

Climate and Ecological Emergencies Advisory Committee



Report of Acting Deputy Chief Executive – Transformation and Operations

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To: Climate and Ecological Emergencies Advisory Committee

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AGENDA ITEM

CEEAC REVIEW: KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation

- (a) That committee notes key findings from the CEEAC review and agrees to put forward recommendations to Cabinet for implementation.

Purpose of report

1. For committee to review and note the key findings from the recent review into the effectiveness of the CEEAC
2. For committee to agree and put forward recommendations that have been developed with the CEEAC review steering group within the report to Cabinet for implementation.

Strategic objectives

3. The Council has set a target to become carbon neutral in its own operations by 2025 and to become a carbon neutral district by 2030. The new South Oxfordshire Corporate Plan 2020-24 states: *“The greatest challenge we face as a society is the Climate Emergency and our ability to adapt our lives and our behaviours to ensure a safe and resilient future. While statements and targets are welcome, the challenge for our district is to take action, transform our operations and inspire our*

residents and businesses to do the same. Aspects of our lives will need to change, but we have a duty to make this transition fair for all parts of society. So, we will show leadership by developing and implementing a climate change programme to make the council net carbon neutral by 2025. We will help our communities to plan a fair transition to a future that will be defined by climate change.”

Background

4. The Climate Emergency Advisory Committee (CEAC) was established as a balanced cross-party committee of South Oxfordshire District Council in 2019 and held its first meeting in September of that year.
5. The role of the committee is to advise Cabinet on matters relating to the climate emergency and ecological crisis.
6. With the approval of the new corporate plan last autumn and the change of name to the Climate and Ecological Emergencies Advisory Committee (CEEAC) in February, It was agreed that it would be prudent for committee and Cabinet members to review the effectiveness of the committee to date, and to identify recommendations for improving effectiveness and alignment to the corporate plan going forward.
7. This review was led by Cllrs Sam Casey-Rerhaye, Sue Cooper and Andrea Powell and supported by officers Suzanne Malcolm, Michelle Wells and Andy Egan.
8. Through a survey we asked for feedback from CEEAC members or substitutes. We asked Cabinet members in a separate survey for their views in relation to the committee's advisory role.

Summary

9. This report has been produced by council officers to analyse the results of the South CEEAC review survey. Two online surveys were used, one for committee members and substitutes (CEEAC survey) and another one for Cabinet members (Cabinet survey). The internal surveys were open for two and a half weeks, between 19 February and 8 March 2021.
10. A total of 5 completed responses were received from CEEAC members and 2 from substitutes; 3 completed responses were received from Cabinet members. As there are 12 CEEAC members and 14 substitutes in total, this represents a response rate of 42% (5 out of 12) among members, and 14% (2 out of 14) among substitutes. The response rate among Cabinet members was 38% (3 out of 8).
11. The surveys were conducted to help the Insight and Policy Team review the effectiveness of the CEEAC to date. This information will be used to help inform and shape recommendations for improving the effectiveness of the committee, and to ensure that its work is aligned with the aims and objectives of the Corporate Plan 2020-2024.
12. The majority of contributors to the CEEAC survey did not believe that the committee had fulfilled its advisory role to the Cabinet effectively.

13. Respondents highlighted the task and finish groups as an activity that had worked well. They specifically cited their focused work and definite outputs as major positives.
14. Significant concerns were expressed about the CEEAC's organisational and structural difficulties. It was felt that this had been an impediment to the work of the committee. There was, nevertheless, some optimism about recent changes.
15. The majority of contributors to the Cabinet survey agreed that the advice and recommendations they had received from the CEEAC had been useful – they did, however, give a more mixed response as to whether the committee had effectively fulfilled its advisory role to the Cabinet.
16. A majority of respondents believed that the CEEAC should have a greater role in relation to the delivery of the Corporate Plan.

Key Findings and Recommendations (CEEAC members)

17. A majority of respondents to the CEEAC survey said that the CEEAC had not fulfilled its advisory role to the Cabinet effectively in respects of:
 - Providing community leadership on the climate emergency and sustainability, facilitating and engaging public sector partners, businesses, community groups and the public.
 - Advising on how the council can contribute to the delivery of:
 - national legally binding targets on the climate emergency
 - countywide targets on the climate emergency through the Oxfordshire Environment Partnership (OEP)
 - the council's own targets on the climate emergency
 - the Oxfordshire Energy Strategy Delivery Plan
 - Reviewing and making recommendations on ways in which the council can reduce damage to the global and local environment through its policies and practices.
 - Reviewing the internal operations of the council with a view to promoting sustainability, adopting best practice and strengthening the council's environmental performance.
 - Making recommendations on bids for external funding relating to the climate emergency.
18. CEEAC members felt that they had a limited sense of what the committee had actually achieved in a variety of areas. They believed that little progress had been made and that the committee had struggled to deliver any tangible benefits/changes.

RECOMMENDATION:

It is recommended that the new Chair of CEEAC seeks to clarify the role of the CEEAC to members as some disparity came through the survey, on the role and remit of the Committee. The new Chair of CEEAC would also like to set expectations about what the committee can achieve.

