

East Herts Council Report

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Date of meeting: 10th September 2024

Report by: Councillor Tim Hoskin, Executive Member for Environmental Sustainability

Report title: Council's progress towards reducing its own carbon footprint to an absolute minimum and identifying a pathway to offset its residual carbon

Ward(s) affected: All

Summary – This report discusses the council's actions in reducing its carbon footprint in line with its commitments in the Climate Emergency Declaration passed by Council on 26th July 2023. The report provides the opportunity for Overview and Scrutiny members to review the issues involved and share views and ideas about tackling climate change with the Executive Member for Environmental Sustainability for his consideration.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR Overview and Scrutiny Committee members:

- a) consider the council's progress to date in reducing its own carbon footprint to an absolute minimum and identifying a pathway to offset its residual carbon and pass any comments to the Executive Member for Environmental Sustainability for his consideration when determining priorities and actions.

1.0 Background

- 1.1 At its meeting on 26th July 2023, Council unanimously approved the making of a Climate Emergency Declaration, this itself building on the Climate Change Declaration previously adopted by Council on 24th July 2019.
- 1.2 A key change within the Climate Emergency Declaration was that although the council maintained its committed to become a net zero carbon council by 2030, the council committed itself to bringing its emissions to a minimum by 2027 with, at the same time, identifying a pathway for offsetting any residual emissions such that members could be confident of achieving a net zero position by 2030.

- 1.3 The Overview and Scrutiny Committee now wishes to investigate and review progress on these goals. This paper outlines the council's actions since adopting the Climate Emergency Declaration, drawing in large part on the council's latest [Carbon Emissions report](#) which was published on the council's website in May this year. Unfortunately, with the announcement of the general election and consequent pre-election period of sensitivity, the council had to delay publicity on this. It is suggested that members have regard to the Carbon Emissions report when approaching this topic at the Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting.
- 1.4 The committee has raised a series of written questions which this report will address by both reference to detailed analysis in the Carbon Emissions report and more recent work.

2.0 Progress on reducing the council's carbon emissions

- 2.1 This section of the report addresses the questions submitted in writing by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and shared with the Executive Member for Environmental Sustainability and the Head of Housing and Health, the council's corporate lead officer for environmental sustainability, in advance of the meeting.
- 2.2 On behalf of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, Cllr Nahum Clements raised in the written proposal to scrutinise this area of the council's work that, *'Climate change is the biggest threat faced by our planet and is beginning to seriously affect the health and wellbeing of residents and the environment in East Herts. It's been almost a year since 26th July 2023 when East Herts Councillors passed a motion declaring a climate emergency and pulling forwards the commitment to reduce the Council's carbon footprint to an absolute minimum from 2030 to March 2027. We are now over 25% of the way to that 2027 target but it is unclear what progress has been made, and whether the Council is on track to achieve its commitments'*.
- 2.3 Cllr Clements then went on to list a series of questions which this report will address in turn. It is hoped that these responses will aid discussion at the committee meeting.

What reduction in the carbon footprint has been achieved to date and is the council on track to hit the 2027 target?

- 2.4 In line with many other authorities, the council uses the Local Government Association (LGA) / Local Partnerships model¹ for calculating the CO₂e (carbon dioxide equivalent) emissions from its activity. This model provides an

¹ <https://localpartnerships.gov.uk/resources/greenhouse-gas-accounting-tool/>

'industry standard' approach to robust calculations. The sources used to calculate the council's emissions figure are listed in the [Carbon Emissions report](#).

