

Working Group on the Climate Crisis

Wednesday, 6th October, 2021

MEETING OF THE WORKING GROUP ON THE CLIMATE CRISIS

Members present: Councillor Smyth (Chairperson);
Alderman Copeland;
Councillors Baker, Bunting, de Faoite and
McReynolds.

In attendance: Ms. D. Caldwell, Climate Commissioner;
Mr. J. Tully, Director of City and Organisational Strategy;
Ms. C. McKeown, Sustainable Development Manager;
Mr. R. McLernon, Resilience Co-ordinator;
Mr. J. McKearney, Project Support Officer; and
Mr. G. Graham, Democratic Services Assistant.

Apologies

An apology was reported on behalf of Councillor Hutchinson

Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of 21st September, 2021 were taken as read and signed as correct.

Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were reported.

Core Cities Climate Investment Platform

Mr. C. Murray, Director of Core Cities, attended in connection with this item and was welcomed by the Chairperson.

The Chairperson, on behalf of the Working Group, provided the Members with an update on the work and background of the U.K. City Investment Commission and its role in the identification of green re-investment opportunities across U.K. cities. He stated that initial research had estimated that income, linked to the green investment programme, could attract £330 billion into the U.K. economy.

Mr. Murray reported on the level of emissions emanating from U.K. cities and referred specifically to three areas of work which was required to address the climate emergency and encourage green investment. The Working Group was informed that, in terms of technical solutions to the problem, significant progress had been made. He referred to the issue of strategy, stating that, in broad terms, it was known and widely accepted what was required and the fact that public opinion had now shifted in support of the practical issues and implications associated with adapting to a net-zero emissions economy. The Working Group was informed that by far the most significant challenge, faced by the U.K. economy, was how

to fund the infrastructure required to adapt to a net-zero economy, estimated to be approximately £330 billion.

The Working Group was informed that, as a result of the huge costs associated with the green investment programme, the public sector would be unable to shoulder that financial burden unilaterally and that the private sector would be required to provide additional financial assistance in support of that objective. The Director of Core Cities highlighted the importance attached to creating the conditions necessary to encourage the private sector capital investment which would complement the other collaborative work undertaken throughout the U.K. in support of the net-zero emissions strategy. He stated that much of the investment required had been identified within stage one of the report and that the stage 2 report, which was due to be published in the near future, would deal with how many of the net-zero emission targets could be achieved, by U.K. cities, to achieve maximum benefits.

The Members were informed that it was important to promote projects which were attractive to the private sector and which provided them with a return on their investment. The Director of Core Cities explained that the retro-fit of housing stock continued to be a problem area, given that the return on investment on that particular project was limited. He suggested that it might be prudent to divert funds from the more profitable enterprises to those areas which were less attractive private sector investment options. The Director stated that a report, outlining a number of proposals in the matter, would be published on 21st October, 2021 and would be launched, for the benefit of the investment community, at the COP26 conference in November 2021.

In response to a question from the Chairperson in regard to the capture and storage of community energy as a potential climate initiative, Mr. Murray confirmed that such an energy regeneration project could fit within the overall energy strategy and meet the terms associated with an approved financial model. A Member of the Working Group enquired as to the potential opportunities to secure investment loans, through Credit Union organisations, in respect of the retro-fit of homes. In response, the Director of Core Cities agreed to explore the issue raised and highlighted some of the financial impediments associated with that issue, including debt ownership of the retro-fit costs and how those issues might be resolved through a social outcomes based solution.

The Sustainable Development Manager confirmed that some community-based work had been identified within the PCAN project and that there existed opportunities for Credit Union organisations to extend their lending portfolios, targeting projects which had been developed to reduce the impact of climate change. She agreed to bring the various strands of the PCAN work together, including the challenges associated with cost effective development projects and agreed to meet with the Director of Core Cities to discuss how many of the proposals, within PCAN, might be developed further.

The Director of City and Organisational Strategy stated that a housing sub-group had been established to examine the retro-fit of Housing Executive stock and referred to some of the benefits associated with that enterprise, including skills and employability, inclusive growth, community wealth, a reduction in food poverty and improvements in health and community well-being. In response to a question for the Director of City and Organisational Strategy in regard to the location and number of potential demonstrator sites, Mr. Murray stated that it was probable that the decision on both issues would reside with the U.K. government.

A Member enquired as to the possibility of developing energy storage as a means to encourage community well-being. The Director of Core Cities stated that the investment required input from large scale financial institutions which could absorb the costs associated with long term financial returns, given the variable nature in supply of renewable energy. He

stated that banks and other financial institutions, including pension fund providers, could make a valuable contribution toward the financing of future green energy development projects.

The Climate Commissioner reported that a household energy storage system was currently being piloted in Northern Ireland, through a social housing energy supply project, in conjunction with the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. She informed the Working Group that the supply scheme included the storage and distribution of green energy and had delivered significant energy savings to local customers. She reported that the "Girona" project as it had been named, could prove useful as a potential demonstrator proposal and with an accompanied tailored pricing plan, could attract significant interest and investment from the private sector. The Director of Core Cities stated that, having now been made aware of the scheme, he would endeavour to carry out some additional research on the merits and potential expansion of the "Girona" project.

The Chairperson, on behalf of the Working Group, thanked the Director of Core Cities for his informative and detailed presentation and he departed from the meeting.

