

# REPORT TO STRATEGIC SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Date of Meeting: 25 January 2024

## PORTFOLIO HOLDER'S REPORT TO SCRUTINY COMMITTEES

Councillor Josie Parkhouse – Lead Councillor for Climate & Ecological Crisis

### 1. Issues relating to achieving the Council's published priorities

#### Net Zero Carbon City

There is a significant risk and challenge that the net zero budget is temporary. Once the £1m budget is spent in March 2026, the roles and activities will cease unless further funding can be found. The Service Lead for Net Zero & Business is researching opportunities to develop an ongoing revenue stream for this work to continue, as well as sourcing external funding.

#### City Wide Net Zero 2030

Since the closure of Exeter City Futures, no one organisation has been coordinating and facilitating the Exeter Net Zero 2030 Plan. A way forward for facilitating and delivering city wide net zero was the subject of a report to Executive 6 January 2024. The report detailed the City Council taking on the role of coordinating and facilitating city wide net zero, utilising an existing budget to employ a temporary 2 year funded post, as well as utilising existing resources, both internally and externally.

#### Exeter City Council Net Zero 2030

Residential food waste has been rolled out to 21,300 domestic properties collecting 687 tonnes of food waste between 1 April to 30 September 2023. Early December an additional 600 properties starting collections, additional collections will be on hold until a new food bay is constructed.

The City Council currently have 3 electric refuse vehicles in circulation. The diesel fleet will be replaced with electric refuse vehicles when they become available and are economically viable to do so.

A decarbonisation plan for the Royal Albert Memorial Museum is due for completion in 2024.

3 decarbonisation plans have been completed for the leisure estate, the remaining sites are to be completed in 2024.

City Council emissions for 2021/22 were 36,631 tCO<sub>2</sub>e, which represents a reduction of 2,293 tCO<sub>2</sub>e (6%) on the previous year. Services with the highest emissions are:

- Social Housing 60% of our footprint
- Procurement 20% of our footprint
- Non-Domestic Buildings 18% of our footprint
- Transport 3% of our footprint
- Offsets 1% of our footprint (positive contribution)

Corporate carbon emissions fluctuate each year, this is a result of strategic decisions and the current formula for procurement.

#### Ecological Crisis

There is a high demand for sports and mixed leisure use across City Council green spaces, this presents conflicting land use priorities. Resource and space restrictions mean that ecology enhancement potential is limited across City Council owned land.

Enhancements are therefore reliant on developments, private landowners, or across existing sites of biodiversity interest. Here the implementation of statutory planning frameworks and council policy can ensure the protection, enhancement, and restoration of biodiversity on behalf of the city.

In addition, space restrictions mean that additional canopy cover targets will need to be achieved across developments and/ or private landowners ostensibly. This limits the ability of the Council to directly influence canopy levels and carbon reduction progress through Exeter's Treescape.

Ongoing resource and budget constraints mean that development projects require external funding. The capacity of operational teams to secure and deliver ecology based projects, alongside core workloads, is limited.

### **Leading a Well-Run Council**

The City Council's solar estate has increased to **3.4MW** which reduces energy consumption and costs for a number of service areas. £418,870.31 has been generated to date this year solely from our Feed In Tariff (FiT) and export to the grid network.

## **2. Update or commentary on any major ongoing programmes of work**

### **City Wide Net Zero 2030**

The following major infrastructure improvements will improve public transport:

- Marsh Barton Train Station
- Okehampton Train Station
- Government is providing funding to re-introduce rail services from Wellington & Cullompton

Along with the Net Zero Project Manager I have recently visited Bristol to learn from the **Bristol City Leap** initiative <https://www.bristolcityleap.co.uk/> I have also had discussions with Oxford and Plymouth City Council to learn about structures, lessons learnt and challenges they have encountered. These will be drawn into developing a programme of works on reducing city wide carbon emissions.

I have attended a number of local, regional and national events to share best practice on what Exeter has achieved, but to also learn successes, including:

- The British Science Festival
- The Net Zero Nations Project Conference in November
- The Labour party Conference to attend numerous net zero events

The reconvened City Council **Transport Working Group** have met and at the first meeting received a presentation on the Sustainable Transport & Communication chapter of the draft Exeter Plan. The Group have submitted a response as part of the consultation. New Terms of Reference are being developed.

To support city wide net zero, the City Council have committed budget from our **Shared Prosperity Fund** to a number of carbon reducing projects. Regular updates on activity is provided to Strategic Scrutiny every 6 months, next is March 2024:

- EPC Advisors (either residential or commercial) - 2024/25
- Greening Your Business (business support) - Prosper is now live and providing specialist support to businesses in Exeter  
<https://www.heartofswgrowthhub.co.uk/prosper-sign-up/>
- Exeter Innovation Hub (high growth business support) – Hub has opened in Princesshay
- Exeter College Retrofit Skills Centre - 2024/25

The Net Zero team are working closely with Devon County Council on a funding submission to **LEVI**, to rollout EV charging across the city, both on-street and off-street utilising our car park estate.