- 2.5 The council uses the 2019 emissions figure as its baseline given that this was the year in which a net zero target date of 2030 was first set. It should be borne in mind that the 2030 target remains, while the 2023 Declaration committed the council to reduce emissions to a minimum by 2027 and put in place, again by 2027, a plan to offset remaining emissions so as to achieve net zero by 2030.
- 2.6 In 2023, the council started publishing a detailed annual report on its performance, drawing on analysis of the latest information. The 2024 report, which drew on emissions data to 2023, was published in May this year. The 2024 report has extended the depth of analysis and for the first time it has included an evidence-based forward projection of future residual carbon emissions along with the council's emerging proposals to offset these.
- 2.7 The 2024 report includes a remodelled estimate of the council's emissions in 2022 which has been constructed using emissions figures for the leisure centres when they were previously fully open prior to their works and Covid-related closures. Similarly, a modelled figure for Hertford Theatre (now BEAM) was used for 2023 while it was closed. In this way, the reported emissions do not include reductions solely due to temporary closures, thus modelled figures only include *permanent* emissions changes arising from redevelopment of the council's buildings.
- 2.8 The council's carbon emission figures since 2019 are given in Table A below. As noted above, the 2019 figure, that is, emissions for 2018/19, has been taken as the baseline.

| Table A: East Herts Council's emissions reductions against the 2019 baseline | | | |
|---|--|--|--|
| Financial year | Total emissions <i>without reduction due solely to (partial) closure of council buildings for refurbishment</i> – in tonnes | TARGET % reduction since 2019 baseline given in the Climate Change Strategy | ACTUAL % reduction from 2019 baseline |
| BASELINE 2019 | 2,940 | | |
| 2020 | 2,800 | 5% | 5% |
| 2021 | 2,565 | 18% | 13% |
| 2022 | 2,446 | 30% | 17% |

| | | | |
|------|-------|-----|-----|
| 2023 | 2,436 | 40% | 17% |
|------|-------|-----|-----|

- 2.9 As shown in Table A, the 2023 figure represents a 17% reduction in CO₂e since the council made its Climate Change Declaration in 2019 which set the council on a course to achieve net zero carbon by 2030.
- 2.10 Members are directed to Table 3 within the [Carbon Emissions report](#) for details of work carried out to date bring down the 2023 emissions total.
- 2.11 The 2023 figure is less than the position aspired to in the Climate Change Strategy of a 40% reduction by this time. Importantly, it should be borne in mind that at the timing of writing, the Strategy was predicated on the council beginning to offset its emissions by now. The current position is that the council, in common with all councils, has yet to determine a robust methodology for offsetting – see paragraphs 2.17 to 2.22 below for a further discussion of offsetting.
- 2.12 In terms of continuing to reduce actual emissions, the council has identified the current approaches to investigate as listed in Table B below. The text from the published Carbon Emissions report is given in the table accompanied by updates since publication in italics.

Table B: Approach to further reducing or avoiding the council’s carbon emissions as listed in the Carbon Emissions report, *with updates since the report’s publication in May 2024 added in italics*

| Options to reduce current emissions / avoid future emissions | Current approach |
|--|---|
| Discuss with the council’s leisure management contractor options to further reduce emissions from Hartham and Grange Paddocks leisure centres. | <p>The council will investigate with the contractor which operates our leisure centres the feasibility of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • reducing both electricity and gas use at the buildings • using the gas-operated combined heat and power unit at Grange Paddocks leisure centre in such a way that maintains the economic benefits of its use while, if at all possible, reducing the consumption of gas • extending onsite renewable electricity production – <i>this relates to the possibility of additional solar panels; discussions about this have already started with SLM, the council’s leisure management contractor</i> |

