

RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

COUNCIL

15TH JANUARY 2020

THE COUNCIL'S RESPONSE TO CLIMATE CHANGE

REPORT OF THE CHIEF EXECUTIVE IN DISCUSSION WITH THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL (COUNCILLOR ANDREW MORGAN) AND CABINET'S CLIMATE CHANGE CHAMPION (COUNCILLOR RHYS LEWIS)

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1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 The purpose of the report is to provide Members with an update on the Council's response to Climate Change.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that Members:

- 2.1 Note the contents of this report;
- 2.2 Agree that the Council's progress towards achieving its Climate Change target of being Carbon Neutral by 2030 is reported biannually to Council for the foreseeable future;

3 REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

- 3.1 For the Council to become Carbon Neutral by 2030.

4. BACKGROUND

- 4.1 In March 2018, Rhondda Cynon Taf Council signed up to the UK100 Clean Energy Commitment to take appropriate action in order to transition towards being a fully environmentally responsible Authority by 2050. In doing so, the Council acknowledged:

- The historic commitments made at the 2015 United Nations Climate Change Conference in Paris towards the future of renewable energy;
- Our responsibility to help secure an environmentally sustainable future for our residents and in relation to the global effects of man-made climate change;
- That air pollution increases the risk of lung cancer, it can worsen existing lung conditions and stunt the growth of children's lungs;

- That climate action is not an inhibitor of economic growth but rather a driver of it, and additional benefits of the development of green industries include the potential to capitalise on the objectives of the Cardiff Capital Region City Deal, in creating well-paid, high-skilled employment locally, regionally and nationally; better health and wellbeing and financial savings to residents and businesses in the short and longer term.

4.2 In light of this, the Council resolved to:

- Match the ambitions of the UK100 Agreement through pledging to achieve 100% clean energy across Rhondda Cynon Taf Council's full range of functions by 2050;
- Work in partnership with our residents and business community to deliver against the commitments made nationally and internationally at the 2015 Paris Summit;
- Turn these commitments into reality through developing a `route map` to a sustainable future, working together with local business, educational and residential communities as part of an integrated approach to a shared sustainable future.

4.3 The Council has followed up this commitment by investing significant sums in reducing its energy consumption, the energy from which has been derived from fossil fuels. The Council already purchases 100% of its electrical energy supply from renewable energy sources and has reduced its carbon footprint by 37% or 12,725 tonnes over the past five years, Examples of the action taken to date by the Council include:

- The upgrading of all street lights to efficient LED units and turning off street lights in specific localities;
- Investing in solar panels, LED lighting, wall and roof insulation, energy efficient gas boilers, and combined heat and power units in many schools, leisure centres and council buildings. The solar panels fitted on council buildings are the equivalent size of two football fields;
- Installed electric cooking equipment in all new kitchens to benefit from the renewable electricity we procure;
- Significantly reduced the amount of waste that is disposed of by landfill or through energy for waste;
- Invested in the Healthy Hillside project with Welsh Government and the Fire Service with benefits for carbon reduction, biodiversity and air quality;
- Through planning agreements with windfarm developers, hundreds of hectares of peat and associated habitats have been targeted for restoration and their carbon and water storage has been increased;

- Invested in 20 micro generation Hydrogen Fuel Cells for our highest energy users (care homes, large schools and leisure centre) with the ambition to do more – this has a significant impact on the emission of greenhouse gases;
 - Ensured all new schools and other council buildings are certified as BREEAM “Very Good” or “Excellent” with EPC ratings of A;
 - Through various government grant schemes, enabled many residents on low incomes to improve the heat insulation in their own homes;
 - Worked with partners to develop renewable energy projects such as, Clydach hydroelectricity, Vattenfall Wind Farm, Gasification Boiler at Ynysangharad War Memorial Park, and Bryn Pica Eco Park.
- 4.4 On 2nd May 2019, the Committee on Climate Change (the CCC), an independent statutory body established under the Climate Change Act 2008 to advise the UK Government and Devolved Administrations on emissions targets and monitor the progress made in reducing greenhouse gas emissions and preparing for climate change, published **Net Zero – The UK’s contribution to stopping global warming.**
- 4.5 The reports key findings are that:
- The Committee on Climate Change recommends a new emissions target for the UK: net-zero greenhouse gases by 2050;
 - In Scotland, it recommends a net-zero date of 2045, reflecting Scotland’s greater relative capacity to remove emissions than the UK as a whole;
 - In Wales, it recommends a 95% reduction in greenhouse gases by 2050, due to the extent of the farming industry.
- 4.6 Its conclusion is ***“A net-zero Green House Gas target for 2050 will deliver on the commitment that the UK made by signing the Paris Agreement. It is achievable with known technologies, alongside improvements in people’s lives, and within the expected economic cost that Parliament accepted when it legislated the existing 2050 target for an 80% reduction from 1990.*”**
- 4.7 ***However, this is only possible if clear, stable and well-designed policies to reduce emissions further are introduced across the economy without delay. Current policy is insufficient for even the existing targets.”***
- 4.8 The governments of the UK have recognised that there is a Climate Emergency and have accepted the advice of the Committee for Climate Change and have adopted these targets which are over and above the commitment made by Rhondda Cynon Taf Council in committing to the UK 100 Commitment.

