

CLIMATE & BIODIVERSITY COMMITTEE



Agenda Item: Committee Objectives & Work Programme for the Municipal Year

Meeting Date: Tuesday, 20 May 2025

Contact Officer: Town Clerk/CEO

The purpose of this report is to set out proposed objectives and a work programme for the Climate & Biodiversity Committee for the 2025/26 municipal year.

The Town Clerk regrets the delay in preparing this report, which resulted from competing priorities and the need to compile information from multiple sources for this newly established committee. The proposed committee objectives should be considered as recommendations rather than requirements.

Members may wish to defer decision-making on this agenda item until after hearing from the Biodiversity & Green Spaces and Compliance & Environmental Officers.

Alternatively, the committee may select priority items during today's meeting or defer to the officers' expertise in developing the work programme, with a comprehensive review scheduled for the September meeting.

Background

Witney Town Council declared a Climate Emergency at the Council meeting on 26 June 2019 and subsequently held a Public Meeting on 28 July 2019 to share ideas and explore collaborative approaches to make Witney net-zero carbon as soon as possible.

The Climate & Biodiversity Committee is a newly established committee for the 2025/26 municipal year, taking on responsibilities from the former Climate, Biodiversity & