



To:
Councillor Andrea Lewis
Cabinet Member for Climate
Change and Service Transformation

BY EMAIL

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Overview & Scrutiny

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Summary: This is a letter from the Natural Environment Scrutiny Performance Panel to the Cabinet Member for Climate Change & Service Transformation. The letter concerns the meeting held on 19 May 2021 and the updates received regarding the Council's Climate Change Action Plan.

Dear Councillor Lewis,

On 19 May 2021 the Panel met to discuss Council progress surrounding the Climate Emergency Declaration. We are writing to you to reflect on what we learnt from the discussion and to share the observations of the Panel.

The Panel were grateful to all who attended to provide information and answer questions. The Panel also heard from the Director of Place regarding recent public consultation feedback, centred on the Council's Climate Change Action Plan.

We heard that this is a critical area of work as a Local Authority and that you, and officers, appreciated the opportunity to demonstrate the ongoing work and to highlight previous work, since the 2009/10 carbon reduction strategy. You emphasised that this work continues to build upon previous projects, and that the Council's influence continues to make positive differences across Swansea.

The Panel heard that this Action Plan incorporates a cross-Council approach, encompassing past and present administrations, to maximise opportunities and promote a cohesive approach across the Council as a whole.

The Panel heard that, in 2019/20, there had been a 55% reduction in Council emissions since the first carbon reduction plan was developed in 2010. We heard that on-going action points included the commitment to reduce fossil fuel investments in terms of the staff pension fund. Actions also include the roll out of electric vehicle charging points, having regard to the needs for network improvements in relation to purchase and maintenance of electric vehicle fleets. We heard that the current fleet will rise to 51 and officers are evaluating tenders to incorporate more environmentally

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friendly fleet vehicles. Officers explained that the full fleet is circa 700 vehicles and that the commercial (electric) market is not currently in existence for the Heavy Goods Vehicles in the same way as it is for small vans and cars. We understand this presents some challenges in attaining a fully green fleet of Council operated vehicles.

We heard that the Council will explore purchase of gas from renewable resources and that, under the present contract, 100% of electricity comes from renewable sources.

We heard that new Council homes are incorporating solar battery storage and air source heat pumps. The housing strategy is linked to the 'Swansea Standard' for new build homes, and also the decarbonisation of wider housing stock.

Officers explained that some waste and recycling targets were difficult to meet over the lockdown period, with many people at home for longer than usual. This was reflected in the report and is not expected to become a long-term issue.

Other areas touched upon by the report included the 21,000 streetlights upgraded to LEDs and the positive engagement from young people through the Eco Schools programme. Officers outlined the range of policy areas interlinked within this area of work, such as the Local Biodiversity Plan, Local Development Plan and Supplementary Planning Guidance. We also heard that a sustainable transport strategy is currently being developed leading to a coherent countywide sustainable travel solution.

The Panel heard that the main objectives of the Climate Change Action Plan will help to achieve net carbon zero by 2030 for 'in scope' emissions, taking a whole-Council approach, incorporating robust strategies and clear targets. Officers are working to identify where new policies may be required or where updates to current policies are needed. Officers highlighted that this approach aligns the current Corporate Plan with future corporate plans, in addition to the Well-Being of Future Generations Act (Wales).

The Panel heard that officers continue to work on developing measurable and quantitative indicators in order to demonstrate and evaluate outcomes. The report outlined that, for example, energy consumption across building stock carried a target of 3% year on year reductions. Officers also highlighted that, as an example of measurable outcomes, the Council had achieved a 66% reduction over the last 10 years in street lighting CO₂ emissions.

Moving from the 2030 to 2050 target, officers described how the Council could develop longer-term strategies and involve wider stakeholders such as partners, businesses and communities. Officers explained that one such strategy would be the launch of a pledge scheme, where individuals and organisations can pledge to make a difference, thereby creating a critical mass of people to drive objectives forward. Officers acknowledged that this is a long-term strategy and, although the action needed is urgent, it will take time to embed such strategies, open dialogue and empower and enable action.

The Panel heard that, as part of the engagement strategy, a climate change survey was designed and implemented. The Panel received an overview of these key findings and discussed pertinent points. Officers explained that an unprecedented 1000 responses were received, demonstrating high levels of public interest in this topic. The Panel acknowledged the efforts of Council staff and we thank all officers involved for implementing and evaluating this survey.

Officers presented the data, highlighting some gaps due to Covid restrictions, such as face-to-face engagement and school visits. Officers explained that the Council has built upon a strong network of relationships to support responses, using all available mechanisms to publicise the survey and generate a large number of returns. Officers commented on the overwhelmingly positive responses; over 93% of people being concerned about climate change and over 94% indicating commitment to make a change. The Panel noted that 350 responses came from Council employees and you commented on this number being a positive demonstration of the Council's ambition to deliver objectives.

Officers highlighted the impacts of lockdown restrictions on behaviour changes, such as reduced car travel, and how the Council should aim to embed any positive outcomes to propel climate change actions. Officers also commented on the consistent pattern of results; the majority of people agreeing with the strategies being implemented currently.

Common themes within the public feedback included education, agile working, recycling facilities and general support for proposed key actions. Officers acknowledged that to have such feedback and indicators of public endorsement is very encouraging.

The Panel heard that regard should be had to aspects of inequality and fuel poverty; many people want to make changes but their financial circumstances will not easily permit these changes, for example the expensive operation of pre-paid electricity metres.

We asked about the local transport network, buses in particular and the lack of service, especially in outlying areas. We heard that an Active Travel solution is within the scope of the Council's 2050 target and officers expect that discussions on a regional basis will likely address this.

The Panel heard that, building on many years of efforts, officers are using the survey feedback to inform design and delivery of services. Officers explained that an updated report would be published in due course to set out the clear actions arising out of this consultation.

We raised queries over car battery use and sustainability. You explained to us that once a battery depletes to 80% efficiency they are no longer used as car batteries, but may be utilised as storage capacity elsewhere. Officers acknowledged that the proposed banning of sales of petrol / diesel cars is driving forward the technology and market for battery powered vehicles.

We also questioned how changes to housing could be made and officers acknowledge that such changes would not be achieved by homeowners without financial support to bring properties up to standard. Officers explained that Welsh Government is further improving the insulation standards of new homes.

We raised queries over the availability of generic charging points for electric vehicles (EV). You explained to us that the supply for the EV infrastructure is 100% renewable, available 24 hours per day, bilingual and is supporting a local company. You expressed your satisfaction with the contracted supplier and emphasised that costs were kept to a minimum where possible.

We heard about the ongoing learning and development being undertaken in this area. Officers explained to the Panel that the Council is working with Gower College to train internal operatives on how to install new technology. Officers are also working with housing staff to develop operating manuals to inform tenants on how to use the new technology. We also heard that the first cohort of Council staff undertook Carbon Literacy training recently and the Council is now exploring options to roll this training out to every Council employee.

We asked questions about the availability of tree mapping and how this may help to monitor maintenance of trees and the underlying land. Officers explained that such a plan relates to Council owned land only, and that private land relies on individual land owners taking responsibility for maintenance.

Finally, we would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the hard work and efforts of all staff and officers involved in the public consultation exercise, particularly during the challenges of the pandemic restrictions. We greatly valued the input and engagement of all attendees at this meeting.

Your Response

We hope you find this letter useful and informative. We would welcome your comments on any of the issues raised, but in this instance, a formal written response is not required.

Yours sincerely,

Councillor Peter Jones

Convener, Natural Environment Scrutiny Performance Panel

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