

# ENVIRONMENT SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

**MINUTES** of a meeting of the Environment Scrutiny Committee held on Tuesday 24 November 2020 virtually.

PRESENT:

Cllr Phil Awford	Cllr Stephen Hirst
Cllr Robert Bird (Chair)	Cllr Sajid Patel
Cllr Dr John Cordwell (Vice-Chair)	Cllr Suzanne Williams
Cllr Kevin Cromwell	

Officers in attendance: Sophie Benfield, Colin Chick and Peter Wiggins

Apologies: Cllr Eva Ward and Cllr Keith Rippington

## 2. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 15 July and 23 September 2020 were approved

## 3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Cllr Phil Awford declared an interest as Chair of the National Flood Forum and as a representative for the Wessex/Severn Wye at the Regional Flood Defence Committee.

## 4. MOTION 861: CLIMATE CHANGE

- 4.1 The Chair first introduced Cllr Moor (Cabinet Member for Environment and Planning) to provide their opening remarks.
- 4.2 Cllr Moor first provided an apology to the Committee for the late publication of this. Officers had been balancing a significant workload in recent months, not limited to an annual report on the climate change response for Cabinet in December and applying for a Government bid for the decarbonisation of heat in public sector buildings.
- 4.3 In response to the noticeable shortfall in capacity, the Cabinet Member and Executive Director had started a recruitment programme for the department to help manage the growing workload and provide sufficient capacity to respond Committee business in a more timely manner going forward.
- 4.4 The report attached set out an assessment on the impact of the first lockdown, and tried to draw some conclusions from that. It also gave a review of where we were in our response to the climate emergency. Cabinet were due to consider this as part of the Gloucestershire Climate Change Strategy Annual Report and Action Plan 2021/22-2026/27 in December.
- 4.5 The Chair next invited Cllr Haigh, the proposer of the motion to present to the Committee. Members were reminded that the original motion had

proposed for the item to be discussed at Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee, as climate change affected the work of the whole Council and all Cabinet Members' portfolios, not just the environmental agenda. Concern was also raised about the lack of public consultation on this report.

- 4.6 In reference to strategy and policy, it was easy to see how introducing cycle paths and encouraging walking would help to tackle the climate agenda, but things such as reassessing the way we delivered care in the county, to avoid professionals having to travel vast distances everyday remained a challenge.
- 4.7 The original thread of this motion had hoped to address these more radical and wide ranging changes that could be made. If the Council were serious about addressing concerns of the original motion, a far wider discussion would be needed. The proposer would welcome this Committee to endorse what was in the report but to also push the motion back to all portfolio holders and build the climate change agenda into everything that we do.
- 4.8 The Chair finally introduced Peter Wiggins, Outcome Manager – Sustainability, to present the report.
- 4.9 The officer started by offering a personal apology to Members of the Committee for the delay in sharing this report. It was recognised that late submission of reports reduce the preparation time members had.
- 4.10 In responding to Cllr Haigh's concerns, it was advised that whilst officers had not directly consulted the public, the report did draw on other public consultation from around the country and within the county (e.g. Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust). In addition, the report referred to other relevant key strategies, including the Gloucestershire Climate Change strategy which was within the remit of all services of the Council to have regard for, as well as being within the Council's decision making process. The first annual report and the refreshed action plan were scheduled to be presented to Cabinet on 16 December 2020.
- 4.11 Section 3 covered information on the impact of the first national lockdown. Members noted that all the research that was available locally, nationally and internationally had been focused on the March – July 2020 period, which will therefore explain why some of this information seemed historic, considering we were now in a second lockdown.
- 4.12 The Government lockdown restrictions from March 2020 forced dramatic change on how people moved around, if they did at all during this time. The chart available at *Figure 1* showed travel patterns and behaviour from Google, the flat line at the top of the blue block was in February this year (the baseline used for life before lockdown), and then the shaded area showed the degree of impact. There had been a significant decrease in travel for recreational retail/shopping and supermarket travel due to the encouragement to shop online and in bulk, as well as travel to places of

work. The implication on public transport use had been significant due to these changes.

