

**Address from the Chair, Councillor Sue Roberts
Climate Emergency Advisory Committee 28th January 2020**

Six months hard work by a skeleton staff, with considerable input from South Oxfordshire District Council (SODC) Councillors, has produced the report that we are discussing today, a one-year work programme to begin in the next financial year. Michelle Wells, Insight and Policy Manager, and her team, have brought project options to the Climate Emergency Advisory Committee which we have gone through and pared down.

Two-thirds of the available £15,000 climate budget for the current year was deployed to expert contractors for scoping and costing project options. Caroline Newton, Jo Robb and I, acting as a Task and Finish group, went through these and selected the highest impact ones to take forward.

Officers already work collaboratively with external partners, including on Oxfordshire-wide projects on electric vehicles, and through the *County Collaboration on Climate Change Group*. This group works at senior officer level across the six councils, and at elected member level. I have attended two meetings on behalf of SODC and am very excited by the wealth of knowledge and experience we can draw upon working at this scale, especially from Oxford City.

Other ongoing projects include the design and procurement of new Council offices. Council, on advice from our Committee, requires this to be genuinely net zero-carbon in its build and net zero-carbon in its operation (without off-site offsetting). We are seeking to procure renewable electricity for our next energy contract and are planning to adapt our Planning Design Guide to signal for low-carbon new homes. Initiatives in the Didcot Garden Town project are around low carbon transport and homes, and importantly, on growing local food.

We have commissioned, baseline reviews of energy use and carbon emissions both for our own operations and district-wide; definition of paths to change; training for officers; workshops with town councils; and planning for an all-day conference for officers and members of SODC and Vale of White Horse, in the Spring. Celia Wilson, Alison Jenner from Vale, and I, met, as a Task and Finish group, with the consultants to scope the conference. It will be both visionary and fun!

The selected work-package for next year, over and above what is already in train, has been carefully costed. It is to plan to retrofit our council-owned buildings for energy efficiency and renewables, whilst helping home-owners and landlords to do the same; to undertake feasibility studies in order to make wise investments in renewables, to reduce

single-use plastic and promote plant-based diets; to move to low-carbon travel; to encourage behaviour change and low-carbon action in the wider community and in business, including through providing baselines and strategies for change; and to develop schemes for the recovery of nature.

It is a top priority for SODC to mitigate climate change, restore our natural world and adapt to the inevitable consequences of already-built-in climate breakdown and ecosystem collapse. Our papers include an article by Professor Jem Bendell highlighting these inevitable consequences and the fact that we shall need to invest to an extraordinary extent to keep safe in the face of the near-future world-scale catastrophes that will affect us, in South Oxfordshire, within the next 10-20 years. These include crop failures leading to food scarcity, extreme weather bringing floods, storms, overheating and even, in our water-stressed region, drought.

Most worrying is the degraded state of nature in Oxfordshire. Our residents have the poorest access to nature in the south of England outside London. The UK itself is the 189th most nature-degraded country of 218 in the world. This affects our resilience in terms of growing our own food, with the loss of pollinators, soils and habitats. This is addressed in our one-year plan. Finance is required for us to join with the rest of Oxfordshire to establish a Local Nature Partnership which will have statutory force and the ability to speak up for our area nationally, and to create Nature Recovery Networks and strategies for improving biodiversity.

We could have done even more this year, there is £5500 left in the budget. However, it takes staff to manage the deployment of money. We have commissioned the most urgent work; the remainder needs to be approved by Council before going out to tender. Crucially, for such work, and to bring the year's activities to fruition, we need, at least for one-year, a dedicated Climate and Biodiversity Officer - an expert who can concentrate full-time on coordinating activity.

This Committee is fully aware of the budgetary difficulties in which SODC finds itself, spending £3.3 million (and rising) more than its income which itself is only in the order of £16 million. We have sought the most cost-effective interventions, for example, net zero carbon homes will be specified in the Planning Design Guide, to run alongside policies in the current Core Strategy, as a cheap and cheerful alternative to creating Supplementary Planning Documents. Many of the recommendations could result in long-term savings or investments for growth, such as providing electric car hire for residents, investing in megabatteries, or improving energy efficiency in our buildings.

I commend this budget to Council, to support the proposed year one work programme which is based on the scoping and prioritisation of actions that we have been working on.