

To: Cabinet
Date: 09 February 2022
Report of: Scrutiny Committee
Title of Report: Climate Emergency Review Group Update

| Summary and recommendations | |
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| Purpose of report: | To present Scrutiny Committee recommendations concerning the Scrutiny-requested update on actions arising from the Climate Emergency Review Group. |
| Key decision: | No |
| Scrutiny Lead Member: | Councillor Liz Wade, Chair of the Scrutiny Committee |
| Cabinet Member: | Councillor Tom Hayes, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Green Transport and Zero Carbon Oxford |
| Corporate Priority: | Pursue a zero carbon Oxford |
| Policy Framework: | Council Strategy 2020-24 |
| Recommendation: That the Cabinet states whether it agrees or disagrees with the recommendations in the body of this report. | |

| Appendices |
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| None |

Introduction and overview

- At its meeting on 18 January 2022, the Scrutiny Committee considered an update report on the Council's response to the Climate Emergency since the publication of the Scrutiny Climate Emergency Review Group report.
- The Committee would like to thank Councillor Tom Hayes, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Zero Carbon Oxford and Green Transport, for presenting the report, Mish Tullar, Head of Corporate Strategy, for his support to the meeting and Rose Dickinson, Carbon Reduction Team Manager, for authoring the report and support to the meeting also.

Summary and recommendation

3. Councillor Tom Hayes, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Green Transport and Zero Carbon Oxford introduced the report. It was highlighted that the Zero Carbon Action Plan presented was a coproduced, composite document which included the accepted recommendations of the Climate Emergency Review Group as well as suggestions from the Citizens' Assembly on Climate Change, from other key stakeholders, as well as internal Council expertise.
4. Mish Tullar, Head of Corporate Strategy added that the Action Plan was published in March 2021 and was a living document mostly comprised of a RAG rating tracker. The Committee was informed of the intention for the Action Plan to be updated and submitted to Cabinet for consideration later in 2022.
5. Discussion of the huge topic of carbon reduction was justifiably broad, including issues around biodiversity, the Council's retrofitting programme to tenants, the efficiency of the Council's commercial property, and ways to engage landlords and tenants on carbon reduction issues. Beyond these, the Committee makes a total of four recommendations on issues around clarity of information, disability inclusiveness, and work progress.

Clarifying Information Provided

6. On the basis that the Zero Carbon Action Plan is a living document, and is expected to be released publicly when it is published for Cabinet later in the year, the Committee suggests an amendment to the way the data is presented.
7. The Action Plan is, as mentioned above, essentially a RAG rating of the actions the Council wishes to pursue as part of its journey towards reaching zero carbon. Green items are those which are on track. Within the Action Plan there are actions which are deemed to be on track, for which resource is not currently in place, for example action 48, where the Council will seek external funding to expand Oxford's electric vehicle charging capacity. The Committee understands that it is necessary in the light of uncertainty to make rational assumptions, and in this specific instance there are strong reasons to believe that this action is on track. It is also true, however, that such funding has not been granted. The Committee suggests that it would be helpful to all reading the Action Plan to know how the actions are progressing against expectations (the current RAG rating), but also to know exactly how far it expects to be able to progress each goal with the current resources available, a statement of where the Council stands on its journey instead of how well it is progressing. This suggestion is likely not to be possible for some actions, but for those it can it will act as a safeguard against over-promising and under-delivering should unforeseen problems arise.

Recommendation 1: That when the Council next updates its Zero Carbon Action Plan it provides, where possible, clarity over how far existing, allocated resources are expected to move the Council towards each goal.