- 4.13 Section 3.4 to 3.6 showed that whilst the cycling rates doubled nationally, they almost trebled in Gloucestershire, with a peak of almost 190% increase during the first lockdown. There had also been a huge increase in people walking and a 75% drop in car use. As soon as the lockdown restrictions were lifted however, car use returned to pre-lockdown levels quite rapidly.
- 4.14 Noting the concerns from employees that the set costs of things like electricity were now being borne at home, rather than by the employer, *Figure 2* demonstrated how the increased energy use when working from home was significantly outweighed by the energy saved from not carrying out their usual commute.
- 4.15 In reference to air quality, section 3.8 explained that Nitrogen Oxides levels in Stroud, for example, dropped to almost half of its usual levels during early lockdown, and this was directly linked to the drop in car use.
- 4.16 In terms of food consumption, this also accounted for a significant amount of greenhouse gas emissions globally. Due to the panic buying and shortage of goods we experienced nationally early on, there had been a big increase in purchases through local traders and lots of local spending, which in itself would have had economic and environmental benefits.
- 4.17 It was widely reported throughout the pandemic how beneficial having access to open space was for people's mental health. This also however highlighted the large disparity in equity of access for households of lower incomes and ethnic minorities who were significantly less likely to have access to an open space. For example in Gloucestershire, 10% of households did not have access to a private outdoor space.
- 4.18 One of the negative impacts however of increased access to public open space was the huge visitor pressure that it brought, and a resulting impact on the natural environment, particularly those that required regular active management.
- 4.19 *Section 4* included information on a series of workshops carried out by the National Environmental Research Council. Their research focused on what the issues were, what questions needed to be asked and then what solutions could be appropriate. Out of the three resulting themes, the report focused on two areas: *Greening the 'build back'* and *Healthy places: healthy people* which were summarised in *sections 4.3 to 4.12* of the report.
- 4.20 What the pandemic had demonstrated clearly was the level of behaviour change that could be achieved to benefit our environment. It had been widely accepted however, that it took around six months to lock in behaviour change and with the first lockdown only being 3 months, many people will have returned to their pre-Covid habits. The Climate Change Strategy

recognised that behaviour change was absolutely fundamental to achieving its targets, which was one of the reasons GCC were recruiting at a senior level to achieve this.

- 4.21 *Section 5* reflected GCC's key strategies and how they related to the climate change agenda and reflected the Council's key priorities. The report concluded that Vision 2050, the Council Plan, Gloucestershire's Industrial Strategy and the Local Transport Plan all supported a green recovery for the county.
- 4.22 *Section 6* concluded that the key strategies and collective intentions for the Council on climate change and the level of behaviour change that would be needed to achieve those intentions was clear. Regardless of any impacts of from the pandemic however, we have seen internationally how quickly people return to behaviours, and the real challenge therefore still very much existed.

### **Questions**

- 4.23 Members noted that the local planning process and future housing need would play a huge role towards achieving carbon neutral targets for the county.
- 4.24 A member expressed concern of the conflict arising from retaining our green space against our local planning process. It was assured that Officers across all local authorities were working closely together on this and there was a carbon neutral network specifically set up to discuss opportunities and challenges in this area.
- 4.25 The Committee noted that district authorities (who were responsible for planning) had high aspirations in terms of what we as a County were looking to achieve for our future housing, however it was appreciated that the planning process itself was prescribed by national government so there were limits on what could be achieved in practice. Authorities had to be mindful that the more challenge their planning framework offered to the process, the more likely plans would be disallowed by the inspector.
- 4.26 In addition, it was important to acknowledge the significant and potentially more difficult challenge, of retrofitting our existing housing stock. Government had recently begun to offer incentives for residents to do this, but further work needed to be done to encourage those who were able to pay to make the needed changes, and work with those in lower income households to be able to as well.
- 4.27 Noting that building a better standard of home was one of Government's key aspirations, it was queried how this would be possible if local authority ambition continued to be curtailed by fear of challenge from the developers. In response, it was advised that the issue for GCC here was where it sat in this discussion (as it was not one of the planning authorities). The Committee noted that Cabinet were due to consider a review of the Council's Developer

Guide in January 2021 and the Cabinet Member responsible would raise this point with officers to see if there was anything additional that could be added to that guide.

