

Working Group on the Climate Crisis

Monday, 9th November, 2020

MEETING OF THE WORKING GROUP ON THE CLIMATE CRISIS

- Members present: Councillor Smyth (Chairperson);
Alderman Copeland;
Councillors Baker, Bunting, de Faoite,
Ferguson, Hutchinson and McReynolds.
- In attendance: Ms. G. Long, Commissioner for Resilience;
Mr. A. Thatcher, Director of Planning and Building Control;
Ms. N. Largey, Divisional Solicitor;
Ms. C. McKeown, Sustainable Development Manager;
Ms C. Shortt, Policy and Data Analyst;
Mr. R. McLernon, Resilience Co-ordinator; and
Mr. G. Graham, Democratic Services Assistant.
- Also attended: Councillor O'Hara.

Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of 19th October, 2020 were taken as read and signed as correct.

Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were reported.

Draft Final Resilience Strategy

The Commissioner for Resilience reminded the Working Group that the Draft Resilience Strategy had already been distributed for public consultation for a period of six months :- to communities, city partners and all Council departments. She stated also that the Policy and Data Analyst had endeavoured to ensure that the document was as current as possible, given the current changes in the external environment. The Members were informed that the level of engagement, as part of the extended consultation process, had been impressive. The Working Group was informed that a major purpose of the Resilience Strategy was to deliver the Belfast Agenda by preparing the city for the impact of climate change and reducing the city's Green House Gas emissions.

The Commissioner reminded the Working Group that the draft strategy was a city-wide document and she informed the Members of some of the changes that were required following completion of the consultation process and the passage of time. She referred to the collaborative work which had been undertaken, with a range of external agencies, in regard to the formulation of the strategy. The Commissioner explained that the strategy sat within the Community Planning processes and was comprised of three core elements namely;

- A Resilience Assessment;
- An Ambitions Document; and
- A Delivery Plan

The Commissioner outlined the constituent parts of each document and stated that it had been modified to reflect Public Health concerns following the Covid-19 pandemic and further emphasised the issue of inequality, which was contained within the document, as a separate and distinct 'stress'. She referred to a further change in the strategy document which had identified previously a link between poor mental health and dependence on prescription medication and which was unsupported by the data.

The Commissioner referred some of the stress factors experienced by the city including, amongst other things, our dependence on fossil fuels, a lack of adequate housing supply in the city, and the centralisation of power as part of our current governance arrangements. She referred to the role of the Community Planning Partnership Board in terms of dealing with those cross-cutting issues. The Members were advised of the change in the original strategy to achieve zero-carbon emissions, in a generation, rather than merely low-carbon emissions as a stated goal within the original strategy document.

The Commissioner stated that she was encouraged by the enthusiasm and participation displayed by children and young people in the implementation of the strategy, with its strong focus on connectivity and a zero-emissions economy. The Working Group was advised of the impact of multiple problem solvers, whereby the solution to one particular problem had provided benefits to other problems identified within the risk-matrix. She identified 30 separate programmes within the strategy document, at various stages of development, including the benefits of having a zero-carbon road map, in the form of a mini-stern. The Commissioner stated that a high-level climate risk assessment had been completed and that the Council was in the process of developing its own adaptation and mitigation plan, which would be active by 2021, subject to Council approval. She reported on the ambitious work undertaken by Belfast Harbour in terms of its de-carbonisation plans to de-carbonise their energy usage by 2025, and their objective to be the greenest port in Europe.

The Members were advised of the work undertaken by Queen's University in the development of a global environmental solutions centre, focused on bio-diversity and other environmental solutions. She referred to the incorporation of sustainability within the City Deal and the implementation of the 1 million trees project. She stated that it was her intention to bring a proposal, to a future meeting of the Working Group, on how young people could be involved in the forthcoming COP 26 U.N. climate change conference in Glasgow. The Commissioner reported on the sustainable drainage strategy, implemented by the Department for Infrastructure (DfI), which would be included within the Draft Resilience Strategy and stated also that Translink had ambitions to have its fleet of buses achieve zero-carbon emissions by 2030.

