

## **DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL**

At a Special Meeting of **Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee** held in Committee Room 1A, County Hall, Durham on **Tuesday 6 October 2015 at 9.30 am**

**Present:**

**Councillor B Graham (Chairman)**

**Members of the Committee:**

Councillors E Adam, J Armstrong, E Bell, J Clare, J Gray, D Hall, G Holland, I Jewell, P May, A Liversidge and L Taylor

**Co-opted Members:**

Mrs P Spurrell

**1 Apologies**

Apologies for absence had been received from Councillors D Bell, J Clark and O Milburn.

**2 Substitute Members**

There were no substitute members.

**3 Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest.

**4 Any items from Co-opted Members or interested parties**

There were no items from Co-opted Members or Interested Parties.

**5 Low Carbon Energy - Overview**

The committee considered the joint report of the Assistant Chief Executive and Corporate Director of Regeneration and Economic Development which provided members with background information prior to a presentation on low carbon energy providing detail of energy development in the Country and in the North East region; current position; issues and challenges and current and future opportunities (for copy of report see file of minutes).

The Chairman welcomed Professor Jon Gluyas, Dean of Knowledge Exchange, Dong/Ikon Chair of Geoenergy Carbon Capture and Storage, Department of Earth Sciences, Durham University who was in attendance to provide members with a presentation on low carbon energy potential in County Durham (for copy of slides see file of minutes).

During the presentation he provided details of the basic energy sources, high carbon/low carbon, embedded carbon, high carbon – mitigation strategy, energy density, UK energy consumption, UK changing energy picture, background in relation to the development of energy in the county and the North East region, current position, issues and challenges and current and future opportunities.

Councillor Hall referred to the use of heat from seawater and asked if there was potential within County Durham to capture this source of energy. Professor Gluyas responded that there are examples of projects involving heat extraction from seawater in Norway but none within the UK although there are projects involving heat being taken from rivers such as the Thames and Clyde. Professor Gluyas commented that in his opinion heat extraction from the sea is only a short step away.

Concerning energy security Councillor Hall commented that there is a drive to decrease energy use in the Country however this is not mirrored in current planning requirements, Government should ensure that planning regulations require the use of low carbon technologies in new builds, as planning has a direct impact on energy savings.

Councillor E Bell referred to a previous visit by the committee to the Dawdon Minewater Treatment Scheme site and commented that whilst minewater was being treated and heat extracted at this site, why was something similar not being done further up the coast at Whitburn.

Professor Gluyas responded that in the UK we waste a lot of energy, 40% of UK energy bills is for heating. Heat from Minewater is being investigated at Whitehaven and will be investigated as part of the Durham City District Heating feasibility study. Work is underway in partnership with UKCoal, The Environment Agency, Northumbrian Water and Durham County Council, investigating the further use of minewater heat in Dawdon. He concluded the heat from minewater should be investigated more but had no answer as to why it is not.

Councillor Adam referred to energy density and asked why the UK is not developing the use of hydrogen gas. Professor Gluyas responded that hydrogen presented an opportunity and that there are a number of options for generating hydrogen. The UK had used hydrogen in the past as 'town gas' was principally hydrogen however in the 1960's a decision was taken by Government to use natural gas. There is no reason why hydrogen gas could not be produced and used in the future.

Councillor Holland referred to the building of carbon neutral housing estates and commented that currently it is not possible to build these estates with current Government planning guidance, there is a need for this to change with current energy security issues and the need to drive down usage. Government needs to change current planning legislation and allow for carbon neutral housing estates to be built. Did Professor Gluyas think Government would change current planning legislation to allow the building of such housing estates. Professor Gluyas responded that there is a need for low carbon housing estates to be built and in order to do this there is a need for planning legislation to change.

Councillor Jewell indicated that there were very few wind sites remaining in County, was there potential for the business sector to use the low number of remaining sites for their financial benefit. Maggie Bosanquet, Sustainability and Climate Change Team Leader

responded that the government had changed the legislation making it more restrictive as to where wind turbines can be located.

Councillor May referred to the Chinese using coal and asked if there would be the opportunity for the UK to once again use coal for heat. Professor Gluyas responded that China was significant smoke issues and that they are currently undertaking work to reduce the amount of coal emissions. In relation to the UK there was still a lot of coal in the earth and would anticipate at some point in the future going back to using coal as a source of energy.

The Chairman thanked Professor Gluyas for his very informative presentation.

**Resolved:** That the report and presentation be noted.

## **6 Renewable Energy - Policy Changes and Update on Recommendations in the 'Reducing the Council's Carbon Emissions' - Scrutiny Review Report:**

The committee considered a joint report of the Assistant Chief Executive and Corporate Director, Regeneration and Economic Development which provided members with: an overview of changes in planning policy in relation to wind turbines and the challenges for local authorities; and an update on the progress made in relation to the recommendations contained within the 'Reducing the Council's Carbon Emissions' scrutiny review report 2013, a copy of which had been circulated with the report (for copy of reports see file of minutes).

