

Minutes of the Climate Emergency Taskforce (virtual teleconference)

23 June 2020 (6pm - 8.15pm)

Present: Councillors Matt Bryan (Chairman), Paul Bowers, Bob Cernik, Simon Eardley, Jill Houlbrook, Gina Lewis, Christine Warner.

Officers: George Ablett, Laurence Ainsworth, Alison Amesbury, David Butler, Rob Charnley, Morgan Jones, Andrew Lewis, Georgina Patel (Qwest), Will Pearson, Gary Shields, Gill Smith, and Sean Traynor

Visitors: Jennifer Kelly (Arup), Marc Watterson (Arup) and James Latham (ForHousing)

1 Welcome and introductions

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the teleconference meeting and introductions were made, in particular the Chairman welcomed Jennifer Kelly and Marc Watterson from Arup and James Latham from ForHousing.

2 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Gillian Edward and Karen Shore and the following officers – Andrew Lewis and Charlie Seward.

3 Declarations of interest

There were no declarations of interest.

4 Embedding the Climate Emergency into Local Planning Policy

Jennifer Kelly and Marc Watterson of Arup set out the potential for embedding climate emergency in planning policy, with a focus on the review of the local plan and the potential interventions that could be made through planning, land use and building control.

They outlined a range of policy and best practice examples around carbon offsetting, renewable energy and sustainable building design but highlighted that achievement is not just about having a policy in place, but embedding approaches from the start of work with developers. The key challenges are

- Setting Direction – setting policy in the absence of long term strategic direction
- Balance – balancing wider legislative and policy agendas
- Viability - short term savings can be very expensive long term
- Delivery - being clear on responsibility and equity of the cost burden
- Evidence - needs to be able to stand up to scrutiny
- Embedding – need a wider range of individual policy areas to be taking account of the climate emergency
- Engagement and buy-in – codesign can result in the most effective policies

Legal challenges on environmental grounds, such as the Heathrow judgement, have been successful. Whilst the focus is currently on national policy, authorities need to

demonstrate where climate change has been considered – invest up front in a detailed review of the climate impacts of plans and proposals and build mitigation into planning regimes.

The Taskforce were left with some key reflections:

- Local planning is really important but has limitations
- Recognise wider opportunities (get people involved)
- Set a direction for change (set targets then really understand potential interventions – scale and pace)
- Implementation and delivery (People want to be able to see the implementation of this ambition)
- Building buy in and collaboration (not about individuals or single organisations, need groups of stakeholders and collaborative action. Involve citizens.

Issues raised by Members:

Cllr Cernik asked if the key difference could be making building regs more environmentally stringent and if there is a way for authorities to all revisit and update their local plans or if this is something that much be done on each local plan individually? Arup responded that whilst building regs are set at the national level it is possible to have quite a strong local plan policy above base regs minimum and also for councils to demonstrate that standard in its own buildings and decisions. Whilst each authority will need to revisit their local plan, picking up on what other authorities are doing and driving some consistencies to set a united front on some more challenging areas may be useful.

Cllr Bowers highlighted that British planning standards are low when compared internationally, with the best European standards being four times higher than BREAAAM excellence. Arup highlighted the need to lobby national government on this. Some areas are setting targets that all new developments will be carbon zero from a certain date and that sets an ambition against which to lobby national government.

5 Minutes of the last meeting

Decided: That

(1) the minutes of the Climate Emergency Taskforce held on 27 May 2020 be approved, subject to the phrase 'putting women at the centre' being changed to 'putting family needs at the centre' (P26); and

Will Pearson fed back on discussions held at the Advisory Group, which had highlighted that the taskforce would also benefit from considering the potential for improvement to existing private sector homes. Georgina Patel has been invited to address the meeting on this. Rob Charnley responded to a question raised at the Advisory Group of whether the Council could prioritise planning applications that met high standards, suggesting that whilst this would be possible, all applications are subject to a statutory processing deadline of either 8 or 13 weeks and so prioritising

applications within such a tight timeframe would be unlikely to provide a significant incentive.

Cllr Eardley asked if the Taskforce could receive an update on the Wildflower and Bio-Diversity strategy in terms of timelines, when it is due to go out for consultation and the ability of the public to identify key verges and areas they would want to see prioritised.

Decided; that

- The Taskforce to receive an update at their next meeting

5 Public question time / open session

The Chairman had received no questions from members of the public ahead of the deadline.

6 Building control and Energy Efficient Homes

Gary Shields set out the key purpose of building regulations in setting minimum standards for developments in terms of health and safety sustainability and accessibility. Building control check the process at three stages: design (including energy performance calculations), build and then completion, with the Council's building service then having an enforcement role where developers do not comply.

Regulations are set nationally and the Government has recently consulted on changing the Future Homes Standards and other alternative approaches. The new standard is expected from 2025 and is expected to deliver homes with carbon emissions that are 75-80 per cent lower than at the current standard.

Gary then highlighted the potential difficulties in setting higher local standards, with the Council's building control service only dealing with around 50 per cent of local developments. The remainder use private sector inspectors who may not be aware of local differences to the national standards and so would not enforce them.

Gary left the Taskforce with three questions:

- Is local planning policy or national building regulation the most effective vehicle for driving higher standards?
- If local policy is chosen how do we seal the gaps between legislation?
- If a developer had a choice of where to build, would a more demanding local policy influence their decision?

Issues raised by Members:

Cllr Christine Warner asked if locally set energy requirements are effective or just suggestions. Gary explained that whilst they would be requirements, without an effective tool for ensuring compliance they may not be adhered to and his experience is that national inspectors do not necessarily check for local variations from the national regulations. This would be easier to enforce if shortfalls were

visually apparent but this is not the case with energy efficiency measures. The Council does suggest developers use our own building control service and actively markets the service, but this cannot be required.