| | |
|---|--|
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • switching to a green, non-carbon electricity tariff • using gas generated through anaerobically digested organic matter which may have lower net carbon emissions than natural gas – <i>officers are currently investigating (a) the extent to which biomethane derived in this way reduces greenhouse gases and (b) the feasibility of switching gas supplies to include of fuel sourced in this way</i> • onsite carbon emissions offsetting. |
| <p>Switch to a greater use of low emission vehicles as part of the council's new joint waste management contract with North Herts Council, which is set to commence in 2025/26.</p> | <p>Contract negotiations are well underway. Current, prudent estimates suggest a 3% reduction in net emissions, that is, 26 tonnes. This will be kept under review. <i>Negotiations have now concluded and work is underway to refine the estimate of future emissions reductions.</i></p> |
| <p>Explore how to reduce gas use in the council's directly managed buildings.</p> | <p>In 2022/23, gas use at Wallfields produced 80 tonnes of CO₂. The council has conducted a detailed feasibility study into switching from gas heating at its main offices at Wallfields, Hertford. The study has found, however, that a switch from gas power to air source heat pumps is prohibitively expensive even with financial support from the government's Public Sector Decarbonisation Programme. This is the result of two important considerations, (a) the increased load on the national grid would be such that a new electricity sub-station would need to be installed and (b) the costs associated with air source heat pumps and associated works to the building are still very high compared with other options.</p> <p>The council is currently exploring several options for Wallfields:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • maximising the usable lifespan of the existing, out-dated gas boiler in case more generous funding becomes available and/or the cost of air source heat pumps and associated works reduce making the option economically viable |

| | |
|---|--|
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • replacing the gas boiler with a high energy efficient gas boiler thus reducing, though not eliminating, continued emissions • investigating the potential and value of using gas generated through anaerobically digested organic matter which may have lower net carbon emissions than natural gas • keeping the air source heat pump feasibility study under review to check if/when this option becomes (more) economically viable • <i>more recently, the possibility of switching to electric space heating, using the council's non carbon electricity tariff, has been added to the list of options.</i> |
| Switch the council's business journeys to the e-fleet rather than individual officers' fossil-fuelled cars. | Since the switch in the council's fleet from diesel vans to e-cars, more business journeys have swapped to these vehicles. Work is continuing to encourage and incentivise use of the e-fleet by officers. |
| Reduce staff commuting by fossil-fuelled vehicles. | The hybrid office/home working arrangements have seen emissions due to commuting drop from pre-pandemic levels. In addition, we are seeing more officers replacing their own cars with electric and/or hybrid vehicles. This will be monitored. |
| Switch away from the approximately 6% of the council's electricity use still not on no-carbon tariffs. | Options are to be explored. |
| Encourage contractors to switch to non-carbon electricity tariffs. | Options are to be explored. |

2.13 Work is already underway on several of the approaches in Table B. For example, discussions are now underway with SLM, the contractor running the council's leisure centres, about how to further drive down emissions.

2.14 There is nothing to suggest that the council will not be able to bring its carbon emissions to an absolute minimum by 2027 as outlined in the Climate Emergency Declaration.

**What is the “absolute minimum” carbon footprint that the council is targeting, and what is the identified pathway to offset residual carbon?
and**

What work has been done to prioritise carbon offsetting within East Herts?

2.15 The council’s [Climate Change Strategy 2022 – 2026](#) set out the council’s route map to become a net zero carbon council by 2030 and so having a clear picture of the sources of carbon emissions, as discussed above, enables the council to deliver and, if necessary, modify the plans laid out in the Strategy. Table C below shows the level and proportion of the council’s emissions from each source in 2023.

| Table C: Functions contributing to the East Herts Council’s emissions total in 2023 | | |
|--|----------------------------------|--|
| Function category | Tonnes of CO₂e | % of East Herts Council’s total emissions |
| Leisure centres | 1,173 | 48% |
| Waste and grounds maintenance contractors | 884 | 36% |
| Council’s transport-related emissions – own fleet, staff business travel, staff commuting | 197 | 8% |
| Council’s directly managed buildings and assets and home working emissions | 183 | 8% |
| Total* | 2,436 | 100% |

* Component figures and total rounded so the total may be +/- 1.

