

Working Group on the Climate Crisis

Monday, 15th March, 2021

MEETING OF THE WORKING GROUP ON THE CLIMATE CRISIS

Members present: Councillor Smyth (Chairperson);
Alderman Copeland;
Councillors Baker, Bunting, de Faoite,
Ferguson and Hutchinson.

In attendance: Mrs. S. Wylie, Chief Executive;
Mr. J. Tully, Director of City and Organisational Strategy;
Ms. C. McKeown, Sustainable Development Manager;
Mr. R. McLernon, Resilience Co-ordinator;
Mr. J. McKearney, Project Support Officer
Mrs. C. Shortt, Statistician, and
Mr. G. Graham, Democratic Services Assistant.

Apologies

Apologies were reported on behalf of Councillors Ferguson and McReynolds

Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of 18th January, 2021 were taken as read and signed as correct.

Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were reported.

Introduction - Chief Executive (Suzanne Wylie) and Director of City and Organisational Strategy (John Tully)

The Chief Executive and the Director of City and Organisational Strategy reported that a preferred candidate for the post of Climate Commissioner had been selected, subject to the necessary approval, and that it was the Chief Executive's intention to attend future meetings of the Working Group until such times as the new Climate Commissioner was in a position to take up his/her appointment. She confirmed that it was anticipated that the Climate Adaptation Plan and the Environmental Sustainability review would be completed by June 2021. She stated also that the Council was undertaking a comprehensive energy review, which she hoped would be completed by the end of the current calendar year. The Chief Executive referred to the work undertaken by the Green Growth Task-Force, through the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA). The Members were informed that the implementation of the various plans would require substantial capital investment and that the Council was looking at areas where the required investment would provide the maximum environmental benefits. The Director of City and Organisational Strategy assured the Working Group of his commitment to support and deliver the objectives in the Council's Environmental Strategy, working in partnership with other relevant public authorities and stakeholders.

Noted.

BCC Environmental Sustainability Review – KPMG

Mr. Shane O'Reilly and Ms. Aniko Kraft (KPMG) attended in connection with this item and were welcomed by the Chairperson.

Ms. Kraft provided the Working Group with an update on the progress made by the Council in respect of the achievement of its targets, as part of its sustainability review. The Members were informed of the various methods used by KPMG to collect data on policies, leadership and strategy, as part of a wider review, to calculate the Council's current Environmental Sustainability Scorecard.

Mr. O'Reilly referred to the regulatory framework which would continue to be an important determinant in the Council's compliance with its statutory obligations in terms of climate change. He referred specifically to:

- The Climate Change Bill for Northern Ireland;
- The Sixth Carbon Budget UK;
- The Clean Air Strategy Northern Ireland; and
- The Northern Ireland Energy Strategy.

Mr. O'Reilly highlighted the importance of readiness to implement the changes required, under both present and future legislative frameworks, to mitigate against the impact of climate change. The Working Group was provided with information on its position in relation to its sustainability ambitions and the fact that relevant stakeholders, both internal and external, had an expectation that the Council would provide leadership in regard to its environmental sustainability programme.

Ms. Kraft provided an overview of the information which had been collated, in determining areas of improvement, as identified within the Environmental Sustainability scorecard. She responded to questions, from both the Members and the Chief Executive, on particular areas which could be developed and improved, including waste management and the attainment of ecological value. A Member raised a question in regard to the influence that the Council could exercise, specifically in relation to air quality and the ecological impact of managing the adverse impact of air pollution, given that overall responsibility resided with central government. In response, Ms. Kraft stated that she recognised the limited impact that the Council could have in that regard and stated that the scorecard reflected the areas which the Council could influence, including local planning policy and the management of its parks and open spaces. She referred also to the potential of the Council to influence other government departments and stakeholders to achieve improvements in air quality on a regional basis.

The Members were informed that as a result of limited resources, it had been necessary to identify key priority areas for attention and that the area of green-house emissions, resource and procurement efficiency had been identified as being key determinants in terms of the Council's implementation roadmap. Mr. O'Reilly explained that work could be undertaken, in tandem, with the priority action areas listed and identified a number of quick wins which could be undertaken as part of achieving some of the objectives within the sustainability roadmap.

A Member raised a further question in regard to how the Council might develop and communicate its environmental leadership credentials to the public and how it could square its environmental aspirations in its planning processes. Mr. O'Reilly, in response, confirmed that Belfast City Council was held in high regard by the public on environmental leadership and accepted that, due to statutory planning legislation, was limited in how it could make a radical difference in the amelioration of planning policy with environmental considerations. He reported that changes to spatial planning was particularly challenging, but stated that the Council could act as a catalyst in the design of its buildings and materials used, in its portfolio of assets, as a means to affect change in terms of regional long-term planning policy.