19. Contributors consistently raised organisational and structural difficulties of the CEEAC as an impediment to the work of the committee. There was, nevertheless, optimism about recent changes leading to improvements. CEEAC members also felt unsupported by the low level of officer support in terms of contribution as well as seniority.

RECOMMENDATION:

CEEAC will now be supported by two additional officers, which will strengthen support and resource available to the committee significantly. Having CEEAC meetings structured around the delivery of the Corporate Plan 2020-24 will provide structure, a direct link to Council business and a greater sense of purpose to the meetings, going forward.

20. Respondents were also concerned that there had been a lack of engagement (regarding what the CEEAC and council were committed to doing around climate change) with the Cabinet, the council, officers and wider community. This was cited as a potential reason for the CEEAC's perceived ineffectiveness.

RECOMMENDATION:

The Climate Action Plan will be supported by a dedicated communications and engagement plan, which will provide the CEEAC with many opportunities to demonstrate community leadership and share their work.

The CEEAC is also supported by the Council's communications team to promote and enhance the work of the Committee, through the issuing of pro-active comms before and after each meeting.

It is also recommended that the new website pages on Climate Action together with a potential newsletter will provide opportunities for CEEAC members to promote and provide a focus for their work for example. via blogs

In addition, the Town and Parish Council Forum at the end of Spring, represents a big engagement opportunity for the CEEAC as the event is focussed on climate action and biodiversity, with a number of external speakers.

21. A majority of respondents (three out of five) believed that the CEEAC should have a greater role in relation to the delivery of the Corporate Plan. They reasoned that the committee could do more in helping to deliver on the ambitions contained within it.

RECOMMENDATION:

It is recommended that the CEEAC plays a formal role in the monitoring of the Corporate Plan 2020-24 and reviews the quarterly performance reports that will be set out as part of the Councils Performance Management Framework (PMF) This will

allow the committee to provide advice and guidance to Cabinet on the delivery of projects in relation to the climate emergency and nature restoration and protection themes. The Corporate Plan 2020-24 has been designed to be agile, so projects within the plan will bend, flex and evolve, which further supports the need for the CEEAC to play a key role in advising on its delivery.

Further, it is proposed that a Biodiversity Steering Group is formed that reports directly into CEEAC, this group will be central to the scoping of projects in the Corporate Plan under the nature restoration and protection theme and help to inform future discretionary growth to fund this work.

22. Most respondents (five out of six) considered that the meetings of the CEEAC had been unproductive – concerns were expressed about disorganisation and a lack of focus.

23. The majority of contributors (six out of seven) suggested that the meetings of the CEEAC were not well structured – concerns were again expressed about a lack of focus.

RECOMMENDATION:

Having the Corporate Plan performance as a standing item will help to address these points. It is also planned that the CEEAC will publish a forward plan of future agenda items which will give them committee a clearer sense of direction and show CEAC members when a topic is planned to be reviewed by the CEEAC and thus create a sense of better organisation. The forward plan of future agenda items will be taken from the work programme 21/22 and developed in collaboration with the Chair of CEEAC and the Cabinet Lead.

24. Respondents rated task and finish groups as the most useful additional method in helping the CEEAC fulfil its role. It averaged 4.00 out 5.00 compared to 3.29 for informal briefings, 3.00 for visits and 1.86 for formal training.

RECOMMENDATION:

Task and Finish groups will continue to be used to support this work area where appropriate. It is recommended that Task and Finish groups are assembled to work alongside officers on the Corporate Plan, communications and engagement, Zero Carbon definition and relevant consultations. They will provide opportunities to give a sense of focus and work in more detail on areas of interest for members. Each Task and Finish group created should be led by a CEEAC member to facilitate and manage input to the groups with feedback from Task and Finish groups as a regular standing item on all CEEAC agendas.

25. Opinion was split over the frequency of CEEAC meetings. While two contributors believed that they should occur every two months, and one preferred once a quarter. Four respondents selected 'other' – of these, two wanted to see meetings occur every month (alternating between in-person and virtual), one believed that they should only be held when there was something to discuss and another stated that additional meetings should be arranged as and when required.

RECOMMENDATION:

As the response to this question was mixed it leads consideration was given to the resourcing demands around meeting co-ordination as opposed to project delivery. The CEEAC review steering group suggest that quarterly meetings would offer the right balance between meetings and delivering projects.

26. Forming a Year One Work Programme, a climate action plan with set dates and a budget was considered to be the main achievement of the committee (mentioned by three out of five respondents). This was followed by raising awareness (two out of five) and the creation of the CEEAC (two out of five).

27. The task and finish group (two out of four) was highlighted by respondents as a thing that had worked well for specific topics as they were focused and had a definite output (like the work programme), while one contributor stated that nothing had worked well so far.