2.16 Further reductions in emissions can be realised from the actions listed above in Table B, however, the reality is that as much as 75% of the council’s emissions at 2019 is, in effect, ‘locked in’ for the foreseeable future given the refurbished/redeveloped leisure centres’ use of, albeit very efficient, gas boilers and the practicalities of transitioning to non-fossil fuelled alternatives to large, diesel-powered waste disposal vehicles. It is worth noting that officers are looking at whether the introduction of newer diesel-powered waste disposal vehicles will yield improvements in fuel efficiency and thus a reduction in emissions. So as to be prudent, however, no assumption for reduced emissions from this source has yet been factored into the forecast residual emissions figure discussed here. A figure of 75% of the council’s 2019 emissions is around 2,200 tonnes of CO₂e and this is the figure that

could prudently be considered the absolute minimum emissions by 2027 although, of course, the council will continue to strive to achieve an even lower figure by this date.

2.17 The need to establish a pathway to offset this level of residual carbon is clearly essential. Unlike when calculating the council's emissions, however, no widely accepted model or toolkit yet exists to calculate how much carbon offsetting the council can legitimately count as a result of its activities and interventions.

2.18 Chapter 6 of the [Carbon Emissions report](#) is devoted to a detailed discussion of the council's approach to putting in place a robust pathway for offsetting residual carbon so as to achieve a net zero carbon position by 2030. In summary, the council has identified four mechanisms via which to offset carbon, these being:

- offsetting via carbon sequestration through trees and biodiversity on the council's own land
- offsetting by facilitating others to reduce their direct emissions
- offsetting through carbon avoidance measures
- offsetting by buying carbon credits

2.19 As discussed in the Carbon Emissions report, each approach has its own complexities which are further compounded by the lack of any established measurement methodologies on even widely accepted definitions of what should and should not be counted towards offsetting.

2.20 Members are directed to Chapter 6 of the Carbon Emissions report for a more in-depth discussion of the potential means for local authorities to offset their emission, including a review of other councils' approaches to deriving the offsetting benefits of their stock of trees, emerging legal advice on what council interventions can be counted towards offsetting and the council's initial offsetting modelling.

2.21 The Carbon Emissions report also refers to the council driving forward discussions on council offsetting with partners across the Hertfordshire Climate Change and Sustainability Partnership (HCCSP). To this end, since publication of the Carbon Emissions report, the council has:

- instigated a research project with the University of Hertfordshire, on behalf of HCCSP, in which the University will review the latest international, national and academic positions, statements and guidance on offsetting by local authorities and bring forward a paper on what activities it would be appear reasonable, defensible and in-keeping with various bodies' pronouncements

to include in the council's pathway to offsetting its residual carbon. Officers from East Herts Council have provided the 'real world' context to academics from the University. The report is due later this autumn

- worked with the HCCSP Manager to further work by the Greater South East Net Zero Hub and Local Partnerships to expand their carbon calculation tool to include a robust means of calculating offsetting alongside emissions. Officers are hopeful of revisions to the model within the coming year.

2.22 While the council does not yet have a clear pathway for offsetting residual carbon, it is felt that the above actions will ensure a robust plan is in place by no later than 2027 as envisioned in the Climate Emergency Declaration.

What are the key checkpoints on the council path to net zero by 2027, and when does the council expect to hit these?

2.23 For avoidance of doubt, the council's Climate Emergency Declaration has not committed the council to achieve net zero carbon by 2027; the 2030 target date for this remains. The Declaration does, however, set the goal to minimise carbon emissions by 2027 and put in place the means of offsetting the residual carbon by 2030.

2.24 With regards to checkpoints on the council's journey to achieving these goals, as discussed above, since 2023 the council has published performance on emissions on an annual basis. The report contains information on current emissions, actions that have been taken and are being explored to reduce or avoid emission further, along with increasingly detailed proposals regarding offsetting.

2.25 It is these annual reports that provide the key checkpoints as they, year-by-year, set out the council's expected position in the run-up to the 2027 and 2030 deadlines. Key checkpoints of note already identified include:

- the full year impact of the switch of the council's own vehicles to a 100% electric fleet from 2023/24 onwards
- the opening of BEAM in 2024/25 which uses non-carbon electricity for its heating
- the switch to a greater use of low emission vehicles as part of the council's new joint waste management contract with North Herts Council, which is set to commence in 2025/26
- projections regarding offsetting, expected from 2026/27 onwards at the latest.

