

Minutes of a meeting of the Climate and Environment Panel (Panel of the Scrutiny Committee) on Wednesday 20 March 2024



Committee members present:

Councillor Hollingsworth (Chair)

Councillor Aziz

Councillor Fry

Councillor Miles

Officers present for all or part of the meeting:

Mish Tullar, Head of Corporate Strategy

Vikki Robins, Carbon Reduction Team Manager

Juliet Nicholas, Energy and Sustainability Manager

Alice Courtney, Scrutiny Officer

Also present:

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

Apologies:

Councillor(s) Kerr sent apologies.

38. Declarations of Interest

None.

39. Chair's Announcements

None.

40. Notes of the previous meeting

The Panel agreed the notes of the meeting held on 27 February 2024 as a true and accurate record.

41. Climate and Environment Panel Work Plan

The Panel considered the Work Plan, noting it was the Panel's final meeting of the municipal year and the agreement of future items for consideration would be the responsibility of the 2024/25 Panel.

The Panel agreed the Work Plan as set out in the agenda pack.

The Panel agreed to take item 7 (Tree Planting) next on the agenda, followed by items 6 (Energy Generation/Solar Potential on Council Buildings), 8 (2023-24 Year in Review) and 9 (Dates of future meetings).

42. Tree Planting [presentation]

Mish Tullar, Head of Corporate Strategy delivered a presentation which provided an update on tree planting, specifically in relation to the planting of new trees. A copy of the presentation slides is included in the minutes pack.

The Panel was informed that other aspects of tree works were currently under review and overall responsibility for tree works undertaken by the Parks team had recently transferred over to the Head of Corporate Property. The Property Services team would provide the clienting oversight for tree management and maintenance in the City going forward. In addition, the Council's Tree Policy was in the process of being updated. However, these elements were not within scope of the presentation and discussion at this meeting.

In response to questions, the Panel was advised that:

- Any recommendations related to the production of guidance for councillors and/or community groups which set out the process for new street tree planting would be welcomed.
- The Council's Tree Policy, Urban Forest Strategy and Biodiversity Strategy (the latter of which was in development) would be aligned; each document served a slightly different purpose so there would not be any duplication or inconsistencies.
- Good progress had been made with the Council's 'Treemails' campaign; the intention was to continue and amplify the campaign in the coming year.
- The Tree Equity Score UK website mapped urban tree distribution.
- There were no issues in relation to availability of trees, as they were readily available.

In addition, the Panel was pleased to note that a strategic review of services provided by Oxford Direct Services was underway; the Panel had recommended such a review following consideration of the Biodiversity Action Plan for Oxford City Council Parks and Nature Areas – September 2023 Review item at its November meeting, though the recommendation had not been agreed by Cabinet at the time.

The Panel agreed to recommend to Cabinet that:

1. The Council produces a guidance document and accompanying flow chart which clearly sets out the process for the planting of new street trees on public land, including but not limited to the mapping of existing empty tree pits within the City; responsibility for the replacement of dead or damaged trees; and a breakdown of the costs for planting and maintaining new street trees, with information as to how those costs might be met by different organisations, groups and/or individuals.
2. The Council produces a guidance document for the planting of new trees, and associated costs, on private land which is aimed at a diverse audience, including community groups, schools, private landowners and landlords.
3. The Council, when it reviews its policies, explores how it could incentivise, promote and encourage the planting, retention and renewal of trees through those policies – particularly within Planning and Licensing.

4. The Council actively encourages tree planting within and around new community buildings and spaces to ensure alignment of these new projects and developments with the City's wider environmental policies.

43. Energy Generation/Solar Potential on Council Buildings [presentation]

Cllr Fry joined the meeting.

Mish Tullar, Head of Corporate Strategy delivered a presentation which provided an overview of energy generation and solar potential on Council buildings. A copy of the presentation slides is included in the minutes pack.

Vikki Robins, Carbon Reduction Team Manager advised that consideration was being given to working strategically with the Council's Housing Revenue Account to explore different options for funding activity. Juliet Nicholas, Energy and Sustainability Manager added that the Council was exploring energy generation and solar potential in tandem with routine improvements to Council-owned buildings (e.g. re-roofing) to maximise opportunities.

In response to questions, the Panel was advised that:

- Ferry and Blackbird Leys Leisure Centres had been fully exploited in terms of solar panel installations.
- The Council could look to implement a similar model to the Low Carbon Hub in relation to solar installations, but in respect of Council housing stock.
- There were operational and commercial challenges related to the practicalities of installing solar canopies on Council Park & Rides, including local grid constraints and return on investment for the Council.
- Oxford Direct Services (ODS) buildings were considered in scope of the definition of 'Council assets' and Cowley Marsh already had solar panels.
- Given other priorities in relation to decarbonisation, there was no spare capacity within the Council to undertake detailed research into other areas' implementation of solar canopies over car parks or innovative solar activity/projects.

The Panel agreed to recommend to Cabinet that:

1. The Council produces a high-level summary of current challenges and constraints impacting on the deliverability of solar opportunities at Council car parks and keeps a watching brief on how similar issues have been overcome in other areas so that any learning could be identified to support delivery in Oxford.
2. The Council prioritises projects on the basis of deliverability and impact when allocating financial and human resources.

Vikki Robins, Carbon Reduction Team Manager and Juliet Nicholas, Energy and Sustainability Manager left the meeting and did not return.

44. 2023-24 Year in Review

Alice Courtney, Scrutiny Officer introduced the report, which had been produced following a request made by the Panel at its meeting on 29 November 2023. The report provided an overview of the Panel's work to date and offered an opportunity for the Panel to reflect and consider how it might best add value going forward.

In discussion, the Panel agreed with the suggestion set out in the report that the Panel aligns its approach to Scrutiny of climate and environment issues to the 'Zero Carbon Oxford' priority within the refreshed Corporate Plan 2024-28, once adopted; complementing the Panel's consideration of the Net Zero Masterplan at each meeting. The Panel also requested that the Scrutiny Officer add the following items to the long list of suggestions for Scrutiny-commissioned items for 2024/25, noting that agreement to consider any of these items would be at the discretion of the 2024/25 Panel:

- Oxford Climate Emergency Centre (*progress following motion passed at Full Council on 02 October 2023*).
- 'Loss and Damage' to the Council as a result of climate change (e.g. costs incurred by the Council as a result of recent flooding) and how this could be addressed/funded.
- Innovative longer-term partnership projects and funding initiatives that the Council could get involved in.
- Internal Council governance – including ensuring there is a clear client, clear responsibility and clear documentation setting out policy/process.

The Chair thanked all officers and Cllr Railton, Cabinet Member for Zero Carbon Oxford and Climate Justice for their contributions to Panel meetings during 2023/24. He particularly thanked the Scrutiny Officer for her support, advice and clarity over the past year.

The Panel:

1. **Noted** the report.
2. **Confirmed** its agreement to the Scrutiny Officer's suggestions as to which recommendations should continue to be monitored (set out at Appendix 1).

45. Dates of future meetings

The Panel noted the dates and times of future meetings.

The meeting started at 6.00 pm and ended at 7.45 pm

Chair

Date: Tuesday 11 June 2024

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.