Update on COP26

The Climate Commissioner provided the Members with an update on the background to the establishment of the COP26 conference and its various events. She referred to the significance of the five year conference forums, with the previous one having been held in Paris, in 2015. The Commissioner reminded the Working Group that, at the 2015 COP conference, global leaders had given commitments to limit the rise in global temperatures to 1.5 degrees Celsius until 2050. The Members were informed that, currently, the world was significantly off course in terms of achieving those targets and was predicted to achieve a sixteen per cent rise in emissions by 2030. The Commissioner reported that should these predictions be realised, a temperature rise of 1.5 degrees Celsius would be reached by 2040 and 2.7 degrees Celsius rise, by the end of the century. She highlighted the urgency of the situation and of the requirement by the major global polluting nations to reduce, significantly, the level of emissions produced by them, if the 1.5 degrees Celsius target was to be achieved.

The Climate Commissioner referred to the three areas of work which were required from the COP26 conference, namely, ambition, awareness and opportunity. She highlighted the need to galvanise local community awareness in regard to climate change, stating that the COP26 conference would make a valuable contribution in the achievement of that objective. The Climate Commissioner referred specifically to the Council's Resilience Strategy and of the need to ensure that the public interest was encouraged and developed further. She referred also to the work undertaken to strengthen existing and the creation of new partnerships in pursuance of the climate change agenda. She referred to using the engagement with Core Cities as an ongoing example of partnership working.

The Climate Commissioner referred to a number of future events which would be taking place, including the Common Purpose Northern Ireland Legacy programme, involving young people. She stated that the legacy programme would provide young people with an opportunity to present their ideas on ways to tackle the climate emergency. The Working Group was provided with a list of additional upcoming events, including a two week programme entitled "Re(Act)", dealing predominately with issues surrounding the circular economy.

The Members were informed that it was anticipated that Belfast City Council would be represented at the COP26 conference and would be furnished with more information in regard to the itinerary and access to the events when that information was available from the conference organisers. In response to a question from a Member regarding access to the COP26 conference, the Climate Commissioner stated that separate access passes would be

required, which was both limited and enforced strictly. She stated that a programme of events had been published and that she would be happy to provide any Member with a pre-briefing, should they be successful in obtaining the relevant access documentation to attend the COP26 conference.

The Working Group noted the information provided and thanked the Climate Commissioner for her informative presentation.

Update on BCC Climate Plan

The Climate Commissioner reported that it was anticipated that the Belfast City Council Climate Plan would be developed by February 2022. She stated that the Climate Plan was based on the Council's sustainability review, which focussed on three main areas and included greenhouse gas emissions, culminating in the development and publication of a baseline report, using 2018/19 as the baseline period. The Climate Commissioner reported that the Council was in consultation with a number of companies to ascertain how it might quantify the emissions produced, by its assets and estate, and how the data might be collated in an automated and digital format. She stressed the importance of using the latest technology in order to target Council resources to reduce its carbon footprint.

The Climate Commissioner referred to other work undertaken by the Council by examining resource efficiency in terms of its energy use, including its procurement practices. She explained further the difference between scope one, two and three emissions. The Working Group was informed that scope three emissions often went unreported by companies and related to the supply chain. She stated that, in many cases, scope three emissions comprised the highest percentage of emissions from an organisation's overall emissions base.

The Working Group was informed that a draft Climate Adaptation Plan had been submitted by Climate NI and referred also to the £1 million climate fund, which would be used to promote and develop investment into initiatives such as the retro-fit of buildings. The Climate Commissioner reported that a number of other carbon reduction investment projects had been presented for consideration and would be screened as a means to select the most viable, impactful and cost-effective use of Council resources.

The Working Group noted the information which had been provided and thanked the Commissioner for the efforts made by her team in support of the efforts to achieve reductions in the Council's carbon footprint. The Members stressed the importance of community engagement stating that it was important that the local community were able to embrace the climate challenge, through participation in a range of community-based initiatives.

Housing Energy Efficiency, Landlord/Seller Incentivisation

The Climate Commissioner reported that she had been requested by the Chief Executive to explore the possibility of the Council being able to influence landlords to upgrade the energy standards of their properties. She highlighted, in particular, houses of multiple occupation as being in need of specific attention. To that end, she informed the Working Group that discussions had taken place with officers from the Council's Planning and Building Control Service. The Climate Commissioner informed the Working Group that, as a result of her enquiries, it had transpired that, in Northern Ireland, there was no statutory obligation on landlords to upgrade their properties to a specified E.P.C. rating.

The Members were advised that the Council's building control regulations were the only statutory powers which the Council could use as an enforcing authority and had no powers to develop or formulate legislation, in that particular area. The Climate Commissioner

explained that the Building Control Regulations were relevant to a limited number of enforceable areas, namely, fire safety, sanitation and energy standards. The Working Group was informed that there were other financial schemes which might assist in this area, including the use of carbon-neutral mortgage schemes, but reiterated that responsibility for formulating legislation, in this area, resided with the Department of Finance. The Working Group expressed its frustration in regard to the lack of enforceable legislation in this area and requested that officers consult with the Department of Finance, with a view to having similar legislation enacted, as exists currently within Great Britain. The Working Group suggested that it would be useful, in conjunction with Members of the Licensing Committee, to consult with the relevant Students' Unions and Tenants Union, as a means to ascertain the living standards experienced by students living in rented accommodation, including Houses of Multiple Occupation.

Car Free Sundays Trial for Belfast

A Member stated that he had been in consultation with the Minister for Infrastructure who was supportive, in principle, of a car-free Sundays trial. The Working Group recognised some of the challenges associated with the proposed trial, including how it would operate and who would facilitate its implementation. The Director of City and Organisational Strategy stated that it might prove beneficial to discuss the matter at the next meeting of the Chief Officers' Management Team and prior to the proposal being presented to the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee for its consideration.

Chairperson