

## READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

### REPORT BY DIRECTOR OF ECONOMIC GROWTH AND NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES

TO:	POLICY COMMITTEE		
DATE:	2 NOVEMBER 2020		
TITLE:	ENDORSEMENT OF READING CLIMATE EMERGENCY STRATEGY 2020-25 & ADOPTION OF CORPORATE CARBON PLAN 2020-25		
LEAD COUNCILLOR:	CLLR PAGE	PORTFOLIO:	STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENT, PLANNING AND TRANSPORT
SERVICE:	DEGNS	WARDS:	BOROUGHWIDE
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#### 1. PURPOSE OF REPORT AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1.1 The purpose of this report is to invite the Committee to (i) endorse the final Reading Climate Change Partnership's Reading Climate Emergency Strategy 2020-25 and (ii) adopt the new RBC corporate Carbon Plan 2020-25. The Reading Climate Emergency Strategy sets out the road map for the next 5 years to work towards the ultimate goal of achieving a 'net zero carbon' Reading by 2030 as per the Climate Emergency declaration, while the Carbon Plan sets out the Council's corporate pathway over the next five years to achieve the target of an 85% reduction in its own corporate emissions, en route to becoming a net zero organisation by 2030.

1.2 Appendices to this report are:

- Appendix 1: Reading Climate Emergency Strategy 2020-25
- Appendix 2: Consultation Report on Reading Climate Emergency Strategy 2020-25
- Appendix 3: RBC corporate Carbon Plan 2020-25

#### 2. RECOMMENDED ACTION

- 2.1 That the Committee endorses the Reading Climate Change Partnership's 'Reading Climate Emergency Strategy 2020-25'
- 2.2 That the Committee adopts the revised RBC corporate Carbon Plan for 2020-25 and the headline target of an 85% reduction on 2008/09 emissions by 2025

#### 3. POLICY CONTEXT

3.1 The Council declared a climate emergency in February 2019 and committed to the goal of achieving a 'carbon neutral Reading by 2030'. Reports were subsequently taken to all key Committees in the summer of 2019 committing then to embed the action required to work towards this goal in the relevant services, activities and plans of the Council.

3.2 The Climate Emergency Declaration required officers to ensure that the revision of the Reading Climate Change Strategy, which is produced by the Reading Climate Change Partnership (RCCP), reflected the urgency of the Declaration, and the process

was therefore brought forward by 6 months. The Council is an active partner in RCCP and Council officers supported the Partnership in developing the draft Strategy, with the intention of publishing a consultation draft in mid-March, finalising it by the end of May and bringing the final strategy back to the Policy Committee for adoption in June with a high profile launch planned for July. Although the mid-March deadline was met, with consultation being launched on 13 March, the national COVID-19 'lockdown' which began soon after impacted the timeline significantly such that public consultation was extended until the end of June. The launch event has now been re-scheduled for 10 November, the centerpiece of a week-long 'Reading Climate Festival' of virtual events and activities.

- 3.3 While the response to the COVID-19 public health emergency has inevitably been the focus of the Council's activity in recent months, global weather events linked to climate change have served as a reminder of the wide-ranging and potentially catastrophic impacts of unchecked global warming. As the winter floods which preceded the lockdown illustrated, Reading will not be immune to these impacts. Some commentators predicted that the lockdowns seen across the globe would lead to significant reductions in carbon emissions. The reality is that while these reductions were significant, they were too short-lived to make a major impact on the underlying trajectory, emphasising the need for action on climate change to be embedded in plans to recover from the impacts of COVID-19.
- 3.4 The idea of a 'green recovery' has been embraced by central Government and many local authorities, including RBC and our partners in Reading UK who have identified this as a key strand of Reading's economic recovery strategy, *Powered By People*, which was endorsed by the Council in September 2020. The strategy sets out how a model of inclusive, green growth can help people transition from industries hit by COVID-19 into the jobs of the future in environmental technology and other green industries. Similarly, the opportunities which opened up during lockdown to improve air quality and promote cycling and walking are being taken forward in Reading's new Local Transport Plan which will shortly be brought back to Committee following public consultation. The Council has been actively pursuing new national funding streams which have been made available to support these themes.
- 3.5 The Partnership has now revised the Reading Climate Emergency Strategy in the light of public consultation, and the final text was signed off by the Partnership Board, on which RBC is represented by Cllr Page, on 22 September. Partners are now being invited to endorse the final Strategy, included at Appendix 1, hence it being presented to Policy Committee at this meeting for RBC to endorse. RBC managed the consultation process on behalf of the Partnership and a consultation report, summarising the comments received and the changes made to the strategy as a result, is included at Appendix 2.
- 3.6 The Council has reduced its own emissions by 62.5% since 2008/09. The main vehicle through which this has been achieved is the Council's corporate Carbon Plan, the current iteration of which covers the period 2015-20. Officers have reviewed the Plan in parallel with the wider Reading Climate Emergency Strategy to cover the same period (2020-25) and the new Carbon Plan for this period is also now being presented to Policy Committee for adoption.
- 3.7 The Carbon Plan will take forward the Council's own commitment to delivering on the wider aspirations of the strategy and will enable the Council to lead by example as it encourages Reading's businesses, organisations and residents to take action on climate change. The headline target within the Carbon Plan is to achieve an 85% reduction in RBC emissions by 2025 compared to the 2008/09 baseline. This is considered an ambitious but achievable target, subject to existing investment plans and policies being maintained, and an appropriate milestone on the road to becoming a net zero carbon Council by 2030.

