

Present: Vice-Chairman in the Chair Councillor Judy Welbourn
Councillors Tom Ashton, Alison Austin, Anton Dani, Paul Goodale and Neill Hastie

Portfolio Holders: Councillors Paul Skinner, Councillor Martin Griggs.

In attendance:

Officers –

Assistant Director - Regulatory and Lead Officer for the Committee, Climate Change and Environment Manager, Safer Communities Service Manager, Climate Change and Environment Officer and Democratic Services Officer

25 APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were tabled by Councillor Judith Skinner Chairman of the committee, by Councillors Peter Bedford, Katie Chalmers and Yvonne Stevens. No substitute members in attendance.

26 MINUTES

Committee agreed the minutes of the previous meeting held on the 26 October 2021

27 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

Councillor Alison Austin noted her role as a Director of Centrepoint Outreach.

28 PUBLIC QUESTIONS

No public questions tabled.

29 CARBON REDUCTION PLAN BOSTON

The Climate Change and Environment Officer presented the report to committee confirming that in 2020 Boston Borough Council had declared a climate emergency and as part of the Council's commitment to tackling global climate change and addressing the impacts of its operations, agreed to develop a new Carbon Reduction Plan. The document was a key step in the Council's response to the climate crisis. The plan had identified emission's' hotspots from the baseline year to been used to inform an overview of opportunities' for carbon reduction.

The Carbon Reduction Plan set out strategic actions for implementation, to achieve the target of net zero CO2 emissions in advance of 2050, currently in advance of the Government target of 2050. Implementing the plan would significantly reduce scope 1 and 2 emissions by up to 90% by 2050.

Furthermore, it would be vital to embrace new green technologies as they became available and more viable and to identify new ways to reduce emissions further, especially scope 3 emissions that were mostly beyond the direct control of the Council.

The plan was a high-level document and therefore a more detailed action plan would need to be developed. That would include anticipated delivery timescales and be presented to Cabinet in spring 2022. Further feasibility studies of all the proposed actions would be undertaken. That would be with a full cost benefits analysis to allow proper consideration of payback prior to taking the projects forward.

The current net zero target in advance of 2050 would be difficult to report against and as such, officers recommended adoption of a more quantifiable target. Although Boston had declared its emergency in 2020, the current target did not reflect the level of ambition.

East Lindsey District Council had annual interim net zero / net neutral targets and officers recommended that Boston Borough Council align its own targets to enable a joined up approach for the two authorities to allow streamlined funding bids be made. It would also allow Boston to stay on track to meet its own net zero ambitions and aim to galvanise action in the short and medium term.

An amendment in target would enable the Council to achieve net zero by the year 2040 with a 45% reduction in carbon emissions by 2027. Year on year reductions target from the 2019 baseline would be 4.55% each year against the baseline. It would allow a split of 5% reduction each year until 2027 and then a 4.23% reduction each year against the baseline from 2027 to 2040. If agreed, the plan will be updated to reflect the changes in target and proposed new timeline prior to presentation to Cabinet in January 2022'. Officers would then ask the Carbon Trust to re model the plan to take into consideration the changes in target. If agreed

Committee comment and questioning followed which are collated and included:

Whilst applauding the plan and acknowledging the need, Members voiced various questions in respect of the lack of information in respect of funding identified within the report questioning where such funding would come from, and the actual reality of delivering the plan within the timelines specified and why the Council was taking such action. Boston was a small town with a small budget so what effect would using Council funds have on both the residents of the borough, and what effect would using funds have on the service area budgets resulting with the Council potentially making choices on what to deliver for its residents. The Council needed to be confident on what it spent its' funds on and mindful that any spends were for improvement of services and not just to be seen to reduce carbon emission.

Referencing the timelines identified and the reality of achieving the targets set Members voiced concerns at the possibility of getting to 2026 and only having a further year to achieve the target, not being able to and what cost it would be to the Council in order to achieve the target.

In response, officers acknowledge the concerns in respect of the lack of clarity of funding. They confirmed that some capital investment would be required but that external funding would be key. However, clearly the Council needed to balance any funding against the community's needs. Furthermore, there was the possibility of a carbon reduction reserve. East Lindsey District Council had been able to reinvest revenue savings after it implemented such a reserve. As a Local Authority, the Council's duty was to lead by example and prove it had a grasp on operation emissions and that it understood its footprint and was striving to address it. The plan in its draft format would be subject to changes in what it could deliver and when it could deliver.

At the current time it was difficult to cost so many unknowns and the plan would be brought back in the spring when projects would have been broken down into more detail with indicative figures available where possible. Large funded projects would come back to Members ahead of implementation with officers exploring all opportunities before coming to committee.

Members were reassured that the targets set were not legally binding and officers assured them they would do everything within their power to achieve them. However, external factors were involved especially in scope 3 emissions over which the Council had little control.

