

Minutes of a meeting of the Climate and Environment Panel (Panel of the Scrutiny Committee) on Thursday 9 March 2023



Committee members present:

Councillor Hunt (Chair)

Councillor Kerr

Councillor Miles

Officers present for all or part of the meeting:

Richard Doney, Scrutiny Officer

Rose Dickinson, Carbon Reduction Team Manager

Mai Jarvis, Environmental Quality Team Manager

Mish Tullar, Head of Corporate Strategy

Alice Courtney, Committee and Member Services Manager (Interim Acting)

Also present:

Councillor Anna Railton, Cabinet Member for Zero Carbon Oxford and Climate Justice

1. Apologies

Councillor Dunne sent her apologies.

2. Declarations of interest

No interests were declared.

3. Chair's announcements

The Chair welcomed everyone to the inaugural meeting of the Panel and explained that she hoped that establishing the Panel demonstrated the commitment of the Council to focus on the urgency of topics relating to climate and the environment and thanked all councillors for their support.

The Chair also explained that the agenda order would be amended and that the item on the Development of a Biodiversity Strategy for Oxford would be considered towards the close of the meeting.

4. Public addresses

Merryl Gelling had submitted a public address which was read by Evelyn Sanderson on her behalf. Dr Gelling welcomed the creation of the new Panel and addressed the item on the development of a Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan.

She concluded by recommending the following:

1. The Steering Group for the Biodiversity Strategy should include Oxford University's Biodiversity Network & HERO project, community wildlife groups and local ecologists
2. The Steering Group should learn from best practice in other cities: eg: [Plymouth Green Minds project](#)
3. Biodiversity implications should be given equal weight across decision making, particularly around the 2040 Local Plan, as adding immense value for the future of the city.

The Chair thanked Ms Sanderson for reading Dr Gelling's address.

5. Development of a Biodiversity Strategy for Oxford

The Panel welcomed the ambition to create a biodiversity strategy and had a wide-ranging discussion with officers and the Cabinet Member about how it might be developed and what might be seen in the action plan.

The Panel was pleased to note the recognition that collaboration across the City was key to the success of a Biodiversity Strategy and that the Council was committed to its success. The Panel noted that the report explained the Council expected the steering group to "include representatives from the Local Nature Partnership, health, universities, businesses, wildlife groups, planning and community groups." The Panel considered that it would be particularly appropriate for Oxford University's Biodiversity Network and the HERO project to be represented on the steering group. The Panel was grateful to the member of the public who addressed the Panel for drawing attention to these groups.

The Panel sought to emphasise what it considered to be the importance of the Baseline Exercise as being fundamental to the success of the Strategy. The Panel considered it vital that, in conducting the Baseline Exercise, the Council and its partners must be aware of, and take account of, shifting baseline syndrome and the impact that would have on individual expectations.

The Panel noted that the second bullet point in paragraph 11 referred to one potential area of focus including that of "considering the appropriateness of the use of pesticides including glyphosates." The Panel heard that there was disagreement as to whether this was practicable in the shorter-term, or even desirable. However, the Panel considered that it would be appropriate to go further than that and argued that the Council should be seeking to stop the use of pesticides and herbicides on Council-owned land as soon as possible and discouraging their use more widely.

The Panel established that Natural England had not had the capacity to audit the eight Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) in the city for some years. The Panel noted that the report suggests that an audit "could be undertaken to better understand how favourable condition can be retained/achieved across these sites" and considered that it was important that this should be done as soon as possible.

The Panel regretted the absence of an explicit reference to trees in the report. The Panel considered it essential that the Council commit explicitly to preserving and protecting mature trees wherever feasible, in line with the Urban Forest Strategy.

The Panel considered it would be inappropriate for any Biodiversity Strategy drawn up not to take account of the internationally agreed Global Biodiversity Framework and

considered it important that the Council commits to adhering to it. Similarly, the Panel considered that the Council should commit to, at the least, meeting the Government targets on halting the decline of species.

The Panel recognised that the Local Plan is required to take account of biodiversity. The Panel considered that the interlinkage of the Biodiversity Strategy and the needs of the Local Plan should be emphasised and highlighted in the drawing up of the Strategy and the development of the Local Plan.

The Panel resolved to note the report and to make the following recommendations to Cabinet:

Recommendation 1: That the Council seeks to ensure that, amongst others, Oxford University's Biodiversity Network and the HERO project are represented on the steering group.

Recommendation 2: That the Council, in conducting the baseline exercise, takes account of shifting baseline syndrome.

Recommendation 3: That the Council considers how best to move away from the use of chemicals in land maintenance as a matter of urgency.

Recommendation 4: That the Council commissions or conducts its own audits of the eight Sites of Special Scientific Interest in the near future in order to understand their current condition.

Recommendation 5: That the Council ensures that the protection of mature trees is prioritised wherever possible.

Recommendation 6: That the Council commits to ensuring that the Biodiversity Strategy is developed in line with the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework and, also, at least in alignment with Government targets to halt decline of species under the Environment Act 2021.