The Chairperson, on behalf of the Working Group, thanked the representatives from K.P.M.G. for their detailed and informative presentation and they departed from the meeting.

Update on BCC Climate Adaptation Plan – (Climate NI)

Mr. Stephen Jones, (Climate NI) attended in connection with this item and was welcomed by the Chairperson.

Mr. Jones provided the Working Group with information on the background to the establishment of Climate NI. He stated that the draft adaption Plan was an internal document and, as such, was linked to the work undertaken as part of the Council's climate mitigation programme of action. The Members were informed that a number of workshops had been held previously, with internal departments and stakeholders, with a view to understanding the impact of Climate Change on the operational delivery of services.

The Working Group was advised of the need to develop a risk register, which would assist in the prioritisation of resources, to mitigate against the worst impacts of Climate Change. Mr. Jones referred also to the importance attached to the development and communication of a Climate Adaptation Action Plan, which it was anticipated would be completed by June, 2021. The Members were informed that an external review would be undertaken, with both the Republic of Ireland and U.K. representatives, as a means to share data and knowledge on their experience in regard to climate adaptation. He stated that the information gained would feed into the risk register and action plan. The Members were informed that the adaptation plan would be linked to the work undertaken by K.P.M.G. and would assist with the goals and objectives contained within the Resilience Strategy and City Deal.

Mr. Jones highlighted some of the key risks identified as having an adverse impact on the Council and its ability to deliver services. Flooding, storm disruption, allied to a rise in sea level, including an increase in global temperatures, had been identified as potential priority areas for the Council. The issue of global migration caused by climate change, and the need to introduce mitigation measures to deal with those potential issues were highlighted as factors which could have a major impact both on a local and regional basis. The Members highlighted the disproportionate impact that climate change tended to have on disadvantaged communities and of the need to ensure that the needs and vulnerabilities of those communities were considered in any future climate adaptation and mitigation plans.

The Working Group thanked Mr. Jones for his informative and detailed presentation and he departed from the meeting.

NI Climate Change Bill Consultation

The Sustainable Development Manager provided the Working Group with background information in relation to introduction of a Climate Change Bill for Northern Ireland. She highlighted the complexities associated with energy and climate change policy in that, historically, responsibility was diffused between several government departments. She stated that the complexity of governance in that area might explain why Northern Ireland's performance in its reduction of greenhouse gasses, compared to Great Britain (GB), was less encouraging. She referred to the over-reliance on fossil fuels within the province as a further reason why significant reductions in carbon emissions had proved more challenging to achieve in comparison to G.B.

The Members were informed of the significant contribution made in recent years in the production of wind energy and highlighted the switch to electric vehicles, including the changes that those measures could make to future energy policy, in securing a greener agenda. The Sustainable Development Manager referred to the significant impact that a Climate Change Bill could make in terms of Climate Mitigation and Adaptation. She referred to the significant contribution made by the agricultural sector in relation the production of greenhouse gasses. The Working Group was informed that the consultation bill posed numerous questions in regard to the targets set for emissions, the criteria which should be considered and whether quantifiable carbon budgets should be included within the legislation. It was reported also that, as part of the consultation process, a question was raised as to whether or not an independent advisory body should be established to oversee the implementation process.

The Sustainable Development Manager referred to the importance of ensuring that disadvantaged groups were not forgotten in the approach to reduce carbon emissions and of the need to ensure that the retro-fit of public housing stock was placed as a priority within the environmental agenda. She stated that it was probable that Northern Ireland could achieve an 82% reduction in carbon emissions by 2050, given its reliance on fossil fuels and that flexibility on targets could be incorporated within the legislation to cater for the specific regional characteristics of the province.

The Working Group expressed a preference for the emission targets, stipulated in option one of the consultation document, but recognised the difficulties associated with the agri-food sector and, in particular, the control of emissions generated by that industry. A Member raised the issue of urban farms and market gardening and how such initiatives might be promoted and developed.

Noted.

Update on Assembly All Party Group on Climate Action

The Sustainability Manager provided the Working Group with details of a meeting of the Assembly All Party Action Group which had been held recently. She highlighted the work which had been undertaken by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) in its land reclamation programme and referred to their planting of water-based plants as a means to absorb carbon-dioxide from the atmosphere. She stated that the All Party Group has received a response from N.I. Assembly Ministers in response to their suggestion on the implementation of improved building design and insulation standards, which the All Party Group had suggested was more cost effective to implement, than undertaking a future radical retro-fit programme. The Members were informed that the All Party Group had provided responses to a number of central government policy documents and referred specifically to the Local Government Order, which was being reviewed by the Department for Communities, with a view to the transfer of enhanced powers to Local Government.

The Working Group, after discussion, noted the information provided by the Sustainable Development Manager.

Chairperson