- 4.28 Referencing electricity consumption, it was questioned whether the previously proposed Local Electricity Bill and the concept of selling electricity locally was still being considered or whether it had been superseded by other energy policies.
- 4.29 Officers informed that this concept had not been overtaken, that the infrastructure was in place to deliver the service for any provider to deliver through, but the challenge remained of how to make it easier for people to provide that locally. The technical term for this was called 'sleeving' which provided a contractual relationship between where the energy was generated and matched its local consumption.
- 4.30 The Committee noted comments regarding the environmental benefits of more people working from home due to the pandemic. It was questioned how GCC measured its carbon footprint of its staff and whether this changed with weather seasons.
- 4.31 Members were referred to *Figure 2* in the report where the left axis measured the difference between summer and winter in terms of energy consumption through fossil fuels and emissions from transport. Although there was clearly a significant increase use of fossil fuel use over the winter period, it was still dwarfed by the emissions produced by transport. Staff could double or treble their residential emission use and it would still not come near to the impact of transport.
- 4.32 An example was provided that GCC (as a seller of electricity) saw its electricity prices after lockdown decline dramatically which gave an idea of how limited electricity use was in the first lockdown. The challenge existed how to communicate this message with staff so they did not feel they were now bearing the cost in terms of energy use and that GCC could not be accused of externalising its carbon levels through working from home.
- 4.33 In terms of reporting carbon emissions from travel, at the moment public publication of staff travel data is outside the scope of the climate change strategy but GCC were still trying to understand this through other means. Before the pandemic, a staff travel survey was carried out which anonymously identified staff postcodes and how they travelled to work. It was identified that around 70-80% of staff lived within 5 miles of work which was easily accessible via cycling, walking or public transport. This provided a huge opportunity to work with staff to change the way that they got to work as well as promoting the existing pool car scheme.
- 4.34 A member questioned how the ban of new petrol and diesel car sales from 2030 would impact our carbon footprint, and also officer's thoughts on how it would impact lower income households. It was informed that we do not yet

understand the scale of this announcement but we expect it to accelerate our carbon neutral goals. In terms of accessibility of electric vehicles, it was appreciated at the moment they were out of the affordability of many households. It was expected however that as they become more widely available and the technology improves, the price will begin to come down and the second hand vehicle market will continue to grow.

- 4.44 It was requested that the Committee saw sight of more up to date data that was reflected in *Figure 1* as May 2020 was now significantly out of date. Officers confirmed they would take this away as an action and potentially look to provide updates via the regular Directors report.

**ACTION: Pete Wiggins/Colin Chick**

- 4.45 It was confirmed that the reference to black ethnicity in paragraph 3.17 was correctly referenced but accepted that other BAME ethnic groups would possibly be similarly impacted.
- 4.46 Frustration was raised about the report not including or referencing any of the huge steps GCC had already taken in reference to climate change. A member reminded the Committee of the following: the creation of the Energy from Waste Javelin Park, sustainability renovations at Shire Hall, multiple new cycle routes, the net zero by 2050 commitment and plans for Gloucestershire to become a leader in the cyber sector.
- 4.47 Officers acknowledged this frustration but advised that the report being considered by Cabinet in December included an update on progress of the climate change action plan and would pick up on all these points. The report needed to go through the relevant governance process for information being published in the public domain, and some of it was not publicly available at the moment.
- 4.48 Addressing questions regarding how we would tackle the challenges of the diversity in our county in terms of town and rurality, the Council had signed up to the UK 100 Network which involved the coming together of similar leading authorities which particularly faced rural challenges like Gloucestershire in addressing its climate change goals.
- 4.49 The Chair summarised the discussion by thanking officers and the Cabinet Member for the excellent summary report of all GCCC is doing in this field, and that really showed us as taking a leadership role in so many areas. The Committee appreciated a lot of this work was very much ongoing but as far as the motion as concerned, it was proposed that the report be recommended to the Cabinet Member to successfully carrying on with this agenda and developing the good and important work.
- 4.50 In addition, reflecting on the comments of the Committee, the Chair proposed that the wording in 6.6 of the report be replaced with the following:

