

Report to: Cabinet

Date of meeting: 26 September 2024

By: Director of Communities, Economy and Transport & Chief Operating Officer

Title: Annual progress report to full Council on the Council's progress towards net zero

Purpose: To consider the progress report.

RECOMMENDATION

Cabinet is recommended to consider the progress report and advise on changes required.

1 Background

1.1 In October 2019 the Council declared a climate emergency. It set a target of achieving carbon neutrality from its activities as soon as possible and in any event by 2050 and committed to reporting annually to full Council on its progress towards meeting this target. Appendix 1 of this report sets out the draft progress report, which will be presented to Cabinet on 26 September 2024 and Full Council on 8 October 2024. Once approved, the progress report in appendix 1 will be published on the Council's website.

2 Supporting Information

2.1 In October 2019 the Council agreed the following Motion, that the Council:

- (i) supports the aims and implementation of the UN Sustainable Development Goals.*
- (ii) recognises and declares a Climate Emergency.*
- (iii) will set a target of achieving carbon neutrality from its activities as soon as possible and in any event by 2050, in line with the new target for the UK agreed by Parliament in 2019.*
- (iv) will build upon the work we have undertaken to date, will commit resources where possible and will align our policies to address the Climate Emergency.*
- (v) will set out a clear plan of action to reduce our carbon emissions.*
- (vi) will report annually at the May Council Meeting on its progress towards the target.*
- (vii) will investigate all possible sources of external funding and match funding to support this commitment, as well as writing to central government with respect to the emergency to request funding to implement swift appropriate actions.*
- (viii) will use our Environment Strategy to provide a strong unified voice in lobbying for support to address this emergency, sharing best practice across East Sussex and more widely through other partners.*

2.2 In line with the commitment made in the Motion agreed in 2019, Cabinet agreed a Climate Emergency Plan in June 2020, which set out how the organisation would continue to reduce its carbon emissions, building on work undertaken since the first Carbon Management Plan was put in place in 2009. The Action Plan covered 2020-22 and set out the scale of the Council's carbon footprint, described the carbon budget that the Council will aim to keep within, and included a set of actions. In 2021/22 Cabinet agreed a further £9.945m to support the work to enable the Council to become carbon neutral and agreed that climate change be considered a basic need requirement within the Council's

Capital Programme and Capital Strategy. Climate change has been embedded in the Council Plan and is recognised as a strategic corporate risk. In February 2023 an updated corporate Climate Emergency Plan, covering 2023-25, was agreed by full Council. This report sets out the progress achieved in 2023/24 in delivering the actions set out in the Plan.

3. Assessing the Council's Carbon Emissions

3.1 A clear understanding of the carbon emissions generated by our activities is a key foundation for working towards carbon neutrality. The corporate Climate Emergency Plan sets out the carbon emissions from the Council's activities using the Greenhouse Gas (GHG) Protocol, an accepted global standard for measuring and reporting on an organisation's GHG emissions. The Protocol divides GHG emissions into three categories, referred to as Scope 1, 2 and 3. Together, these represent the total GHG emissions related to an organisation and its activities. Each scope covers the following emissions:

- Scope 1 – emissions from the combustion of gas, oil, petrol, diesel, coal, or wood. For the Council this covers buildings and vehicles where the Council is responsible for paying for the fuel.
- Scope 2 – emissions from the electricity purchased by the Council.
- Scope 3 – emissions that result from all other activities of the Council. There are 15 different scope 3 categories defined in the Protocol, some of which do not apply to a local authority (e.g. emissions from manufactured goods). The categories that do apply include emissions from business travel, water usage, waste, procurement and staff commuting. In other words, the Council's scope 3 emissions mostly comprise the scope 1 and 2 emissions of other organisations (e.g. contractors).

3.2 The Council has measured scope 1, 2 and some scope 3 emissions since 2008-9. Data on scope 1 and 2 emissions is of higher quality than data on most scope 3 emissions, largely because the Council relies on third parties to provide their carbon emissions under scope 3. The Climate Emergency Plan highlights that scope 3 emissions are by far the largest part of the Council's estimated carbon footprint, notably through the supply chain i.e. the goods, works and services that are purchased by the Council in order to deliver its statutory functions. This is typical for a local authority, as most of the Council's revenue and capital budgets are used to procure goods, services and works from third parties. For an upper tier authority this includes major services such as highways maintenance, waste disposal, and education, as well as social care provision commissioned from a myriad of relatively small independent providers. The Climate Emergency Plan also highlights that the largest proportion of scope 1 and 2 emissions is from schools. Overall, this means that the majority of carbon emissions generated by the Council's activities are from sources over which the Council has influence but limited direct control.

