting.

The Working Group was advised that the tree planting season operated from November to March each year and that it was hoped to launch the initiative from November

2020. He stated that the Conservation Volunteers were looking currently for an alternative site from which to operate. In that regard, it was felt important to endeavour to provide a site for their tree nursery and accordingly Physical Programmes were considering a suitable site at Beechvale Farm. The Resilience Coordinator stated that the Beechvale Farm site offered the potential to be available for urban farm developments and for the expansion of “Grow Your Own” schemes, however. He stated that further work was in progress to consider the feasibility of the site, and that a future report to the relevant Council committee was required.

The Members expressed their support for the project and in response to a question on community engagement, in respect of the project, the Resilience Coordinator stated that community engagement would be form a part of the process and that the development proposal offered the possibility for training and employment for young people and an opportunity to develop their skills. A Member requested that the Council look at the possibility of increasing allotment capacity given the extensive waiting list, currently, to be allocated an allotment.

In response to a further question, the Resilience Coordinator stated that the Conservation Volunteers were looking for a nursery site of approximately three to four acres. The Commissioner for Resilience stated that, given the scale of the One Million Trees Programme, it was anticipated that a number of tree planting sites would be required across the city and that a report would be brought back to the People and Communities Committee in relation to development proposals for that purpose.

Noted.

Date of Next Meeting

The Working Group noted that its next meeting would be held on Monday, 9th November at 5.15 p.m.

Chairperson