4.9 Further independent scientific research has suggested that unless significant action to reduce the impact of carbon emissions is taken by governments across the world by 2030, the current changes to the climate will be irreversible. The impact of this will be catastrophic, with significant changes to the temperature of the Earth creating rising sea levels, destroying many countries and cities, and forever changing our eco systems that support human life. The recent fires and floods in New South Wales and Jakarta that have already occurred in 2020 highlight the need for us all to urgently take steps to reduce the impact of climate change.

4.13 **In light of this, the Council's Cabinet, in approving to consult on the Council's new Corporate Plan, committed to becoming a Carbon Neutral organisation by 2030 and to work with residents and businesses within the Borough to ensure the whole County Borough is Carbon Neutral as close as possible to the 2030 target.**

5 WHAT ACTION DOES THE COUNCIL NEED TO TAKE?

5.1 The challenge facing the Council, local businesses and residents is significant and can feel overwhelming given the size of the change and the level of financial investment required to transform the way we live our daily lives.

5.2 To respond to the Committee on Climate Change Report the UK and Welsh Governments will have to show strong leadership and take responsibility for:

- **The Electricity Sector** - The decarbonisation of the electricity sector has arguably been one of the big success stories of the UK economy and Government policy over the past 15 years. 33.3% of electricity generated in the UK in 2018 was from low carbon sources, and, more recently, the UK has broken a number of coal-free records. 100% of the UK's electricity mix will need to come from low carbon sources and low carbon generation. The Net Zero Report contains the stark statement "*consistently strong deployment of low-carbon generation will be needed in order to quadruple low-carbon supply by 2050... including at least 75 GW of offshore wind*". This will require significant investment in traditional and new renewables, increased investment in offshore wind and bioenergy, the widespread deployment of carbon capture, usage and storage technology (CCUS), and ultimately investment in new nuclear plants;
- **The Transport Sector** – The UK has made limited progress in decarbonising its transport sector for a number of years. Over the past ten years, as emissions from power and industry have reduced, transport has become the largest emitting sector of the UK economy accounting for 27% of Green House Gas emissions in 2017. The heightened awareness of the need for clean air and the Government's Road to Zero Strategy https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/723501/road-to-zero.PDF has changed this, and the public and private sector are now rapidly trying to change and

decarbonise the UK's transport infrastructure. However, when you compare the UK's performance with other European countries such as Norway (which is a major oil producer!) the UK's progress is insignificant. The Net Zero Report recommends that:

- all new cars and vans on sale from 2035 will need to be fully electric. This creates a new set of challenges including those around charging/fuelling infrastructure, but also creates opportunities for new innovative commercial structures, funding models and approaches in the automotive and infrastructure sectors;
 - the majority of HGVs will either need to be electric or hydrogen powered, with 800 hydrogen refuelling stations being built by 2050 and 90,000 depot based electricity chargers being deployed; and
 - emissions from aviation and shipping will need to be considered and reduced.
- **The Heat Sector** – Green House Gas emissions generated by houses amounted to 15% of the UK's total in 2017, with almost all of this coming from the burning of natural gas for heating and cooking. The Government has since responded by a commitment to ban gas boilers in new homes from 2025 and instead require ground or air source heat pumps to be installed. The renewed focus on district heating networks is also encouraging. The Net Zero Report goes further than this, mandating huge investment in domestic energy efficiency and proposing an entire overhaul of domestic and industrial heat generation, with hydrogen likely playing an integral role, along with electricity. The only by-product of burning hydrogen is water and it can potentially be fed through the existing gas network to homes across the country, thereby utilising existing infrastructure. One of the more challenging elements of a switch to hydrogen however will be the universal roll out of electric heating and hydrogen-compatible boilers in homes. Such a transfer will be a major technical and logistical challenge, something that many believe the UK struggles with: the Smart Meter roll out being one of many examples cited. To achieve the Net Zero targets, large scale hydrogen production plants will have to deliver the energy at scale by 2030.