1Energy approached 4 city institutions in the latter part of 2022 concerning their ambitions to install a **District Heat Network** in Exeter. 1Energy made a bid for funding through the Green Heat Network Fund <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/green-heat-network-fund-ghnf> and were successful in achieving a grant of £44m. City institutions are not procuring a DHN, but may consider connecting to a DHN if the business case stacks up. A member briefing is due imminently.

Once the report on City Wide Net Zero has been endorsed by Executive and Council, discussions will take place with City Council services in how existing services can positively contribute to reducing city wide carbon emissions.

### **Ecological Crisis - Recovery, Enhancement and Net Gain**

As a supporting Authority, the City Council will continue working with the Responsible Body (Devon County Council) on the creation of the **Local Nature Recovery Strategy** (LNRS), which is due to be published summer 2024. A requirement under the 2021 Environment Act, the strategy will outline a joint authority framework of objectives, supporting the delivery of nature recovery and biodiversity net gain within Devon.

The City Council is investigating the potential use of Suitable Alternative Natural Greens Spaces (SANGS) to mitigate the impact of the Exeter Local Plan and future development, on sites of significant international biodiversity interest. A report titled 'Recognising and capturing the Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace (SANG) potential of the Valley Parks' has been completed and will form part of the evidence informing the emerging Joint Mitigation Strategy. Footprint Ecology have been commissioned to undertake this work and a final draft version of the strategy is expected next year.

Work continues on the implementation of mandatory **Biodiversity Net Gain** (BNG) arrangements. This statutory requirement will see a 10% BNG requirement implemented (either onsite or offsite) across unexempted developments and following the biodiversity gain mitigation hierarchy. The City Council's planning teams continue to develop processes in accordance with evolving guidance and regulation, and this includes working with third-party private landowners and Devon County Council to secure legal agreements for offsite 'habitat banks' in Exeter.

The City Council have an enhanced biodiversity duty under the Environment Act 2021 which requires LAs to communicate what they are doing to improve the environment and to show the positive change they're making through statutory biodiversity reports. BNG, the LNRS and the Exeter Plan will be the primary contributors, as well other projects such as Exeter Wild City, Northbrook Arboretum, and the potential re-naturalisation of Exeter's waterways. The first report must be published by March 2026 and work in 2024 will begin ensuring we are recording the positive changes from these projects.

### **Exeter City Council Net Zero 2030**

**The Water Lane Smart Grid and Storage** project is completed and includes:

- a ground mounted 1.2 MW array at Water Lane with energy storage technology
- a private wire connection providing a renewable energy supply to the Council's Operations Depot at Exton Road to support the electrification of the Council's fleet
- battery storage at three further sites where solar energy is generated
- 140kw solar installation at the Riverside Leisure Centre

The City Council were a finalist in the first edie Net Zero Awards for “Renewable Energy Project of the Year” for the Water Lane Smart Grid and Storage. Sadly the Net Zero team weren’t successful in winning the top prize, but continue to deliver innovative projects to reduce our corporate carbon emissions.

To Net Zero team continue to deliver **Carbon Literacy** training for officers and Cllrs continue with 190 completing the training and 85 being certified as being carbon literate. Bronze status has been achieved, silver is the goal.

The Net Zero team is leading a Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme (PSDS) funded project for heat decarbonisation for RAMM & Riverside Leisure Centre.

### **Ecological Crisis**

Exeter’s **Tree and Woodland Strategy 2023-33** will be released in 2024. The strategy outlines a framework for protecting the biodiversity and biosecurity of Exeter’s Treescape. It identifies objectives that will support canopy cover increases where space allows across City Council owned land, and through development and private land stakeholders. The recent ‘Valuing Exeter’s Urban Forest Report’ indicates that Exeter’s holistic canopy levels reduce City Carbon by as much as 1,500 tonnes per year. With the implementation of strategy objectives this figure is anticipated to gradually increase as canopy levels do, although the benefits will not be fully realised till the maturation of new planting schemes closer to 2033.

### **3. Issues that may impact service delivery/financial performance/future budget requirements**

As previously mentioned, there is a significant risk and challenge that the net zero budget is temporary. There is budget remaining for activity to continue until March 2026. The Service Lead for Net Zero & Business is researching opportunities to develop an ongoing revenue stream for this work to continue, as well as sourcing external funding.