## **4. THE PROPOSAL**

### **4.1 Current Position**

The consultation draft Strategy approved by Policy Committee in February represented the Reading Climate Change Partnership's first attempt to map out a pathway to net zero by 2030. This has now been amended in the final version of the Strategy at Appendix 1.

### **4.2 Options Proposed**

Having reflected on the outcomes of public consultation, the Partnership Board did not feel that the extremely ambitious goal of achieving a net zero carbon Reading by 2030 could credibly be accelerated still further. However, the Partnership felt it important to respond to the desire expressed in consultation for more ambition in some areas by making changes to the commitments and targets in the Action Plans contained within the Strategy to this effect. At the same time, disruption caused by COVID-19 has inevitably delayed some actions and changes have also been made to the final text to reflect this.

### **4.3 Other Options Considered**

Having published the consultation draft, and conducted public consultation, the broad options in finalising the strategy were to (i) increase the level of ambition within the final strategy (ii) no change (iii) reduce the level of ambition. Public consultation suggested a variety of views about the proposed pathway, though the majority were generally supportive of the approach proposed and a significant minority favoured strengthening the level of ambition. Neither options (ii) or (iii) were therefore considered realistic options in the light of the Climate Emergency Declaration and subsequent public consultation.

## **5. CONTRIBUTION TO STRATEGIC AIMS**

5.1 The Reading Climate Emergency Strategy 2020-25 contributes to all six corporate aims as follows:

- Securing the economic success of Reading and provision of job opportunities: the Reading Climate Emergency Strategy highlights the opportunities of pursuing 'clean growth', developing Reading's low carbon economy and stimulating a 'green recovery' from the economic impacts of COVID-19
- Ensuring access to decent housing to meet local needs: the Strategy includes ambitions to improve the energy efficiency of both public and private housing and to tackle fuel poverty
- To protect and enhance the lives of vulnerable adults and children: the Strategy notes that climate impacts are expected to be more severe for the more vulnerable in society, and proposes action to reduce these vulnerabilities
- Keeping Reading's environment clean, green and safe: the Strategy includes a number of 'natural solutions' to climate change (e.g. increasing tree cover) which will enhance the natural environment and greenspaces as well as helping mitigate and adapt to climate change
- Ensuring that there are good education, leisure and cultural opportunities for people in Reading: the Strategy includes actions to educate the community about climate change, how to tackle it and the benefits of taking action
- Ensuring the Council is fit for the future: the corporate Carbon Plan will contribute to this aim by minimising the risks and costs associated with energy and other natural resource use and improving the efficiency of Council operations.

## **6. ENVIRONMENTAL AND CLIMATE CHANGE IMPLICATIONS**

6.1 The decision recommended fulfils a central commitment of the Climate Emergency Declaration by bringing forward a new Reading Climate Emergency Strategy and

setting out the pathway for Reading as a whole, and Reading Borough Council as an organisation, to achieve net zero carbon emissions by 2030.

## **7. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND INFORMATION**

- 7.1 The process of developing the Reading Climate Emergency Strategy has involved a wide range of stakeholders, with theme groups of 6-8 key stakeholders meeting regularly to shape each of the six themes within the strategy. These theme groups arose out of a public meeting at the Civic Centre attended by 120 people at which the invitation to join the theme groups was opened to all. The extended consultation process provided further opportunities for stakeholders and the wider public to influence the strategy and advice was taken from RBC consultation and communication experts to refine the consultation questions. A consultation report is appended to this report (Appendix 2) summarising consultation responses and the changes made in response.