The Working Group was advised of the important goal associated with the eradication of fuel-poverty and the retro-fit of the housing stock, with particular reference to public housing stock. She highlighted the importance attached to ensuring that homes were adequately insulated and more efficient in terms of energy usage. The Commissioner provided the Members with an outline of the governance structure associated with the implementation of the 30 projects contained within the draft strategy.

A Member stated that she was pleased that the strategy had been separated into three distinct components and that the issue of inequality had been incorporated into the strategy. In response to a further question in respect of whether the concerns of older people had been

factored into the strategy, the Commissioner reassured the Member that older people had been considered, given that they were highly vulnerable to climate change in terms of their health and lack of mobility. She referred also to the collaborative work undertaken by the Health and Social Care Board in regard to excess winter deaths and the work undertaken to retro-fit homes and eradicate fuel-poverty.

A Member raised concerns in regard to connectivity within the city, with particular reference to the development of sustainable transport modes and the lack of progress in that regard. The Commissioner recognised that more work required to be undertaken with DfI in terms of sustainable transport. She stated that progress had been made in the sustainable transport and connectivity delivery process but recognised that the centralised governance structure, in respect of transportation, was an impediment to rapid change. The Commissioner reinforced the need to tackle fuel poverty, as a matter of priority, and referred to the impact that it had on food poverty as a consequence. She stated that the strategy had identified the issues raised by the Member as a problem and of her hope that the future development of district heating schemes for the city, in the future, could make a positive impact towards the eradication of both food and fuel poverty.

The Working Group noted the information which had been provided and adopted the Draft Resilience Strategy, subject to the approval of the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee. The Members thanked the Commissioner for her detailed and informative presentation and acknowledged the amount of work involved to achieve the targets set, both within the strategy, and enshrined in legislation.

Oil and Gas Exploration Motion - Input from BCC Legal and Planning Department

The Sustainable Development Manager provided the Working Group with background information in regard to a motion, on the subject of oil and gas exploration, which had been presented to the Council previously, by the Chairperson. She referred to the content within the motion, requesting that the Council look at all avenues to examine the impacts of its policies, both legal and otherwise, in terms of their impact on climate change. She referred to the motion in terms of its reflection on central government policy on areas such as, fracking, oil and gas extraction, including a moratorium on the issue of further licensing in regard to mineral extraction. In so doing, she stated that the motion proposed communicating with the Minister for the Economy in relation to the issuing of exploratory licenses and the removal of permitted development rights for exploration purposes.

The Sustainable Development Manager provided an overview of the legal and planning implications associated with the motion and invited both the Divisional Solicitor and the Director of Planning and Building Control to advise the Working Group on the implications and restrictions associated with the adoption of that motion. She outlined the implications of the motion in terms of both planning and the Council's Local Development Plan.

The Divisional Solicitor stated that the Council's main levers in respect of that proposal, was contained within both its planning policy and separately in its influencing role, within the Northern Ireland Executive, to affect change in those areas of oil and gas /mineral extraction. She provided the Working Group with an outline in relation to the hierarchy of the planning process and stated that the Council was currently involved with a public examination stage, in relation to its draft Local Development Plan, which would allow the Council to develop its own plans in regard to environmental protection. She stated that the issues referred to in the Member's motion required the adoption of a regional policy by the Northern Ireland Executive.

The Divisional Solicitor advised that the Council was limited to adhering to its own planning policy in relation to land under its jurisdiction and applying relevant planning policies.

She stated that, as the Council had declared a climate emergency, environmental concerns could be considered in any future planning policy relevant to its draft Local Development Plan (L.D.P.)

In response to a question from a Member in regard to the Council's authority to draft its own policy in relation to permitted development, the Divisional Solicitor advised that the Council, as a Planning Authority, was obliged to apply regional planning policy in regard to decisions impacting on oil and gas extraction within its jurisdiction. She stated that the Council would primarily be in a position to dictate its policy on those specific areas, where it was the owner of any land where development of this nature was being considered. The Director of Planning and Building Control joined the meeting at this point and confirmed that it was the intention of Minister Mallon to remove Permitted Development rights in relation oil and gas exploration, including fracking, but could not as yet provide a time-lime for that legislative change.