Members received a presentation by Leo Oliver, Policy Officer, Maggie Bosanquet, Sustainability and Climate Change Team Leader and Stephen Beresford, Senior Sustainability and Climate Change Officer, Regeneration and Economic Development which focused on: changes to Government Planning Policy in relation to renewables (wind turbines) and the challenges this presented to local authorities; progress made by Durham County Council in reducing carbon emissions; key projects; challenges and opportunities and future developments (for copy of slides see file of minutes).

The Chairman thanked officers for their very informative presentation and indicated that she was pleased they had mentioned during the presentation about renewable technology projects undertaken with schools and that the drop in Feed in Tariff introduced by Government would now make projects with schools difficult in terms of affordability. Officers confirmed that some of the projects with schools were no longer feasible as a result of the significantly reduced tariff and that this would also impact on the renewable energy business sector potentially resulting in the closure of some businesses.

Councillor May commented that the progress chart illustrating the Council's reduced carbon emissions was interesting and showed that progress had been made. However were emissions from Durham County Council's external contractors included within this data. Officers responded that where there is an opportunity to include contractors' emissions then Durham County Council will try to include this within the individual contract and this had been done in relation to the waste transport contract. It is not always feasible to include the emissions element in every contract however once the Carbon Management Plan is refreshed then Durham County Council will be able to more clearly see what the

Council is directly responsible for such as Durham County Council offices and where Durham County Council does not have control but can influence such as schools.

Councillor E Bell referred to solar panels and commented that he had found schools in the County difficult to get then 'on board' with renewables and his concern was that the reduced tariff would mean that many more schools would opt out of introducing and using renewables. He continued by asking why the Council did not have a policy in relation to new build Durham County Council buildings requiring that they use renewable technologies like solar panels. Officers responded that the timing of the reduced Feed in Tariffs is bad as Durham County Council had recently prepared a number of options for schools to install PV solar panels. Some panels may be installed before the introduction of the reduced tariff in January, but not many. In relation to a policy for new build Durham County Council buildings, officers found the current situation frustrating however a new build energy policy is under consideration.

Councillor Holland referred to national Planning Policy Guidance and commented that it is inadequate. He suspected that the change in planning guidance concerning restricting the location of wind turbines resulted from Government responding to the concerns of the Southern Counties however County Durham had embraced wind turbines with a number of sites within the County. He continued that new buildings within the County should be energy neutral and that government policy should drive this. An opportunity existed via the County Durham Plan (Policy 16) to make new builds within the County energy neutral.

Officers indicated that they could only do what legislation and building regulations currently permitted. Government has got rid of Code for Sustainable Homes policy as it has been replaced by building regulations with current Durham County Council policy reflecting this. There is an issue in relation to ensuring that development sites remain viable particularly in relation to affordable home sites where the developer will pass on the additional costs of renewables to the purchaser, increasing the cost of the property.

Councillor Adam referred to the cost of energy and commented that energy companies did not want free or cheap energy as this would affect their profits. Housing developers would not make as much profit if they had to make houses more energy efficient. Energy was a huge proportion of people's income and if this was free it would give them more disposable income. Officers referred to the solar panels that had been installed which produced more power than had been anticipated.

Councillor Adam referred to housing groups and if they could be encouraged to provide energy efficient housing in particular the 200 houses which were to be built at Newton Aycliffe.

The Chairman commented that this was between housing and planning. Councillor Armstrong responded that members would see the plans for the development when available including detail of the types of properties to be built on the site, properties built by Durham County Council should lead by example.

Councillor Liversidge commented that the reduction in the Feed in Tariff from 12 pence to 1.8 pence was significant. Had the government given an official explanation as to the reasons for the reduction?

Officers responded that the budget for solar panels was over spent so the Feed in Tariff was cut which had resulted in people quickly getting solar panels installed prior to the reduction in the tariff.

Councillor D Hall referred to the current position of the County Durham Plan and commented how this was an opportunity to identify and add additional sites for wind turbines in line with the Government's new planning policy. Officers responded that County Durham is in a fortunate position as the Plan is currently being refreshed which would provide an opportunity to revisit locations within the County which would be suitable for wind turbines. Councillor Hall continued by asking as to whether a similar process could be undertaken as part of the refresh of the County Durham Plan concerning identifying areas for low carbon homes. Officers responded that sustainable buildings fall under Policy 16 of the Plan and that in order for this to be looked at as part of the refresh then the evidence base of the plan would need to show that sustainable buildings are feasible and viable. However, officers would feed back key messages from this meeting to the Spatial Policy Team who are responsible for the refresh of the Plan. Councillor Hall referred to the anti-poverty strategy and asked if a heat strategy had been developed for County Durham as 40% of bills within the County was for heating. Officers responded that there is a national heat strategy currently and that work is underway on a heat strategy for Durham City with the consultants' initial energy masterplan and heat map report with recommendations expected shortly and a further in depth feasibility study to follow.

Councillor Armstrong stated that Government is changing planning policy frequently which has resulted in Planners constantly having to revise policies and strategies.

**Resolved:** That the report and presentation be noted.