Referencing the significant reductions in emissions at West Street offices due to home working throughout Covid, Members questioned the reality of the reduction aligned with the increase in emissions at the homes of staff, and asked if it actually portrayed a false sense of reduction. All the staff working individually in individual homes would normally be sharing space and heating / lighting within West Street. Whilst homeworking saved emissions for the Council, the impact in individual residences was higher but officers noted that currently it was difficult to quantify.

Further comment by a Member questioned the need to relocate the Council to an alternative, newer or new build office suite due to the size, age and structure and layout of West Street that would never be carbon efficient. Focusing on Council sites with high emissions a further Member questioned the future of the GMLP (Geoff Moulder Leisure Pool) which had by far the biggest footprint and the Crematorium.

Officers confirmed all sites would be under consideration as they considered the possibility for change across all of the Councils' services and sites and would take recommended actions listed in the CRP back to Full Council for consideration.

Referencing the move by ELDC to their new offices a Member urged the Council to start looking immediately for a new site to ensure it captured the latest renewables. However, in response a Member stated that the Council needed to be careful if planning to relocate. Any such move would purely be to reduce its carbon footprint and it would not bring any savings to the taxpayer's of the Borough. West Street is a functioning building, it is town centric making it easy for the public and staff to access and it enabled the staff and visitors to access the town centre and support the local businesses on a daily basis. Officers need to undertake thorough investigations into making West Street more carbon efficient prior to making any decision to relocate and spend vast amounts of taxpayers' money doing so. Selling on the Municipal Buildings would not solve its carbon footprint issues, it would simply hand them on to whoever bought it.

Officers confirmed that moving forward the viability of West Street would become clearer. A great deal of new technology would come forward, some of which whilst not in the report would be sooner than later and assist in producing zero energy buildings, however the Council must use the most affordable technology it could afford. Officers had to look at the wider picture capturing small savings on everything the Council did and focus on scope 1 and scope 2 emissions allowing what was possible to become more evident for Members. There was however very little the Council could do in respect of scope 3 emissions and in months and years to come, be subject to targets from Central Government and in certain areas, especially gas burning, with the Council's hand forced it would have to look at alternatives. The plan took also into consideration decarbonisation of electricity from a national level, which the Council had no control over.

Following questions relating to a third party business providing a bus service the Assistant Director of Regulatory (*Lead Officer for the committee*) provided clarity of the plan. He confirmed that the Council had declared its own Climate in Emergency in January 2020 following a Task and Finish Group review that raised a number of recommendations. One recommendation was to look at the Council's own emissions and develop its own plan. Thereafter it became a core priority. The plan allowed the Council to 'get its own house in order'. As the Council had adopted the core priority, it was now obliged to deliver on it and the plan set out how to deliver it within the remit of the Councils control. It looked at the Council's activities and operations within its control.

Voicing concern a member asked why items within the plan that he felt should have been agreed officially at Full Council, had not been. The Member then stated he felt that the plan should be an aspiration as against an actual fixed plan that is to do something and finish it. What would happen if the Council did not reach its' targets? If it aspired to, it had attempted but not achieved yet if in the plan they it failed. The Council itself would be obsolete soon and without significant Government intervention, the Council as it stood in size would not be able to afford everything the Officers intended to do, without having a serious impact on budgets and services for the ratepayers. The Member questioned why the Council was not already undertaking measures including the use of solar panels on its public conveniences and within its car parks and why it had not considered harnessing hydro power. Addressing the issue of staff and members now working across the three council areas and their increased footprints over the east of the county the Member stated he felt the Councils footprint was increasing. Stating he supported the plan and realising that the Council could not afford to ignore the situation, the Member underlined his preference of it being an ambition as against an actual plan.

A Member asked for the costs for the power bill for West Street and the Lead Officer advised he would provide it following the meeting.

RECOMMENDED:

That the Environment and Performance Committee:

1. Has provided comment and input into the draft Carbon reduction Plan and recommended its adoption to Cabinet in accordance with the Council's commitment to reduce its carbon emissions as set out in the Corporate Strategy.
2. Recommends that Cabinet agrees to refine the Council's existing 'net zero in advance of 2050' to target to a more ambitious and measureable target of net zero by 2040 with a 45% reduction in carbon emissions by 2028, providing these can be achieved without the reduction in change in quality of services or adversely impacting on the revenues budget. The Carbon Trust to be asked to update the Carbon reduction Plan to reflect this ambition prior to it going to Cabinet.