The Director in response to a further question in regard to the Council's draft Local Development Plan, confirmed that the Council was at the stage of submitting part 1 of the draft Local Development Plan to the Planning Appeals Commission (P.A.C.) The Director gave the Working Group a detailed overview of the work which had been undertaken, prior to the submission of its Local Development Plan, to the Department for Infrastructure (DfI) in August 2019. He stated that the next stage of that process involved the P.A.C. examining all of the policies and supporting evidence, in the form of an Independent Examination. He outlined the details of the Council's draft policy in regard to mineral extraction in terms of determining a defined need. The Director stated further that, under the Council's draft planning policy, any permission in respect of mineral extraction would be required to meet specific criteria and in so doing, ensure the protection of the environment, landscape and natural heritage. He referred also to the requirement to undertake Environmental Impact Assessments (E.I.A.) prior to any mineral extraction proposal being approved

The Members were advised that Part 2 of the planning policy provided a more detailed scrutiny of planning proposals which were no less stringent than stage 1 of the planning process. In response to the Director's comments, a Member expressed his satisfaction that the draft planning policy contained within the draft L.D.P. provided the necessary protection for both people and the environment in respect of mineral extraction. In response to a further question from a Member regarding planning applications being lodged and approved in advance of the Council's draft L.D.P. being adopted, the Director stated that the Council's existing planning policy was, in his opinion, sufficiently robust to ensure that the environment and landscape would be sufficiently protected in respect of any such proposal.

A Member raised a further question in regard to the Council's ability to support the rejection of a hydro-carbon exploration proposal, prior to it being enshrined in the Council's draft L.D.P. The Director in response stated that any such exploration proposal, in advance of the draft L.D.P. being approved, would be judged within the current planning policy context. He stated that the current policy did offer some protection to the landscape and physical amenities and, in so doing, dependant on the proposal under consideration, would still give the Council reasonable grounds to refuse such a proposal, if it was considered to be detrimental, on a number of physical factors, including heritage and the environment.

The Working Group noted the information which had been provided in the update by the Director and agreed to ascertain, from DfI, a timeline in respect of the potential change in respect of permitted development rights. He agreed also to provide the Working Group with an update on the progress in relation to the public examination process, relevant to future permitted development rights.

**Update on NI Assembly All-Party Group on
Climate Action- October 2020**

The Sustainable Development Manager provided the Members with an update in respect of the N.I. Assembly All-Party Group on Climate Action. She stated that, at its October meeting, 3 items had been discussed, namely the Climate Change Bill, a report on both the Climate Assembly and the pathways to de-carbonisation. She stated that the Group had considered the impact of carbon emissions in respect of transportation and the need to develop a regional transport strategy, given the impact of current vehicle usage and associated pollution. The Members were informed that the All-Party Group had requested also that the Housing Executive provide them with a report in regard to the retro-fit of buildings.

The Chairperson, who had been in attendance at the All-Party Climate Action meeting, stated that it had been very well attended and reinforced the need for the public to engage with the process. He referred specifically to the 1 million trees project which was an important environmental development and which provided both tangible and visible environmental benefits and which permitted the public to play a positive and practical role.

The Commissioner advised the Members in regard to a number of up and coming events, including the launch of the mini-stern. She referred also to the work undertaken by the Council, in conjunction with K.P.M.G. in relation to a sustainability review, as part of the Council's development of its own Climate Plan. She stated that the methodology for the review included the involvement of the All Party Working Group and that it was anticipated that, to that end, a workshop would be held on the 23rd November, 2020.

Noted.

The Chairperson, on behalf of the Working Group, thanked the Commissioner for Resilience in relation to the valuable work undertaken by, both her and her team, in terms of the efforts made to influence policy and inform the public on the adverse impact of climate change.

Date of Next Meeting

The Working Group noted that its next meeting would be held on Monday, 23rd November at a time as yet to be determined.

Chairperson