28. Contributors suggested that the following could be improved:

- Having a plan with deliverable targets and providing regular updates on progress (six out of seven)
- The chairing of meetings (three out of seven)
- Relationships with/presence at Cabinet (three out of seven)
- Creating a new department for climate (two out of seven)
- Having a Head of Service for climate change and higher officer representation (two out of seven)

RECOMMENDATION:

The work programme 21/22 reflects the full picture of work that will be covered in this area for the year ahead. The development of the Climate Action Plan will be supported by modelling work that will enable us to plot out a longer-term pathway to achieve our targets.

It is recommended that the Chair of CEEAC and Cabinet Lead for this area should report to Cabinet after each CEEAC meeting under the agenda item at Cabinet “recommendations from other committees.”

This area of work has moved from policy development into delivery, so consideration should be given to the longer-term management and co-ordination of the delivery of projects in this area alongside officers, CEEAC and Cabinet

It has already been proposed to create a Biodiversity Lead post to take forward projects under the nature restoration and protection theme and this is currently subject to future growth.

Key Findings and Recommendations (Cabinet members)

29. The majority of respondents to the Cabinet survey agreed that the advice and recommendations from the CEEAC to the Cabinet had been useful.

30. There was a mixed response when it came to how effectively respondents felt that the CEEAC had fulfilled its advisory role in respects of:

- Providing community leadership on the climate emergency and sustainability, facilitating and engaging public sector partners, businesses, community groups and the public.
- Advising on how the council can contribute to the delivery of:
 - national legally binding targets on the climate emergency
 - countywide targets on the climate emergency through the Oxfordshire Environment Partnership (OEP)
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- Reviewing and making recommendations on ways in which the council can reduce damage to the global and local environment through its policies and practices.
- Reviewing the internal operations of the council with a view to promoting sustainability, adopting best practice and strengthening the council's environmental performance.
- Making recommendations on bids for external funding relating to the climate emergency.

31. Concerns were consistently raised about a lack of information being shared clearly and consistently with Cabinet about the work the CEEAC was undertaking in these areas. This made it difficult for Cabinet members to reach a determination regarding how effectively the CEEAC was discharging its role and fully understand their challenges and successes.

RECOMMENDATION:

The Chair of CEEAC and Cabinet Lead for this area should report to Cabinet after each CEEAC meeting under the agenda item at Cabinet "recommendations from other committees." This was not consistently done last year.

Whilst the work of the CEEAC should cross-cut all services, consideration should be given to the creation of a distinct portfolio area covering climate and nature, briefings could then take place monthly with the Cabinet Member and chair of CEEAC to ensure information is shared quickly and fully.

32. Building cross-party consensus and collaboration was regarded as the main achievements of the committee.

33. Securing resources for the new climate change lead officers was highlighted by respondents as the main thing that had worked well.

34. Contributors suggested that the following could be improved:

- Making practical recommendations to Cabinet;
- Receiving advice from external experts;
- Delivering the objectives of the Corporate Plan;
- Quality of discussion and the structure of meetings.

RECOMMENDATION:

The forward plan will provide space for external speakers to be invited to future meetings. It is also planned that there will be an all Councillor Briefing with external consultants who have completed the District Council Scenario modelling in the late Spring.

The Town and Parish Council Forum represents a good opportunity for the CEEAC to receive advice and information from external speakers as well as showcase the development of the Climate Action Plan.

The CEEAC fulfilling a role to monitor the performance of the Corporate Plan will give the Committee a central role in helping the Council to deliver the objectives in the Corporate Plan.

As the CEEAC has such a broad remit, managing debate and structure of the meetings can be challenging. It is recommended that advice is sought from Democratic Services on how they can help to support and structure the meetings. more frequent liaison is needed between the meeting Clerk, Chair, Vice Chair, Cabinet Lead and reporting officers to ensure effective management of the meeting.

Climate and ecological impact implications

35. The implementation of the Council's climate and ecological emergency declarations are explicitly designed to achieve positive ecological, climate and sustainability impacts. It is understood that embedding consideration of ecological impacts across all Council decision making and project development is an important step towards making meaningful progress in protecting and restoring the natural world in South Oxfordshire.
36. The CEEAC play an essential role in providing advice and guidance to Cabinet on the delivery of all climate and nature projects, therefore a review of its effectiveness was needed to ensure they are operating as effectively as possible given the scale of ambition in this area and our challenging targets.

Financial Implications

37. Any council decision that has financial implications must be made with the knowledge of the council's overarching financial position. For South, the position reflected in the council's medium-term financial plan (MTFP) as reported to Full Council in February 2021 showed that the council is due to receive £4.3 million less in revenue funding than it plans to spend in 2021/22 (with the balance coming from reserves including unallocated New Homes Bonus).
38. This funding gap is predicted to increase to over £5 million by 2025/26. As there remains no certainty on future local government funding, following the announcement of a one-year spending review by government, and as the long-term financial consequences of the Coronavirus pandemic remain unknown, this gap could increase further. Every financial decision made needs to be cognisance of the need to eliminate this funding gap in future years.

Legal Implications

39. There are no specific legal implications arising from this report. Risks

Conclusion

40. Members are invited to note the key findings in report
41. Members are invited to take forward a recommendation to Cabinet to implement the recommendations set out in this report.