Over the past month, the Service Lead for Net Zero & Business has spoken with all Service Leads to talk through the challenges they face to reduce service carbon emissions. Service Leads have been incredibly honest in the challenges they face and the support they have received to date from the Net Zero team.

In spring 2024, the Net Zero team will commission **SWEEG** to update the City Wide Green House Gas report, to enable a review of the Net Zero Exeter 2030 Plan and an action plan to be developed to address areas that have high carbon emissions. This will be used to develop a work programme for the new Programme Manager City Wide Net Zero.

A study to determine the full financial cost of achieving city wide net zero by 2030 will be commissioned.

Due to the sale of **Mary Arches Street Car Park**, the Net Zero team are researching alternative locations for the solar located on the top floor of the car park.

I have been discussing with the Communities Portfolio Holder a proposal to establish a climate change group through **Exeter Connects**, as engagement with our communities and residential associations will be key to deliver change across the city.

If successful, the County wide **LEVI** funding may have a small impact on income streams, as EV charging will be provided by an external provider. If the funding bid is successful, existing charging points (PodPoint) located in City Council car parks will be used for City Council use only – which would support the electrification of our fleet network.

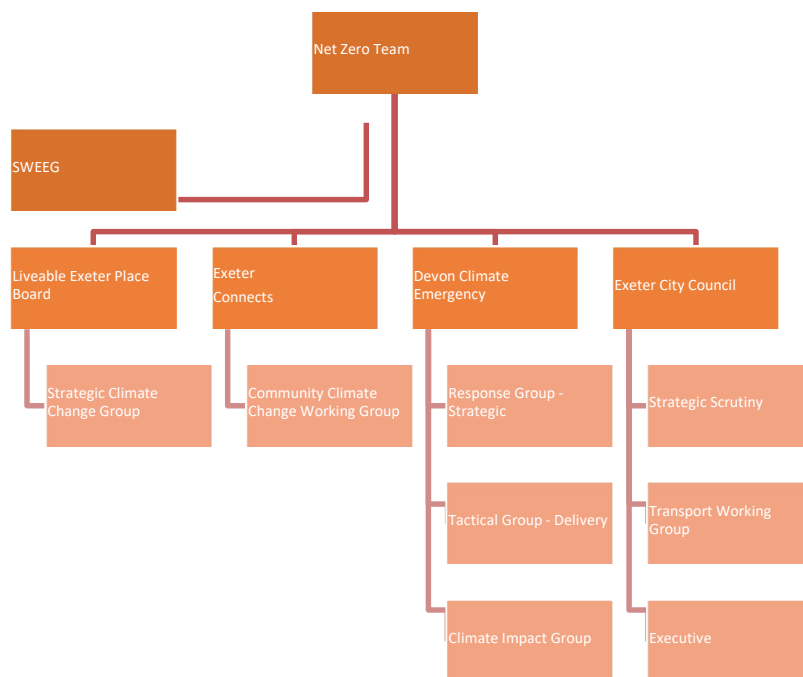
The Service Lead has started to **review City Council policies**, to determine a positive or negative impact they may have on reducing city wide or corporate carbon emissions. This review is extensive and will take some time to determine impact, the results will be reported back to Executive in the future.

#### 4. Potential changes to services/provisions being considered

##### City Wide Net Zero 2030

Since the closure of Exeter City Futures, no one organisation has been coordinating and facilitating the Exeter Net Zero 2030 Plan in regards to its delivery, monitoring and evaluation. A way forward for facilitating and delivering city wide net zero was the subject of a report to Executive 6 January 2024. The report detailed plans for the City Council to coordinate and facilitate city wide net zero, utilising an existing budget to employ a temporary 2 year funded post (Programme Manager City Wide Net Zero) and utilising existing resources, both internally and externally. As there is an existing team that focuses on net zero activity, it is proposed this team takes on the City Wide Net Zero, with delivery overseen by the Service Lead for Net Zero. The wider Net Zero team are currently working at capacity, so opportunities to support will be limited initially.

The new temporary post will be the main point of contact for city businesses, community group in delivering net zero for Exeter, acting as a co-ordinator and facilitator for a wide range of carbon reducing projects. The chart below highlights how existing structures will be utilised.



#### 5. Other matters the Portfolio Holder wishes to raise with the Scrutiny Committee

A submission to the Exeter Plan has been submitted, in relation to its impact in reducing city wide carbon emissions. I look forward to working with City Development in how Building Control and the planning regime can act for good in reducing city wide emissions.

I am working with the Service Lead for Net Zero in how our car park estate can have a positive impact on reducing city wide emissions, whilst continuing to deliver an income stream to deliver a wide range of discretionary and statutory services.