3.3 The Council therefore has a large and complex carbon footprint. Further work is being carried out to quantify scope 3 emissions, notably from our extensive supply chain, before they can begin to be integrated reliably into the Council's carbon footprint and targets set. Consequently, the Climate Emergency Plan focusses primarily on reducing scope 1 and 2 emissions, for example carbon emissions from buildings. This is also typical for most local authorities.

4 Working Towards Carbon Neutrality From Our Activities

4.1 The approach adopted in the Climate Emergency Plan is that, in order to make its fair contribution to reducing county-wide emissions, the Council will aim to cut its own emissions in half in the 5 years between 2020-25. This is based on a recognised methodology developed by the UK's Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research for calculating the carbon budget by local authority area. A carbon budget represents the total quantity of greenhouse gases which can be released to the atmosphere if we are to contain temperature rises to a given level – this can be calculated globally and then broken down into national and sub-national budgets. The Tyndall model, based on current scientific understanding, indicates that to stay within a budget based on a rise of no more than 1.5

degrees centigrade above pre-industrial levels (as set out in the UN Paris Agreement on Climate Change) requires cutting emissions from East Sussex by half every 5 years.

4.2 This science-based reduction target is what the Council is working towards, rather than a fixed end date by which it will become carbon neutral. This approach is in line with advice to Councils from the Local Government Association, which has stated that: *“There is no science to picking an end year where emissions are zero. Setting a target year by which emissions will be zero can be symbolically important. However, what counts is the trajectory of the commitments to carbon reduction between now and the target zero emissions year. This defines the actual level of emissions reduction being promised over the budget period. This is what matters to climate change”*.

4.3 Cutting emissions in half every 5 years is extremely challenging. This is highlighted by modelling carried out by independent experts in 2022, which indicated that the Council would need approximately £200m up to 2050 to pay for capital intensive interventions to keep within the science-based target for just its scope 1 and 2 emissions. Many of the simpler and cheaper measures, and those within the Council’s direct control, have already been implemented through the Council’s carbon reduction programme that has been delivered for many years and which is summarized in appendix 1. In addition, the last two years have seen significant cost increases through the supply chain, as well as delays to delivery with some projects due to bottlenecks in the supply of particular items and the limited availability of consultants and contractors with the right skills and experience. Some of these pressures have been partly mitigated by the Council successfully securing £1.9m of additional external funding since 2020. Bids for further external funding continue to be made, however there is intense competition for funding. In view of the challenging financial position for local government, which is highlighted in the Council’s State of the County report in June 2024, lobbying of government to encourage larger scale and longer-term sustained funding for public sector decarbonization continues to take place.

4.4 Despite the challenging circumstances, appendix 1 illustrates that the Council has reduced its emissions by 35% between 2019/20 and 2023/24, against the cumulative target of 43%. This is a shortfall of about 950 tonnes of CO₂e, which is equivalent to the average annual per capita emissions of about 170 people in the UK, based on the latest government data. The 35% reduction has largely been achieved through a combination of the carbon reduction measures that the Council has invested in, the decarbonization of the national electricity grid and changes to the Council’s buildings portfolio. Other County Councils have not yet reported publicly on their performance in 2023/24, so it’s not currently possible to compare the Council’s performance with that of other local authorities. However, the most recent independent assessment of local authority performance in addressing climate change, carried out by Climate Emergency UK in 2023, ranked the Council as 7th amongst English county councils and the highest performer amongst county councils in the South East in its overall approach to climate change.

4.5 Progress towards becoming a carbon neutral council is overseen by the Climate Emergency Board, which has senior representatives from every department and is co-chaired by the Chief Operating Officer and the Director for Communities, Economy and Transport. Reporting on progress is made quarterly to the Corporate Management Team, annually to Full Council and is published on the Council’s website.

5 Conclusion and Reasons for Recommendations

5.1 The Council has recognised the severity of the climate crisis by declaring a climate emergency, by setting a clear science-based target and by committing an additional £9.9m of funding up to March 2025 to cutting corporate carbon emissions. The scale of the Council’s functions and the diversity of providers the Council works with makes this a complex and substantial task. Significant work has already been undertaken to reduce emissions and will continue to be undertaken. This report sets out the further progress made during 2023/24.

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LOCAL MEMBERS: ALL BACKGROUND PAPERS: None
