

Working Group on the Climate Crisis

Wednesday, 23rd June, 2021

MEETING OF THE WORKING GROUP ON THE CLIMATE CRISIS

Members present: Alderman Copeland;
Councillors de Faoite, Hutchinson and Smyth.

In attendance: Ms. D. Caldwell, Climate Commissioner;
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; and
Mr. G. Graham, Democratic Services Assistant.

Election of Chairperson

Nominations were sought to fill the vacant position of Chairperson and it was:

Moved by Councillor de Faoite,
Seconded by Councillor Hutchinson and

Resolved – That Councillor Smyth be appointed to the position of Chairperson for the period ending June, 2022.

(Councillor Smyth in the Chair.)

Apologies

Apologies were reported on behalf of Councillors Baker, Bunting and Ferguson.

Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of 15th March, 2021 were taken as read and signed as correct.

Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were reported.

BCC Climate Plan

The Resilience Co-ordinator reminded the Working Group that the Council had agreed to develop a Climate Plan for the city by the end of 2021. He stated that, in order to develop effective adaptation and mitigation measures, as part of the Climate Plan, the Council had engaged with Climate N.I. and K.P.M.G. to assist with that process. The Members were informed that K.P.M.G. was working on an environmental sustainability review on behalf of the Council which had prioritised three key areas, namely, greenhouse gas emissions, resource efficiency and procurement.

The Climate Commissioner reported that the work, associated with an evidence based approach, would assist in the development of the Council's climate plan in the identification of climate risk and mitigation measures. She stated further that a climate risk assessment would be undertaken, in conjunction with a baseline emissions survey, in order to estimate the Council's current emissions and associated carbon footprint. She stated that those two tranches of work were critical in the identification of areas where specific action was required to address both current and future climate risks and reduce the Council's carbon footprint.

The Commissioner highlighted the importance of undertaking collaborative work, with relevant stakeholders, in the development of a science-based target to achieve a reduction of carbon emissions, which would be aligned to the Climate Bill and the Council's energy strategy. The Members were informed that, for each action area identified, it would be necessary for the Council to develop a strategic approach to deal with the areas requiring climate action and mitigation. She referred also to the need to develop a number of strategic goals to tackle the climate issues identified and map out how those goals could be realised. As part of the Climate Plan, the Commissioner emphasised the importance of regular monitoring of progress against the climate emission targets and of the need to formalise reporting mechanisms on progress made.

The Working Group stated that the work on the Climate Plan, including the strategies and policies to support the plan, would be ongoing. In response to a question on how Belfast might progress its emission targets ahead of the U.K. target of zero emissions by 2050, the Commissioner stated that a report, published by the N.I. Climate Change Committee, had suggested that Northern Ireland should endeavour to achieve an 82% reduction on emissions by 2050, given its high levels of dependence on both fossil fuels and agriculture.

A Member of the Working Group requested clarification of the progress which had been made in regard to those targets which were not under the control of the Council and referred specifically to transportation as an example. In response, the Director stated that the Council had an important role as an influencer on government policy and that work had commenced with the Department for Infrastructure (DfI) to incentivise alternative forms of transport including, adjustment to bus routes as a means to reduce emissions and improve the use of public transportation.

BCC Skills Report

The Sustainable Development Manager provided an update on the potential benefits of the Council's skills report which had been commissioned in 2020/2221 by the Council's Economic Development Unit, in partnership with the Climate Commission. The report outlined, in particular, the benefits of upskilling the workforce to meet the challenges associated with pursuing a future green economy. She stated that, as part of the draft Programme for Government, it was stipulated that the economy should be competitive globally, regional balanced and carbon neutral. She referred to a number of infrastructure improvements to assist with the new green economy, including, amongst other things, improvements to broadband, transportation and retro-fit of housing comprising energy transition and distributio

The Sustainable Development Manager referred to the needs of the new green economy, including vehicle design and sustainable building technologies. She stated also that it was important that the new skills were developed to meet the needs of the emerging technologies.

In response to a question in respect of the timeframe for the retro-fit of houses, the Director stated that he would check on the information requested by the Member and would report back to him in the matter. The Sustainable Development Manager stated further that the skills required by the new emerging technologies were being addressed currently by the

skills academy. A Member requested information on the infrastructure required in respect to anticipating the number of public charging points to meet anticipated demand. The Sustainable Development Manager stated that the question was relevant and that accessibility to local E.V. charging points was vital, if the transition to electric vehicles was to be effective. She reported that the current VPACH project was working to assess the demonstrable demand in the city in order to identify the locations where the charging points were required.

Councillor de Faioite Motion – Environmental Implications of Decision Making

A Member highlighted the importance attached to local politicians being provided with the necessary information, associated with the environmental repercussions, of their decision making process. The Director stated that engagement with Camden Borough Council had taken place and that it was anticipated that an officer meeting, between Belfast and Camden Councils, would be taking place in the near future, at which Members of the Working Group would be invited to participate in the discussions.

The Climate Commissioner referred to the work undertaken by K.P.M.G. in regard to the Council's procurement policy and how it could be adapted to meet the Council's emission targets. The Director stated that it was important that the Climate/Environmental policy was embedded into the Council's procurement strategy. He stated also that a low carbon powered fleet was imperative for the Council to meet its climate targets and of the need to monitor continuously the Council's policies and decision-making in terms of its climate obligations.

Update on One Million Tree's Project

The Resilience Co-ordinator provided the Working Group with an overview of the progress which had been made, over the previous eighteen months, in respect of the one million trees project. He provided the Members with information associated with the project, which included the establishment of a Steering Group to oversee the implementation of the project. The Working Group was presented with an outline of the steps involved with the tree planting site identification process and were informed of the close working relationship between the Council and its delivery partners, which included the Woodland Trust and the Conservation Volunteers.