8. On a wider note, the Committee notes that the phrase ‘net zero,’ although generally understood as a broad concept, is one which has no universally agreed definition. There is consensus about the need to include emissions which are directly attributed to an organisation, but no such consensus exists over what sits within and without the definition in regards to indirect emissions. Issues such as whether the carbon impact of investments, procurement or should be included are a topic of debate and their inclusion is inconsistently applied. Although they are indirect, the carbon impacts of these activities can be substantial indeed, for some organisations more than their direct emissions. Banks which finance fossil fuel extraction, for example, are liable to have a greater indirect carbon impact than that arising from their direct operations.
9. A consequence of this inconsistency is that the carbon outputs which can exist under the ‘net zero’ umbrella are very broad. Within the city, Oxford has a disproportionately high number of people who are actively engaged with these issues, and for whom this degree of detail matters. Likewise, the Council is recognised as a trailblazer of good and innovative practice amongst local authorities on many carbon reduction issues. The Committee feels it behoves the Council to respond to these facts by providing greater detail on what the Council means when speaking about ‘net zero’. It is not realistic to suggest that every reference by the Council to ‘net zero’ is accompanied by a definition. However, in key strategic documents where the concept plays an important role, the Committee suggests it is not overly arduous to provide information on the assumptions and definitions which underpin usage of the phrase. This is particularly the case as the Council has largely unpicked these issues and determined its definition already in its December Cabinet report on Net Zero Targets and Green Gas Purchasing.

Recommendation 2: That the Council provides a clear statement of the assumptions and definitions it is applying when referencing net zero in strategies and other documents.

Disability Inclusivity

10. The report provided to the Committee read as follows for the equalities impact assessment: “No adverse impacts on any part of the community have been identified at this stage, however Oxford City Council will continue to consult with Legal Services to ensure all projects have due regard to the public sector equality duty.” The Committee feels that this response falls below the expectations the Council has of itself as one which seeks to promote equality amongst the diversity of its citizens. It is simply not the case that the totality of the Council’s ambitions for reaching net zero will have no adverse impacts on minoritised groups, particularly when the range of issues faced by different disabled groups are considered in more granular detail.

11. Two aspects of the Action Plan are necessary to consider in order to provide an inclusive plan for disabled residents – full consideration of the impacts of proposed actions on individuals with different disabilities, but also a consideration of the cumulative impact of the proposed actions when taken together. It might be that taken individually a particular action may cause minor inconvenience to a disabled person, but when such inconveniences are layered on top of one another, or there are unconsidered interactions between policies, the cumulative effect may be a severe curtailment of autonomy.
12. Disability-inclusive policy, according the UN Department for Economic and Social Affairs, is enabled by ‘meaningful participation in policy-making in this area at all levels,’ resulting in ‘tailored climate action.’ This is some distance from the Council’s undertaking that it will engage with legal colleagues to ensure that legal duties are met. The Committee wishes to see this distance closed through involving disability groups more regularly, but more importantly, at an *early* stage. The further plans develop it becomes costlier and less effective to retrofit disability-inclusivity into them; it is much more effective to develop disability-inclusive plans from the outset. This is an issue which the Council’s Inclusive Transport and Movement Focus Group has raised previously.

Recommendation 3: That the Council makes greater efforts to ensure that climate policies are disability inclusive, including involving disability groups at the earliest stage.

Work Progress

13. One specific issue on which the Committee was disappointed by the lack of progress was over the creation of cycle greenways into the City. Funding was secured to see the development of a concept masterplan but has not progressed, owing to Covid. The point is taken that taking a strategic and holistic approach to transport issues does require time, political stability from partners and staff resource to realise the fullest potential of any cycle ways. Covid and the change in administration at the County Council were deeply disruptive. Further, both Councils have had higher priority transport initiatives to deliver, such as electrification of the bus fleet and a bus prioritisation plan submission to government and even emergency-funded cycling initiatives. However, the Committee’s view is that now that these causes of delay are more distant, the continued importance of greenway development means it should be prioritised. The Committee would like to see the Council be proactive in its work with the County Council to restore impetus to the delivery of this element of the Action Plan.

Recommendation 4: That the Council works with the County Council to prioritise the delivery of cycle greenways into the City which were paused owing to Covid.

Further Consideration

14. The Committee is likely to revisit this issue when the update to Cabinet is provided later on in 2022.

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