

Overview Scrutiny Committee

Thursday, 19 September 2024

19.30 pm

Present:

Cllr Jordan Meade (Chair)
Cllr Lee Croxton (Vice-Chair)

Councillors: Helen Ashenden
Derek Ashenden
David Beattie
Gurdip Ram Bungar
Gavin Larkins
Tony Rana
Ektaveen Thandi

Sarah Parfitt Director (Corporate Services)
Ben Clarke Committee Services Officer (Minutes)

37. Apologies for absence

An apology for absence was received from Cllrs Leslie Hills and Emma Elliott; Cllrs Derek Ashenden and David Beattie attended as their respective substitutes.

38. Minutes

The minutes of the Overview Scrutiny Committee held on Monday, 25 March 2024 were agreed and signed by the Chair.

39. Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were made.

40. Call ins

Item called-in from the Cabinet meeting of 09 September 2024: Item 11, Climate Change Update

The Chair explained that the above item was considered at Cabinet on 09 September 2024 and that it had been called-in in order for the Committee: -

- to better understand and explore the challenges that the Council faces in decarbonising its own operations
- to assess if the strategy is delivering value for money
- to consider the viability of the strategy continuing against the backdrop of savings required to balance the next budget

The Director (Corporate Services) advised that the report asked Cabinet to reflect on the delivery of the council's Climate Change Strategy thus far and allow consideration of the

future strategic direction of the council's climate action given the changes to national policy, the economic situation of the county and the council's financial position since the council adopted the Strategy in December 2020.

The written decision of the Cabinet was as follows: -

Resolved that Cabinet Members acknowledge the report and agree to commence the development of a new Climate Change Strategy for the Council.

The Director (Corporate Services) further explained that the report gave the Cabinet an opportunity to refocus the Council's activity around climate change; back in 2019 the Council adopted a pledge to work towards becoming carbon neutral by 2030 which was followed up with a climate strategy that focused on three key areas:

- Priority 1 – Gravesham Borough Council – the organisation
- Priority 2 – Gravesham Borough Council the housing provider
- Priority 3 – Gravesham Borough Council the community leader

Over the last five years, the country had been through significant changes, and it gave an opportunity for the Council to pause and reflect on what had been achieved over the last five years. Those achievements had been presented to Full Council and the public through annual reports submitted to the Climate Change Advisory Board. In addition, it also gave an opportunity to review whether the Council was using its limited resources in the most effective way to deliver the most benefit to the Borough.

In light of the outcomes of those reflections, at the previous Cabinet meeting, Members agreed to a refocus and redrafting of the Climate Change Strategy. This was done to focus on the Council's role as a place shaper and leader in terms of how the Council would assist the public and local businesses in delivering wider climate change to the Borough.

The Chair thanked the Director (Corporate Services) for her presentation and reiterated his reasons for calling in the decision.

The Director (Corporate Services) fielded questions from the Committee and explained that:

- The initial £500K climate exchange reserve was set up to provide seed funding to support climate change initiatives and it brought forward projects such as 'recycling the go', installation of EV chargers in Council owned car parks and match funding for other projects. The Council had delivered many successful projects with £381K of that reserve still remaining. The Council had been successful in bids for government funding in relation to social housing decarbonisation and using existing council resources, those within the Housing Capital Programme in particular as well as some of the operational activities of the Council. The Committee queried if the £381K would be retained in the reserve and if it would be decreased or increased in the future. The Director (Corporate Services) advised that the Council, as part of the development for the new Strategy, would review if the reserve was still fit for purpose and upon conclusion of that review there may be a shift in how the reserve and its amount would be used in the future
- The Chair stated that the Council was marked 43 out of 181 district authorities in 2021/22 in terms of climate change strategies and how Gravesham's action plan compared to other local authorities and he requested an update on the results of the 2022/23 scorecard rankings. The Director (Corporate Services) explained that