What progress has there been on publishing annual eco-audits of the council's progress, and the holding of an annual meeting? (As committed to in the 26th July motion)

- 2.26 For the last two years, the council has published a report on its carbon emissions. This year, this report was expanded to project likely levels of residual carbon and work thus far to understand how to offset those residual emissions.
- 2.27 Unfortunately, although this year's report was uploaded to the council's website in May, efforts to publish the report were hampered by the pre-election period of sensitivity in the run up to the general election. The report, however, has now been publicised via a press release and through other media in August and it is on the agenda for discussion and debate at the council's next Environmental and Climate Forum on 7th October. This Forum meeting will constitute the annual meeting to review the findings; members are invited to amplify the council's publicity about the upcoming meeting.
- 2.28 Through these routes, as well as this Overview and Scrutiny meeting, members, partners and residents will be able to review the latest information and make suggestions for actions as well as show any ideas on how to present the increasingly complex information in the next annual report.

3.0 Summary

- 3.1 In the written basis for the Overview and Scrutiny Committee's consideration of work stemming from the Council's Climate Emergency Declaration in July 2023, Cllr Clements expresses concern about *'a lack of evidence about the progress made to date,'* noting that he, and most probably other members, were not aware of *'any published updates since the July 2023 motion was passed'* nor the *'publishing [of] eco-audits and holding [of] annual meetings'*. Given the inability to publicise the Carbon Emissions report in a timely way, even though it was published on the council's website in May, because of the general election, it is understandable that the report may have gone unnoticed. It is hoped that this report to Overview and Scrutiny has been able to raise the profile of the council's work so as to enable members to scrutinise the work so far and feel able to contribute to the ongoing debate about how best to meet the council's net zero goals.

4.0 Reason(s)

- 4.1 This report has been prepared as a direct response to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee's wish to thoroughly review the council's progress to date in pursuance of its commitments in the Climate Emergency Declaration.

5.0 Implications/Consultations

- 5.1 Community Safety

a) None arising directly from this report.

5.2 Data Protection

a) None arising directly from this report.

5.3 Equalities

a) Yes – Members are directed to Chapter 4 of the council’s Climate Change Strategy 2022 – 2026 which discusses in detail the interaction of climate change and equalities, most notably the co-benefits of work to tackle climate change on the wellbeing of people in the district with protected characteristics.

5.4 Environmental Sustainability

a) Yes – The work identified in this report will improve environmental sustainability.

5.5 Financial

a) No – There are no direct financial implications arising from consideration of the council’s work to date in relation to council’s Climate Emergency Declaration although, of course, should specific actions be followed, there would in some cases be quite considerable financial implications; any future proposals with significant revenue and/or capital implications for the council will be put to members for consideration at the time.

5.6 Health and Safety

a) None arising directly from this report.

5.7 Human Resources

a) None arising directly from this report.

5.8 Human Rights

a) None arising directly from this report.

5.9 Legal

a) None arising directly from this report.

5.10 Specific Wards

a) None arising directly from this report.

6.0 Background papers, appendices and other relevant material

6.1 Background Information:

- a) Climate change emergency declaration 2019
<http://democracy.eastherts.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CIId=158&MIId=3508&J=3>
- b) Climate change emergency declaration 2023
<http://democracy.eastherts.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CIId=158&MIId=4215&J=5>
- c) Climate Change Strategy 2022 – 2026 https://cdn-eastherts.onwebcurl.com/s3fs-public/2022-10/Climate_Change_Strategy_2022%20Accessible.pdf
- d) East Herts Council Carbon Emission: 2023, published May 2024
https://cdn-eastherts.onwebcurl.com/s3fs-public/2024-05/2023%20East%20Herts%20Council's%20emissions%20report_accessible.pdf

6.2 Appendices

- a) None.

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