

AGENDA ITEM NO. 9

TITLE: EAST CAMBRIDGESHIRE ENVIRONMENT ACTION PLAN - OPTIONS FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT, INCLUDING A CITIZENS ASSEMBLY

Committee: Operational Services Committee

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1.0 ISSUE

- 1.1 On 8 June 2020, Operational Services Committee approved the Council's first 'Environment Plan', which provides a strategy and action plan to deliver on the commitments of the Climate Change Motion approved in October 2019.
- 1.2 That Plan included an action to prepare, with the community, an East Cambridgeshire wide Environment Plan to compliment the ECDC-only Environment Plan of June 2020.
- 1.3 This agenda item seeks Committee approval on some of the principles of what that community engagement should comprise of.

2.0 RECOMMENDATION(S)

- 2.1 That the Committee:
- (A) Agrees to the continued progression towards a 'partnership forum', on the basis of the approach set out in the agenda report;
 - (B) Agrees not to progress a Climate and Natural Environment Citizens Assembly at this stage, but does not rule out such an Assembly at a later date;
 - (C) Agrees that engagement commences on potential representatives for the Partnership Forum, but that no decision on representatives be made at this stage; and
 - (D) Agrees a further update on the options for the setting up of the partnership forum (or similar) at its meeting in January 2021.

3.0 BACKGROUND/OPTIONS

- 3.1 On 8 June 2020, Operational Services Committee approved the Council's first 'Environment Plan'. We continue to make good progress on the 'actions' agreed in that Plan, as reported to Committee in September and a further detailed update will be presented in January.
- 3.2 This agenda paper focus on one specific 'action' in the Plan which states as follows:

"Action 14: Put in place arrangements, by April 2021 (including a district wide partnership forum), to facilitate the preparation of a district wide Action Plan

(‘District-EnvPlan’). This Action Plan, which is prepared in partnership with a wide range of stakeholders, will set out how we can cut our carbon emissions and boost the natural environment collectively across the East Cambridgeshire area.”

- 3.3 This agenda paper also addresses a request made by this Committee in June, when approving the Environment Plan namely:

“That officers explore the possibility of using Citizens Assemblies and report back to the Committee”

Progress to date on Action 14 (a district-wide action plan)

- 3.4 As Action 14 states, above, the clear intent is for the district-wide environment action plan to be prepared *with* the public, rather than prepared *for* (and imposed *on*) the public.
- 3.5 Nevertheless, before any meaningful engagement with stakeholders can properly begin, two matters need to be established:
- First, meaningful baseline data captured, so as to be able to start a meaningful conversation; and
 - Second, agreement on what sort of engagement should be put in place.
- 3.6 Of course, even once the above two are established it does not prevent both from being built on and continuously evolving, once stakeholders commence involvement. But, nevertheless, we the Council, need to take responsibility for getting both off to a good start.

Baseline data capture

- 3.7 In the ECDC Environment Plan of June 2020, a variety of statistics and evidence was established so we could work out, as an organisation, where our environmental impacts existed enabling us to work out what areas to tackle through specific agreed actions. Thus, for example, the June 2020 Plan set out the Council’s ‘carbon footprint’ and highlighted what ECDC operations contributed most to that footprint.
- 3.8 The same principles apply to preparing a district-wide action plan. Officers have been gathering data to help establish the facts in terms of the carbon emissions and other matters in East Cambridgeshire. A report to Committee in January is intended to set out some of these headlines, though as a flavour, and unsurprising, road traffic and residential emissions are the two dominant sources of CO₂ emissions in the East Cambridgeshire area. Combined, they are responsible for nearly three-quarters of all emissions. On the flip side, the district does perform strongly on some forms of renewable energy production, when compared with other areas (the district has high biomass and solar photovoltaics (PV) energy generation, though exceptionally low energy generation from wind).

Establishing a partnership forum to progress a district wide action plan

3.9 This is not as easy to establish as it may seem, and made all the more difficult by the covid-related restrictions on engaging with people (and larger audiences) face to face. Key questions are thus:

- Which stakeholders should be involved?
- How many should be involved?
- Who decides the participants?
- Should there be different levels of engagement with different stakeholders?
- What type of engagement should it be?
- Who coordinates activities? The Council? If not, then who?
- How is an action plan signed off? By whom?
- To what degree do resources limit the answers to the above questions?