- 5.3 Whilst, the UK Government will take a lead on the major infrastructure changes required to achieve the Net Zero Targets, the Council will inevitably take a facilitating role to implement UK and Welsh Government policy in respect of green energy production, creating the infrastructure for low carbon vehicles and for low carbon homes. The Council, local businesses and residents can also play their part, with societal change being fundamental to a reduction in the emission of greenhouse gases.

5.4 To respond to this challenge the Council has created the Climate Change Steering Group, a sub-committee of the Council's Cabinet, charged with developing the Council's response to the Climate Change agenda and supporting Cabinet to achieve the 2030 Net Zero target. The Steering Group has met twice, and has monthly meetings planned until the end of this Municipal Year. To date it has:

- **Work Programme** - Developed and agreed a work programme for the six months to May 2020;
- **Biodiversity** - Considered and challenged the Council's Biodiversity Plan and recommended that Cabinet approve the Plan;
- **Community use of vacant/unused land** - Simplified the Council's processes and procedures to enable community groups to use underused or vacant Council land for environmental purposes;
- **Waste Management Strategy** – Recommended that Cabinet consider increasing the Council's waste recycling target from 70% of its household waste by 2025 to 80% by 2025 at its January 2020 meeting, and challenged other public sector and private sector organisations to do the same. This new target will be the most challenging in the UK;
- **Local Procurement of Supplies and Services** - Requested officers to come forward with proposals in June 2020 to increase the Council's procurement of local supplies and services. Currently, the Council spends £227m on supplies and services of which £51m is spent with businesses registered in Rhondda Cynon Taf, and £138m on businesses registered in South East Wales. The Steering Group has requested a report that sets out targets and plans to significantly increase the amount of money the Council spends locally, initially focusing on small and medium sized companies based in the County Borough, and South East Wales.
- **Elimination of single use plastics in all Council contracts and premises** – Requested that officers present a report to the April 2020 Steering Group to identify all the procurement contracts where the Council purchases single use plastics for its day to day business, including schools, and puts in place a recyclable or carbon friendly alternative;
- **Taffs Well Thermal Spring – Generating carbon free energy for the community of Taffs Well** – Made a recommendation for Cabinet to consider at its January 2020 meeting to invest in the technology to use the natural heat from Taffs Well Thermal Spring to heat the local school and community centre.

5.5 Over the coming months the Steering Group will consider the following reports:

- **Transportation – how do we reduce our carbon emissions and change our modes of transport?** - This report will focus on maximising the benefits of the South Wales Metro; consider electrical vehicle charging; opportunities to significantly increase active travel options; how we reduce the impact of the Council’s fleet of vehicles, commissioned/subsidised public transport, licenced taxis and home to school transport;
- **Air Quality – how do we improve air quality, and eliminate the “hotspots”, the Air Quality Management Areas in the County Borough** – The report will consider what proactive action we can take in the air quality management areas, to ensure air quality improves across the County Borough;
- **Community Engagement – What can the residents of Rhondda Cynon Taf do to reduce their carbon footprint?** – How can the Council working with Friends of the Earth, Extinction Rebellion, Greenpeace and other local environmental groups engage residents and businesses to adapt and change how they live their lives to reduce their demand on planet Earth? *This will be a joint report with the Community Members of the Steering Group;*
- **Energy Generation – What opportunities do we have to generate energy on public sector land and/or rivers in Rhondda Cynon Taf –** This report will set out a series of proposals for the Council to build and finance potential solar, wind and hydro schemes on Council or other public sector owned land and rivers, that will make a significant contribution to the Council achieving its Carbon Neutral target;
- **Nature’s Assets - Using the Natural Environment to reduce carbon emissions and the effects of climate change** – This report will focus on a range of projects, such as a long term tree planting programme in town centres, schools, public sector land and other sites, which will have a positive impact on improving air quality, supporting flood management and prevention schemes, reducing noise and vehicle pollution and generally improving the living environment of residents. We are currently working with National Resources Wales to identify the land in the Council’s and NRW’s ownership suitable for tree planting programmes and to determine the “right” range of tree species to be planted. In addition, we will consider how the Council can replicate the Isle of Man Community Tree Planting Scheme, where the Isle of Man will plant one tree for every person living on the island in 2020. The Isle of Man project, which is known as ‘The People’s Wood,’ will contain 85,000 trees in support of the government’s commitment to reach net-zero carbon emissions;
- **Strategic and Local Development Plans – How do we plan for the future, and ensure new homes, new buildings, and other infrastructure are carbon neutral?** – The Cardiff Capital Region and the Council are planning to prepare a regional SDP and a RCT LDP. It is essential that these ten year plans include new policies and commitments to ensure our housing, transportation and business infrastructure minimises our carbon footprint and it is fit for purpose in the 21st Century and beyond. This will include

commitments to ensure offices and homes are well connected with public and active travel options; town centres become places to live as well as work and socialise; and the natural environment is enhanced;