Recommendation 7: That the Council takes account of the interconnectedness between the policies in the Local Plan and the Biodiversity Strategy when developing both documents and ensures that these links are emphasised and appropriately cross-referenced.

6. Net Zero Master Plan

Cllr Railton introduced the Net Zero Master Plan and explained that it outlined actions that would be taken over the next two years and provided an outline of completed actions so that the Council was able to track its progress.

Rose Dickinson added context and explained that the master plan had been compiled by the Environmental Sustainability team in response to the BDO audit and that it was to be read alongside the Road Map and the Action Plan. The purpose of the Master Plan was to better enable and track progress. It was to be updated every quarter and the document was to enable prioritization and identification of resourcing issues.

The Master Plan as well as the Road Map and Action Plan were a step towards what had been identified as needing, having recognized that there was a need to better capture information and that it had clearer deadlines with action owners.

Officers explained that they would be grateful for the views of the Panel as to where the document might be improved.

The Panel considered the Master Plan extremely comprehensive and commended officers for the work that had gone into it.

In response to questions, the Panel established that:

- Zero Carbon Oxford Partnership (ZCOP) had identified that work was needed on adaptation with regard to energy and water procurement and that the county-wide steering group was due to have its first meeting a week after the Panel's meeting;
- The document was a living document and would grow and adapt; it was not held to contain everything that would achieve Net Zero by 2040. However, there was a suggestion from the Panel that the document could contain an indicative carbon scale and could indicate how important each particular aspect was in relation to the larger target;
- That it would be useful for alternative financial sources to be included in the Master Plan or associated documents;
- That a wider installation of EV charging points was to be expected in city car parks;
- That there was a pilot of e-cargo bikes delivering for retailers in the Covered Market which was expected to provide data and insight for an expansion of the use of e-cargo bikes which was to be discussed by ZCOP;
- The EPC ratings of Council-owned commercial buildings had been discussed but needed further exploration.

7. Zero Carbon Oxford Partnership

The Chair welcomed the report and commended the extent of the work and the wide range of stakeholders involved.

In response to questions, the Panel established that:

- The Leader of the Council was the current chair of ZCOP but it was a partnership of equals with different groups within it and with different organisations leading on different focuses of work;
- That no hotels were currently represented on ZCOP but that retail was represented;
- Other stakeholders could be added to the steering group or to ZCOP more generally with the agreement of other steering group members and the Panel suggested that schools in the independent sector might prove a useful addition, given their transport needs;
- Updates were provided on a quarterly basis to the ZCOP steering group and, going forward, would be provided to this Panel;
- Solar panels on car parks had been discussed at Council and there was a sprint group looking at renewables where partners were discussing the use of adjacent land assets. The Panel accepted that part of the reason for ZCOP was the possibilities of scale and noted that the total solar capacity of roofs in Oxford was 30 megawatts whereas the Botley West development had a capacity of 840 megawatts;
- Some feasibility studies had already been shared and future ones could be shared with members, given that the Council was a member of ZCOP;

- Green Leases was an area where more exploratory work was necessary before officers could advise what was feasible;
- The Council hosted the secretariat for ZCOP with an officer who looked for available funding opportunities on an ongoing basis which were applied for where relevant; funding sources include both central government and charitable organisations.

The Panel thanked officers for the report and resolved to note it without making any recommendations to Cabinet.

8. Fleet Decarbonisation

The Panel welcomed the report but questioned why there could not be a sub-target for a section of the fleet, such as cars and vans, whilst it recognised that it might not be feasible for HGVs. It was noted that there had been many discussions about associated carbon targets and the Head of Corporate Strategy agreed to give further consideration to whether a target was practicable. The Panel also noted that there were currently some capacity issues around EV charging infrastructure in the city centre.

The Panel established that the Zero Emission Bus Regional Areas (ZEBRA) scheme had been approved and that 159 electric buses were being manufactured in the UK and were expected to arrive by March 2024.

The Panel was pleased to note that electric vans and other Large Goods Vehicles are being used by Oxford Direct Services Ltd (ODS) and recognised that it would be difficult to decarbonise the whole fleet at this time. However, the Panel considered that greater attention should be given to exploring how ODS could move towards including large electric cargo bicycles in its fleet for freight.

The Panel resolved to note the report and to make the following recommendation to Cabinet:

Recommendation 1: That the Council should commit to working with ODS to explore how ODS could include electric cargo bicycles in its fleet.

9. Work Plan

The Panel agreed to the Scrutiny Officer's recommendation that the Panel should meet informally with officers in order to identify items for its work plan for the next municipal year.

10. Date of next meeting

The Scrutiny Officer advised that he would circulate a proposed date for the Panel to meet informally before the close of the municipal year. [*This was subsequently confirmed as Wednesday 26 April.*]

The meeting started at 6.00 pm and ended at 7.45 pm

Chair

Date: Date Not Specified

When decisions take effect:

Cabinet: after the call-in and review period has expired

Planning Committees: after the call-in and review period has expired and the formal decision notice is issued

All other committees: immediately.

Details are in the Council's Constitution.