3.10 This agenda report attempts to set out some options to address these questions. To start with, it addresses the specific question of whether or not a Citizens Assembly should be pursued.

Citizens Assembly

3.11 **What is a Citizens Assembly?** A citizens' assembly is a group of people who are brought together to discuss an issue or issues, and reach a conclusion about what they think should happen. The people who take part are chosen so they reflect the wider population – for example in terms of demographics (e.g. age, gender, ethnicity, social class). Citizens' assemblies give members of the public the time and opportunity to learn about and discuss a topic, before reaching conclusions. Assembly Members are asked to make trade-offs and arrive at workable recommendations.

3.12 **What happens at a Citizens Assembly?** Assemblies can be organised in different ways but may, for example, involve participants attending an event over a weekend where they hear and question expert contributors who are chosen specifically to reflect the range of views on a specified topic. Smaller workshops can then take place to discuss what was said, identifying the issues and arguments that they feel to be most important.

3.13 At a second (or more) weekend, Assembly Members discuss what they had heard and reach a set of recommendations. To do this they work through a series of exercises, involving small group discussions, as well as some voting and ranking of options. The weekends are typically led by professional facilitators and there are also facilitators on each table.

3.14 **How can you ensure that an Assembly is accessible to everyone?** It is important that a citizens' assembly is accessible to everyone. In some examples this has involved covering the cost of attendance in full i.e. providing travel, accommodation and meals. In addition, Assembly Members can be provided with an honorarium of, say, £150 per weekend in order to encourage and support their participation. This approach recognises that Assembly Members were giving up time to take part and

ensures that a diverse range of participants (e.g. including those on low-incomes, unemployed, with caring responsibilities, etc.) could participate.

- 3.15 **How do you ensure that the information Assembly Members receive is balanced and accurate?** In order to ensure balance and accuracy, an Expert Lead should be appointed to advise on the selection of expert contributors and the development of materials. A suitable individual would need to be identified.
- 3.16 **Have any other cities held Citizens Assemblies on this topic?** The UK Government announced in 2019 that a UK wide climate based Citizens Assembly will take place in 2020. The Government wrote to 30,000 households in early November 2019 and then selected just over 100 representatives “*from all walks of life and all shades of opinion to discuss how the UK should meet the target [of net zero by 2050]*”. Those people met over six weekends in spring 2020, and a final report was published in September 2020. It is a huge 556 page report, though summaries are available. This website provides the details, and its findings are interesting and worthy of further consideration:
<https://www.climateassembly.uk/report/> .
- 3.17 On a smaller scale, in July 2019, Camden held the UK’s first Citizens’ Assembly on the climate crisis. Over three sessions, Assembly members considered evidence from climate scientists, environmentalists and community energy practitioners, before developing their proposals on how Camden should address the climate crisis. The Assembly proposals will inform a new Climate Action Plan for Camden which will be published in 2020. The summary report can be viewed here:
<https://www.camden.gov.uk/documents/20142/0/Camden+Citizens%27+Assembly+on+the+Climate+Crisis+--+Report.pdf/947eb4e5-5623-17a1-9964-46f351446548>.
- 3.18 **What are the options for East Cambridgeshire?** A key question is whether, with resources available, a Citizens Assembly is the best way forward in East Cambridgeshire or would a different engagement approach be more effective both in terms of outcomes and budget.
- 3.19 If it is decided the Council does wish to hold its own Climate Change/Natural Environment Citizens Assembly, then it is proposed that an external experienced and reputable organisation is engaged to deliver it. This approach would mean that robust and tested processes are used to identify a representative sample of participants, set the agenda and identify external experts alongside running robust activities to get the best possible participation from everyone involved.
- 3.20 What should not be underestimated is the cost of running a Citizens Assembly, both directly (to pay for the running of it) and indirectly (officer time preparing for it). What is clear from evidence elsewhere, is that running a Citizens Assembly cannot be done ‘half-heartedly’; to do so would lead to an outcome which is not robust nor genuinely representative of the residents of East Cambridgeshire.
- 3.21 Overall, officer view presently is that a formal Citizens Assembly on climate and natural environment issues in East Cambridgeshire should not be progressed, primarily due to the cost of such a programme (it could easily cost £100k or more, for which we do not have a budget) but also as the Council lacks, at present, any real

baseline as to what the local issues are in East Cambridgeshire and what options there are for a citizens assembly to consider and vote on. Such baseline and policy options are emerging, and therefore a Citizens Assembly should not be ruled out completely. But, for the next few months at least, it is not recommended to be progressed. In the meantime, the results of the Sept 2020 UK Citizens Assembly report will be looked at in more detail, to see what recommendations from it could be applied locally.