Climate Emergency UK (CEUK) was a voluntary body that conducted desktop reviews of what was available on the Councils website rather than what the Council was actually doing. Between 2021 and 2023, CEUK changed the targets in the criteria for assessment and updated scoring to include areas that were the responsibility of the County, not the Borough. Due to those changes, the scorecards for 2022/23 could not be compared fairly to previous scorecards; additionally Members should be aware of how that information was gathered and assessed, as there were several areas that officers felt the Councils actual position was not fully reflected in those scores. The Director (Corporate Services) advised that she did not have the 2022/23 rankings to hand although the information had been submitted to the Climate Change Advisory Board and was available in the public domain. The Director (Corporate Services) agreed to circulate the information to Members outside of the meeting. The Council would continue to publish CEUK's work on the Councils website when it was available, and it would be used to assist in research for the future strategy; the aforementioned issues with their assessment would need to be factored in

- In 2019, there was an expectation that the Government would recognise the significance of the decarbonisation of the housing stock, it was still a policy of the current Government, and provide further funding to deliver against that policy. Some funding had been delivered but it had been on a bidding only basis which was not guaranteed. A portion of the decarbonisation work had been delivered successfully through the normal Capital Work programme as it delivered financial benefits to both the Council and the tenants such as reduced heating costs and thermal comfort improvements. The £127 million cost attributed to decarbonisation had increased but that figure was not known in 2019; the report to Cabinet enabled the Council to refocus and one of the areas that could be considered was increased lobbying arrangements to Government for more funding and working with external partners to do the same
- Installation of solar panels onto Council owned buildings was previously investigated; for the Civic Centre it was advised that there was not enough space on the roof, and it wasn't viable for the Woodvilles due to infrastructure already on the roof. Brookvale was able to accommodate solar panels, and an application for funding would be made to the next round of the next public sector decarbonisation scheme which was expected to be announced imminently. There were already a number of solar panels installed on some of the Councils housing stock, and it was about exploring further opportunities in the future when an opportunity arose
- Procurement arrangements had been reviewed as well as developer obligations and the Council expectations; all suppliers, over a certain figure, were now expected to demonstrate carbon reduction as part of their plans and contribute to reducing the carbon footprint in the Borough. In a number of projects, especially in employment and skills area, the Council was focused on skills that the community needed to bring forward a number of carbon reduction ambitions as those skills were still in development and were in short supply; seeking and developing those skills added to the Councils refocus to a leadership role
- To obtain the carbon literacy qualification, officers needed to complete a two day training process but if officers wanted to be certified then they needed to submit an application where they expressed how they wanted to take their climate change journey forward and influence others. The application would then be reviewed and agreed by a body before any certification was issued. The Council had a number of officers who had complete both stages of the process, but the majority felt that the two day training was sufficient for their roles. The training was targeted towards key officers and Councillors in key positions whereby the training would help them in their

decision making processes. A report was planned to be taken to the Climate Change Advisory Board setting out how the Council would increase staff awareness and showcase how climate change affected their Council roles as well as their personal lives. Initially, the Council paid for the training but then the LGA offered free sessions for officers which was taken advantage of. Local authorities across Kent were all working to develop a training programme which would share future costs and increase networking between officers across the County. The Director (Corporate Services) agreed to circulate how much the Council had spent on carbon literacy training for officers and Members

- The Council's carbon neutral pledge stated that the target was 2030 and within the pledge it stated that the Council would do what it could to help the community lower the emissions of the Borough by that date
- The Director (Corporate Services) acknowledged the Chair's concerns over the Council being a Community Leader but advised that the Council was best placed to liaise with the Community and local businesses and share best practice. The Council would use its role in the Community to share information and implement climate activities which would help increase awareness of what could be accomplished and the benefits that could be shared by the Community
- Since the Strategy was implemented, as agreed five years ago, a letter was sent to Westminster seeking further funding and powers to make the carbon neutral pledge possible. The Council had also been involved in all consultations released on policy design and raising climate change awareness wherever possible. A recent example of the Council driving climate change was engagement with the Lower Thames Crossing (LTC), the DSO process and numerous submissions to the LTC; one of the key points made in the submissions was the climate ambition of the Council as well as the climate impact of the LTC to the Borough
- The Director (Corporate Services) agreed to circulate a response outside of the meeting on how much was spent on upgrading the lights in Council buildings to LED and how much was funded from the reserve or from existing maintenance budgets