The Working Group was informed of recent developments in regard to the urban tree planting programme and the steps taken to incorporate tree planting within the city centre, which included the creation of an urban forest by 2023. The Members were advised that approximately 40,000 trees had been planted in the first year of the project and that the Council had been successful in securing £289,000, over a three year period, from the Woodland Trust Tree Fund.

The Members were apprised of plans to develop a tree nursery facility, within Belfast, given the current E.U. restrictions on imported plants from countries outside the E.U. The Resilience Co-ordinator highlighted the link between the one million trees project and the Council's climate plan for the city. The Working Group was provided with information on the efforts made to ensure the maintenance of the existing woodland and the importance of public engagement, including the active involvement of younger people in the project.

The Working Group noted the information which had been provided and thanked the Resilience Co-ordinator for the detailed update and commended the work which had been completed in the planting of 40,000 trees in year one of the project.

Update on COP 26

The Climate Commissioner referred to the co-ordinating role played by the Council in advance of the COP 26 conference to be held in Glasgow in November, 2021. She stated that a sub-group had been created for that purpose through the Climate Plan Programme Board and that a hub would be created to galvanise the various projects being undertaken by both the Council and its partner organisations. She referred to the efforts being made to engage with the public, including the creation of an events hub and a COP 26 web page, as part of a public engagement process. She highlighted the number of applications submitted by Belfast to participate in the COP 26 event, at which, five had been short-listed for discussion.

The Working Group was informed that BEIS were supporting Planetmark to host an Electric Carbon bus tour throughout the U.K. to promote the Race to Zero and COP 26 events. The Sustainable Development Manager reported that a visit to Belfast was being arranged in partnership with Planetmark, Translink and Wright Bus. She stated that a series of business and community events would be planned around the bus tour to showcase climate actions. She stated also that it was hoped that the carbon bus would visit Belfast at the end of September and would be beneficial in increasing public awareness of the current climate emergency.

The Climate Commissioner provided an update on the Race to Zero campaign and on the request to produce an emissions baseline, prior to Belfast being part of that campaign. She stated that it was hoped that the required data on its emissions would be available in the near future and would allow the City to participate in the Race to Zero campaign. The Working Group requested that the issue of climate engagement by older people be placed on the agenda for the next meeting of the Reference Group on Older People.

Noted.

Update on VPACH 2 Electric Vehicle Project

The Sustainable Development Manager provided the Working Group with an update on the VPACH Electric Vehicle project. She stated that it was the Council's intention to work with Virgin Media and other external partners to explore the provision of a range of E.V. charging points in its car parks which could be utilised by the community. She stated that the project had been funded by Innovate U.K., with the objective of repurposing Virgin Media telecommunications infrastructure to provide on-street E.V. charging in residential areas.

The Working Group was advised that M.R.P. restrictions had now been removed, which had prevented access to the market and that commercial interest in the proposal had now been re-established. As a result of this commercial decision, it was reported that an offer of £300,000 had been made to develop new infrastructure, by installing thirty charging points, in Council-owned car parks, within the next six months. The Sustainable Manager referred to a number of legal barriers which required to be dealt with, prior to the necessary infrastructure work being undertaken. She stated further that it was anticipated that future funding streams would be available. The Members were informed that work had commenced in mapping demand including the identification street locations across the city in respect of the installation of E.V. charging points.

The Sustainable Development Manager referred to a number of legal issues which required to be addressed if the necessary infrastructure was to be put in place, within the allocated time-frame, to draw down the available funding. The Members were informed of the need for the Council to enter into commercial partnership with the private sector to build the necessary infrastructure. She stated that an internal team had been created to consider the development of E.V. charging across Council owned land. The Members were informed that

the internal team included the Estates Management team, Legal Services, Procurement and the Council's Planning section. The Sustainable Development Manager stated that it was hoped that this collaborative exercise would place the Council in a favourable position to bid for future funding allocations.

Noted

Update on Assembly All-Party Group on Climate Change - 28th May 2021

The Sustainable Development Manager informed the Working Group that Minister Mallon had been in attendance at the All-Party Group on Climate Change at the N.I. Assembly and that she had given her support to examine the opportunity for N.I.C.S. staff to continue to work remotely following the pandemic. She stated that the Minister was aware of the level of vehicular emissions created by the daily commute to and from the workplace and saw the creation of rural hubs as a means to mitigate many of the adverse impacts of vehicular emissions caused by commuter journeys. She stated that the integration of climate policy was an important element within the Council's Local Development Plan and highlighted the need to manage water resources, in a sustainable way, including urban drainage and improved home insulation.

The Working Group was advised that at the next scheduled meeting of the All-Party Group on Climate Change the Circular Economy had been placed on the agenda for discussion. It was reported that the meetings to date had been well attended and were open for members of the public.

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

Update on NI Energy Strategy Consultation

The Sustainable Development Manager emphasised the importance of the N.I. Government Energy Options paper, both to the corporate body and the city as a whole. She stated that the document contained seventy-five questions and provided a route-map for future de-carbonisation of the city. She highlighted a number of issues contained within the document, which were both relevant and could inform the Council's approach to energy efficiency, fuel poverty, electric vehicle charging infrastructure, including the role of the Planning Service in delivering on the climate agenda. She emphasised how the draft energy strategy would contribute to the economic growth of the city and how many Council departments were assisting in that process. She agreed also that a copy of the consultation document would be made available to the Members of the Working Group upon request.

Noted.

Chairperson