- **Quantifying Rhondda Cynon Taf's carbon footprint on Wales and the World** – This report will seek to use Welsh Government's planned carbon footprint measurement tool that will be released in April 2020 to establish a robust baseline for the County Borough and to determine the next steps to prioritise interventions and investments;
- **Learning from Best Practice across the UK and the World** – The report will identify examples of best practice from across the World and consider how the Council, residents and businesses can apply the best practice in Rhondda Cynon Taf to reduce our footprint.

- 5.6 The potential Steering Group Agenda item that has attracted the most interest is in respect of exploring the opportunity to plant more trees to tackle the effects of climate change. We are fortunate in Rhondda Cynon Taf that the built up areas of the County Borough support a large number of urban trees, in parks, gardens, woods and along roads and railways. Approximately 18.5% of the urban area is tree covered: Aberdare, Pontypridd and Mountain Ash all exceed 20% urban tree cover compared to a Welsh average of 16.3%. Typically, well-wooded urban areas are associated with affluence. In Rhondda Cynon Taf almost all communities benefit from urban tree cover. Managing the trees on highways and other council land is important for their health, longevity and for carbon storage.
- 5.7 The great majority of the deciduous woodland in the valleys and border vale have developed through natural regeneration. Air photos suggest that, since the Second World War, woodland cover has extended significantly in Rhondda Cynon Taf, almost exclusively by natural regeneration. This is due to a number of factors, including reduced sheep grazing (as a result of changes to farm subsidies), and the natural tree colonisation of brownfield sites/road embankments and railway lines. Because that process has happened naturally, it has not been widely recognised, but if one compares successive aerial photos over the last 70 years, the results are significant and the process is strong and on-going.
- 5.8 We are working with NRW to strike the right balance between facilitating natural regeneration of woodland with a successful large-scale tree planting programme that may also serve a purpose as a commercial venture. We have to recognise that, compared with natural regeneration, plantation woodlands rarely look natural and because of the even structure and age of trees there is reduced habitat diversity and less opportunity for biodiversity. In addition, planting trees increases the risk of spreading tree diseases. The very recent emergence and rapid spread of 'ash die back' in Britain appears to have been greatly accelerated, and may have been directly caused by the planting of diseased ash trees grown in tree nurseries. All these factors will be taken into consideration in developing a Tree Strategy for the Council.

6 EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS

6.1 An Equality Impact Assessment is not required with regard to this report.

7 CONSULTATION

7.1 There are no consultation requirements at present.

8 FINANCIAL IMPLICATION(S)

8.1 There are no financial implications aligned to this report. Any investment required to address any of the recommendations will be reported and considered separately. Nevertheless, over the course of the next few years the Council will seek to realign its revenue and capital budgets to ensure that it has the financial resources to invest in major projects that can have a positive impact on reducing the Council's carbon footprint.

9 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

9.1 There are no legal implications aligned to this report.

10 LINKS TO THE CORPORATE AND NATIONAL PRIORITIES AND THE WELL-BEING OF FUTURE GENERATIONS ACT

10.1 This report seeks to update Members on the progress made by the Council and the Cabinet Climate Change Steering Group to reduce the impact the Council and its residents and businesses have on the environment and respond to the issues set out in the Committee on Climate Change Report – Net Zero. The future actions that arise as a result of the Council progressing outline proposals in this report will be considered by the Council's Cabinet and it will take full regard to the seven national wellbeing goals.

11 CONCLUSION

11.1 The Council's Cabinet has revisited its commitment to becoming a Carbon Neutral Council, and has set an ambitious target of achieving this by 2030, along with the residents and businesses of the County Borough. The Climate Change Cabinet Steering Group has set out an ambitious programme to enable the Council to make progress towards achieving the 2030 target.

11.2 Achieving the 2030 target requires the communities of Rhondda Cynon Taf to work together. The Council, therefore, welcomes the input from other organisations and individuals in helping to achieve this ambitious target.