Following a discussion on climate change emergency and action, the Director (Corporate Services) advised that it was useful to have spirited debate on the subject of climate change and consider all points of view when creating the Strategy and appropriate climate activity. The Director (Corporate Services) acknowledged Members' comments and advised that the Strategy wasn't just about greenhouse emissions, it was about helping the whole Borough. A full debate on the merits of the Strategy and views on the subject of climate change could be had when the Strategy was submitted to Full Council next year

The Chair stated that when the Climate Change Strategy and the carbon neutral pledge were submitted to Full Council five years ago, he led the Conservative Group in opposing the motion put forward and raised concern that a fully costed plan outlining a detailed breakdown of the total costs and what was achievable wasn't in place first. The Chair had asked that a plan be put in place and brought back to Full Council for debate before anything was moved forward and agreed. In addition, the Chair raised that the pledge to become carbon neutral by 2030 exceeded the Government's own pledge of 2050 and was based on the availability of technology that still did not exist in 2024. The Chair stated that his original concerns raised in 2019 were more evident now with the difficulties the climate change strategy and pledge had encountered; the Chair was of the opinion that the Climate Change Strategy should be changed completely rather than evolved. The Chair asked for a detailed explanation of evolution vs change and what the priorities of the new Climate Change Strategy would be.

In response to the Chairs question, the Director (Corporate Services) advised that she could not comment on the evolution of the Strategy as she wasn't at the previous Cabinet meeting where that comment had been made by a Member of the Cabinet. With regards to the carbon neutral pledge, many other local authorities across the Country made similar pledges at that time and were now in the same position as Gravesham reflecting on the actions of the last five years, especially their positions following the pandemic. The Director (Corporate Services) reminded the Committee that in February 2020, the Council had achieved a ten year balanced medium term financial plan and then Covid struck which greatly altered the Councils financial position; the Council was in a very different position now compared to 2019. The areas of focus outlined in section 4.2 of the report focused on leadership and place making and using the powers available to the Council in the best way possible, based on the Councils current financial position.

The Director (Corporate Services) further explained that the Council had learned over the last five years that Climate Change activity did not just have to focus on the benefits to the environment. There were additional benefits that stemmed from the activity that had positive effects on the Council, local businesses and the public in terms of health and wellbeing, creation of new jobs and reduced energy bills etc. As a result, the new Strategy was likely to also consider the co-benefits of the climate change activity and what it meant to Gravesham as a Borough. More importantly, the Strategy would outline how the Council would work with the Boroughs organisations, businesses and local residents to encourage them to take steps to improve the climate and the general quality of life in Gravesham.

The Director (Corporate Services) stated that an indicative timetable for the new Strategy had been drafted; a report confirming Cabinet's decision to review the Strategy would be considered at the Climate Change Advisory Board in October 2024, with consultations being held internally and externally with resident and business surveys to inform on what was included in the Strategy. The draft Strategy is expected to be ready by March and submitted to Full Council in April for Member discussion and consideration.

The Chair asked that during the creation of the new Strategy, consideration be given to the Councils planning policies and whether or not they were fit for purpose in delivering carbon neutrality for the Borough; it was essential to ensure the policies were updated before the Local Plan process was complete.

The Chair stated that there wasn't any proposed recommendation to Cabinet at this stage but looked forward to a debate in the future.

Members noted the report.

Close of meeting

The meeting ended at 20:27pm.