## **8. EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT**

- 8.1 Initial screening prior to the launch of public consultation suggested that an Equality Impact Assessment was not required as the issues raised by climate change, which is the subject of the strategy, are universal and apply to the whole population regardless of race, disability, gender, sexuality, age or religious belief. That said, in taking forward specific actions proposed in the strategy it will be for the relevant lead partners to ensure that equality impacts are considered and assessed appropriately.
- 8.2 As a general observation, research suggests that climate change will impact disproportionately on the most vulnerable in society. In this context, action to tackle climate change should have an overall positive impact for vulnerable people, and the Strategy emphasises the importance of a 'just transition' to a low-carbon economy in which the costs of transition do not fall on those least able to sustain them.

## **9. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 9.1 The Council managed the consultation process on behalf of the Reading Climate Change Partnership, and the main legal implication arising from this relates to the requirements associated with public consultation. Other action proposed within the Strategy for which the Council is identified as a delivery partner can be delivered within its current legal powers though there is explicit recognition within the Climate Emergency Declaration and the Strategy that some changes in Government policy and legislation may be required to support Reading in achieving the ambition of net zero carbon by 2030.

## **10. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 10.1 Capital and revenue commitments: the specific actions identified for the Council within the Reading Climate Emergency Strategy can be delivered within the revenue and capital budgets agreed as part of the Council's Medium-Term Financial Strategy (2020-23). The approximate cost of delivering the action set out in the corporate Carbon Plan over 5 years is c£9 million although it is difficult to be precise in view of uncertainties around the extent of our asset rationalisation programmes, the pace at which the price of renewable energy will fall, and our ability to attract external grant funding to supplement our own investment. The Council, however, has identified capital funding of over £7 million over three years for investment in energy efficiency and renewable energy projects, an increase from an annual budget of some £250,000 which had previously existed for energy efficiency projects. In the two full financial years since the climate emergency was declared (2019/20 and 2020/21), the Council has committed c.£34 million to capital projects in transport, waste and energy, some

of which will also contribute to delivery of corporate carbon reduction targets. However, notwithstanding this investment, a number of actions involve pursuing external funding where we currently lack the resources to deliver them. The 'value at stake' or potential cost avoided by implementing the corporate Carbon Plan is estimated at c£1.5m p.a. on building running costs alone by 2025/26.

- 10.2 Strategy actions for which no funding has currently been identified: the Climate Emergency Declaration recognised that the ambitious aim of delivering a net zero carbon Reading by 2030 could not be achieved without additional resource and powers from central government. The Strategy therefore necessarily includes action which is required to reach this goal but for which funding has yet to be identified. To this end, the Strategy includes the clear statement that 'Some of the actions included in the action plans below, and the scale and pace at which they can be progressed, will be subject to the prevailing national policy context and/or the provision of additional powers and resources by central government, as made clear in Reading's climate emergency declaration. This does not mean we are not committed to them - on the contrary, we see them as key to achieving the net zero target - it is simply to reflect the reality that the partners in Reading alone cannot solve some of the bigger challenges we face'.
- 10.3 Value for money and financial risks: it has been well established since the publication of the Stern report into the economics of climate change in 2006 that the costs of inaction far outweigh the costs of action on climate change. In the context of climate change, which presents unprecedented risk and catastrophic consequences for our way of life and human wellbeing on a global as well as local scale, the action outlined in the strategy can be considered good value for money. Those actions which require further policy changes or investment by RBC will, however, be further tested for value for money at the appropriate time. At the project level, each RBC project will be subject to a business case with the aim of ensuring that revenue savings produced by the investment cover the debt financing charge including Minimum Revenue Provision (MRP) on the life of the asset.

## **11. BACKGROUND PAPERS**

- 11.1 In producing the Strategy, the following have been referred to:
- Committee on Climate Change - various reports
  - Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change - various reports
  - UK Government data on carbon emissions
  - Reading Vision 2050
  - Reading Climate Change Adaptation Plan
  - Reading Local Plan
  - Reading Local Transport Plan (current iteration and consultation draft)
  - Reading Means Business on Climate Change: the Reading Climate Change Strategy 2013-20