Other Community Participation/Engagement Options

- 3.22 Full Council committed to the setting up of a 'partnership forum'. Whilst this commitment may not extend to the establishment of a 'citizens assembly' (for reasons above), it clearly goes beyond just 'consult the public on a draft plan'.
- 3.23 What could a 'partnership forum' look like? To be effective, such a forum needs to be proportionate in scale (numbers of people / scope of work) and representative of views (i.e. not just environment based lobby groups, who are naturally more likely to want to join such a forum). The forum also needs to have a clear brief as to its purpose, and a timeframe as to what it is going to produce. Some form of 'terms of reference' will be needed so that a minority do not unreasonably hold up the majority view.
- 3.24 For ECDC itself, it should join the forum, but should not be seen to be the one with a 'power of veto' above all other participants, simply because it is providing the coordination and administrative support. Ultimately, the district wide action plan to be produced by the Forum should not be seen as an "ECDC plan", but a partnership plan endorsed by the partnership as a whole.
- 3.25 Committee's views on the above would be most welcome, so that such a partnership could start to be established, but as a starter for that discussion, perhaps the following could form the basis of such a forum:
- Approximately 20 representative on the forum, covering as wide a range of views and interests as possible.
 - ECDC provides the administrative support to set up the meetings, though ideally in the medium term the partnership could undertake this task itself (partly to remove such a burden from ECDC, but perhaps more importantly so as to demonstrate the forum's independence of ECDC).
 - The first task of the forum would be to establish its first ever district wide 'action plan' for East Cambridgeshire, if possible by June 2021 (to align with the update of the ECDC 'action plan' due at that time).
 - Thereafter, the forum could tackle a select few themes per year, focussing on those areas first that could deliver the greatest results (perhaps one CO2e related theme, and one natural environment related theme, per year)
- 3.26 In some respects, what could emerge is similar to the concept of a Community Land Trust: namely, ECDC helping to establish a Trust/forum, then providing on-going

support, but then ultimately leaving it to the Trust/forum to decide what issues matter most to them and what actions they want to see addressed.

- 3.27 If the above establishment of a Forum is broadly supported, it obviously only involves a limited number of participants. Therefore, in addition to above, a more open engagement process at key stages could be developed. This will inevitably be more 'consultative' rather than the detailed engagement that exists with the Forum, but nevertheless would build upon the ongoing and successful Climate Change 'Ideas Forum' and enable everyone to have their say. It should be possible (indeed appropriate) for the Partnership Forum to be open to admitting a new contributor to their partnership at any time, and therefore anyone who appears to be bringing forward particularly good ideas or enthusiasm via the consultation route could in turn be encouraged to join the Partnership Forum.
- 3.28 In effect, therefore, it is a two-tier approach: a balanced, focussed, committed Partnership Forum, which is supported by a wider consultation forum. As part of all that, ECDC acts as support, not leader. Ultimately, the goal will be for the action plan created to be owned by the Partnership, and hopefully something which can then be endorsed by individual organisations (including ECDC). Alongside it, ECDC will continue to prepare its own annual 'action plan' for its own operations, as it did so in June 2020; and will encourage others to do the same for their own operations.

4.0 ARGUMENTS/CONCLUSIONS

- 4.1 The purpose of this paper is to seek a consensus on how we progress community engagement on a district wide environment plan.
- 4.2 Further reports will be put to Committee to refine the approach, before launching an agreed way forward sometime in early 2021 (by April at the latest).

5.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS / EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT / ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT ASSESSMENT

- 5.1 There are no direct implications arising from the recommendations, though future recommendations linked to this paper may result in implications, and these will be assessed at that stage.

6.0 APPENDICES

- 6.1 Nil

Background Documents

Location

Room 12, The
Grange,
Ely

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