*The challenge of bringing about a fundamental change in transport powered by renewable sources remains. GCC has a leadership role in bringing this about and as a first step will be publishing its EV strategy very shortly.*

4.51 This was seconded by the Vice-Chair of the Committee for officers to take forward.

## **5. EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S REPORT: ECONOMY, ENVIRONMENT & INFRASTRUCTURE**

5.1 Colin Chick, Executive Director of Economy, Environment and Infrastructure, updated the Committee on current issues. In particular, members noted that:

- Services were dealing with going back into national lockdown restrictions and new challenges of protecting frontline staff through the winter e.g. gritting workers.
- On 16 December 2020, GCC signed the GDA with Homes England to secure £250m for M5 J10. The Cabinet had also approved the use of CPO for land acquisition if the project required further down the line.
- The Highways skills academy continued to be really successful, with apprenticeship positions now increasing up to 20.
- The ambition bid of £10.5m for the Tranche 2 of the Emergency Active Travel Fund (EATF) had unfortunately only resulted in £864,750 being awarded.
- Improvements on the A419 were now complete.
- The ITU team continued to work closely with schools to ensure the services were running safely. This had been an incredibly difficult area to bring back online after the first lockdown. The services had however continued to run through the second lockdown.
- E-scooters were proving to be very successful and providers were happy with the current usage.
- The footways spend update requested at 3.8.
- There were some last minute concerns from DfT of the M5 J9 improvement options, which should be going to consultation in January 2021.
- The LTP was being presented to Cabinet in January and full Council in March next year.
- Early feedback on the new booking system used at HRCs was very positive and many residents want to system to be permanent.
- The Quarter 2 2020/21 performance scorecard showed green stars on all services which reflected the hard work and dedication of officers tackling the challenges from the pandemic.

5.2 It was queried whether officers had considered looking at transport waste by water, due to the number of water courses in Gloucestershire. It was advised

that it was a difficult concept as the cost would go up quite dramatically and it would require double/triple handling, but potentially worth looking at in some circumstances.

- 5.3 Referencing the recent Tranche 2 EATF funding allocation, it was questioned how this money would now be allocated. It was advised that the amount would all be put towards building a pot for the B4603 cycle scheme. GCC did not want to lose the leverage they had for this scheme and still hoped to deliver the cycle route as soon as possible. The scheme would provide a solid backbone to connect existing and new cycle routes throughout the county.
- 5.4 A member was glad to see that the London Road cycle scheme had progressed regardless of parking concerns. They were however concerned about the removal of the speed camera and reported they had witnessed speeding which raised an issue of safety for cyclists using the new cycle lane. Officers confirmed once the scheme was in properly, they would be doing a full review of it and will look at things such as speeding. There was no plan at the moment to reinstall the speed camera.
- 5.5 Under 2.3 a member noted the reference to a potential new contract for street lighting and queried whether this would require the involvement of the Highways Procurement Cabinet Panel.

**ACTION: Colin Chick**

## **6. WORK PLAN**

- 6.1 The Committee noted the additional meeting for 9 December in order to consider the urgent motion referred from Council.
- 6.2 It was agreed that the 2021 work plan would be discussed at the next meeting.

**CHAIR**

Meeting concluded at 12:30.