Councillor Houlbrook asked whether we should be lobbying for a change in planning regulations that requires private sector building inspectors to local building control services. Gary agreed with this as a possible approach

Councillor Bowers asked how competitive the Councils building control service is in comparison to the private sector, asking why people choose to use other services? Gary responded that reasons vary with some national developers preferring to use national contractors such as the NHBC who they can use consistently and who provide a brand which is recognised by purchasers. The Councils building control costs are comparable with many, but can be undercut by inspectors who undertake fewer site visits by e.g. also allowing builders to provide photographs to show compliance. Councillor Bowers asked if the Council could advertise our building control service to homeowners through the planning application process and Gary agreed to look into this.

7 Private Sector Housing in Cheshire West and Chester

Georgina Patel highlighted that 71 per cent of homes in the borough being owner occupied and a further 14 per cent being private sector rented accommodation. Most local homes are semi-detached or detached and around 30,000 homes were built before 1930, tending to have solid walls. The average efficiency banding of local homes is band D.

The Anthesis report highlighted the scale of interventions required to achieve carbon neutrality. Legislative drivers are in place for improving private sector housing emissions, including requirements on private sector landlords to achieve at least energy band E in any let property.

Key considerations for improvements are:

- Support people to move away from gas – gas boilers will be banned in new builds from 2025
- Retrofitting in existing properties is expensive and inconvenient
- Funding for domestic energy efficiency has been sporadic and changeable for a number of years
- Local authorities are in the best place to be a co-ordinated service for domestic energy efficiency through collating the available funding streams

Issues raised by Members:

Councillor Bowers asked how many times CW&C have taken action against landlords over energy efficiency. Georgina offered to find out outside the meeting.

Councillor Houlbrook queried why the map of energy efficiency levels across wards is four years old. Georgina suggested that these figures do not change quickly, with the Anthesis report also showing that 69 per cent of properties are D or below but would investigate whether more recent information is available.

Councillor Bryan offered to circulate a useful update which he had recently received and would circulate to the Taskforce.

8 ForHousing – Response to the Climate Emergency

James Latham (ForHousing) presented on their proposed improvement to the stock they manage on behalf of the Council and the route to a planned 71.5 per cent reduction in carbon emissions. Proposals included increasing minimum SAP rating to C, reducing water use (and so water heating), solar PV and battery storage and ground source heat pump district heating. Further savings (of around 25 per cent) could be sought on capital investment delivery processes whilst responsive repair delivery is seen as having little scope.

Newbuild properties present strong opportunities for improvement, with modern construction methods (eg offsite) predicted to provide a 34 per cent reduction in emissions for a 30 per cent increase in costs. Low and zero carbon solutions can be pursued relatively efficiently for around £10,000 extra per dwelling. It can take 30 years for a home to emit as much carbon through use as was emitted in its construction though.

Issues raised by Members:

Cllr Bryan welcomed what ForHousing are doing and asked how failed cavity insulation can be repaired. James explained that a number of bricks are removed and the insulation is either scraped or 'hoovered' out of the cavity then replaced.

Cllr Warner asked when retrofitting external wall insulation have there been issues over adequate ventilation not being considered? James highlighted that external wall insulation is not a significant part of plans, but where it would be done contractors are used who can do dew drop calculations to identify and avoid issues. Ventilation is always a key consideration.

Cllr Bowers asked how many such measures are included in plans for Sutton Way. Alison Amesbury highlighted that the Sutton Way project is focused on improving the local community by tackling the anti-social behaviour and nuisance issues. The focus is on the exterior of the properties, the open space and appearance. Work has been delayed by the pandemic though and so we can consider if additional works could be considered.

Cllr Eardley asked how many homes Sanctuary Housing has in the borough and whether they are planning similar approaches. Alison Amesbury advised that

Sanctuary have around 6,500 - 7,000 properties in the borough and are part of the Council's Housing Partnership (including Sanctuary, Weaver Vale, ForHousing and other registered providers) which is encouraging and working with all providers to understand how they are contributing to this agenda. This work does need to be included in the scope and targets of the Councils action plan.

Cllr Gina Lewis highlighted that Weaver Vale already have a large number of properties but are also delivering a number of newbuild homes. How can we work with them to ensure we consider all the relevant sustainability issues when constructing social housing? Alison Amesbury highlighted the requirements on developers to meet new building reg requirements but that we are also working with them to deliver higher standards. The Council also needs to do this for our own housing delivery but need to reflect on the balance between cost and the number of affordable homes delivered. There is also the potential to encourage Housing Providers to declare a climate emergency as well.

9 Discussion on Housing and Land Use

Cllr Bryan summed up the presentations that had been received by the Taskforce and requested comments.

Cllr Gina Lewis asked about the effect of the pandemic and the lockdown, with the improvement to the environment that has been made in the last three months and the possibility of lobbying the government to maintain this improvement.

Cllr Eardley reflected on the need to consider how we use our soft power and lobbying powers, particularly around the local plan process. This should include an ongoing robust defence of the green belt and devolution of our ability to drive this agenda at the local level, pegging back the ability of the Planning Inspectorate to overrule valid local decisions. He also highlighted the need to consider retrospective planning applications and to promote developers themselves having wildflower strategies.

Cllr Eardley also mentioned that he had some substantive comments from Councillors Fifield and Watson as well as further comments of his own that he would forward in an email given the need to bring the meeting to a close.

Cllr Bryan asked that anyone with further comments or suggestions arising from the meeting should also email them through.

Next Meeting:

The next taskforce meeting will be on 15 July and consider offsetting and carbon repair.