30 PROTECTING THE HEALTH AND WELLBEING OF RESIDENTS LIVING IN HOUSES IN MULTIPLE OCCUPANCY

The Safer Communities Service Manager presented the report, confirming it was to provide Members with assurance of the ongoing work undertaken by the Housing Standards Team, with the last similar report tabled in 2014. The team dealt with licensing compliance for those properties requiring licencing and dealt with complaints across all types of rented properties not solely HMO's (houses in multiple occupancy). Furthermore, the team worked closely with both the Police and, also with the Fire and Rescue service with whom they now accessed premises allowing them to see inside properties first hand and refer any findings on through the procedure in place. The team also received referrals from partner agencies when visits carried out to properties for other purposes, suggests that the property is occupied as a HMO. Officers' would be attending a meeting with the Police to gain an insight into their activities and to understand the pressure they face with a view to possible working alongside them in the future. The team would continue to progress its work with all agencies and partners.

The Housing, Health and Wellbeing Officer worked with many colleagues across the Council, not only on housing standards issues but also in assisting residents with educational support by providing key information on issues including sourcing vaccines, and recycling and fly tipping problems. They further bolstered their workload with enforcement work as and when required. Following the resignation of the Senior Housing Officer, the Council appointed a replacement on the 1st December 2021.

Members were advised that the Council had received an approach from SHELTER to support them in lobbying Government for landlord registration.

Concluding the brief overview the Safer Communities Service Manager confirmed that the report sought to gain Members support for the team to continue with its ongoing initiatives. Furthermore, Members were asked to consider convention of a Task and Finish Group to scope the opportunities available to tackle issues in respect of HMO's and rented accommodation, both in the immediate impact on the tenants and the further reaching effect they have in respect of neighbourhoods and also on Council resources. Noting work undertaken by a neighbouring authority in respect of selective licensing, the Safer Communities Service Manager noted that it would be a good piece of work to take into consideration should the Task and Finish Group be agreed.

Committee comment and questioning followed which are collated and the key comments included:

Members all felt that due to the scale of such a review, that an initial briefing needed to be scheduled, to enable them to gain a clear perspective of what the Council could actually do to improve things. Depending on the outcome of the briefing, Members could then take the review forward.

Ongoing concerns experienced by Members in relation to HMO's included the constant placement of black bin liners onto pavements which could not be accepted by the waste collections due the mixed contents, often with foodstuffs encouraging vermin, and resulting in the Council's fly tipping team having to continually clear the debris up.

Concerns further noted included the compliance, or lack of, with the definition of HMO's and the swiftness of the changeover of tenants in high occupancy houses.

The increase in transient tenants often crammed into small houses, the lack of understanding by many of the rules for waste disposal and the deprived conditions in which many of them resided also caused concern as did the lack of care by certain landlords' for their tenants. Members questioned if changes in licencing in isolation would address the issues, even if it would be possible to increase charges. All landlords' needed to be accountable across all areas of the rental sector and the Council currently failed in its responsibility to residents.

The Portfolio Holder applauded the suggestion of the Task and Finish Group and confirmed he would support such a review. He advised he was currently lobbying Cabinet to extend his budget to source more enforcement agents. He stated that the rents in Boston were high whilst salaries were low and advised he did not support any increase in charges as landlords' would simply pass on to the cost to the renter. He also reminded Members that not all landlords' were the same and the Borough had some exceptional ones who did not deserve to be penalised. The Council also had an excellent relationship with the Landlords forum.

Referencing the work of a neighbouring authority in respect of selective licencing a Member noted that further research would no doubt find other authorities across the country experiencing similar issues and comparative cases would be useful in identifying and supporting potential ways in building Boston's response within the review.

Concluding, the Safer Communities Service Manager thanked Members for their comments and noted he felt reassured that they wanted to investigate further through a review, which would allow a full address of all areas impacted by the current issues including waste, recycling, education – landlords and planning. Stating that he was mindful a similar suggestion had been tabled through the sister scrutiny committee and that resources could not run two large reviews, he suggested that the one review be undertaken in conjunction with the sister committee.

The Head of Regulatory (Lead Officer) noted that it would be sensible to look at a combined piece of work.

Members noted that whilst there were two scrutiny committees, on such a large review, areas within the remit of each committee would be included and there was an invincible line between the two committees with a number of members sitting on both committees. The Portfolio Holder confirmed he agreed an initial member briefing and confirmed that Scrutiny had previously undertaken similar joint reviews successfully, seeded from both committees.

RECOMMENDED:

That Officers' schedule a Member Briefing prior to the official convention of a Task and Finish Group Review.

31 MEMBER WORKING GROUP FLY TIPPING

Councillor Judy Welbourn confirmed that the group had concluded and that a report would be produced which would come back to committee.

32 WORK PROGRAMME

Members were advised that an invitation to Anglian Water to attend the meeting scheduled for the 1st February 2022 had been accepted.

The invitation to the Landlords' Forum to attend in March is withdrawn in light of the recommendation for a Task and Finish Group review.

The Meeting Closed at 8.30 pm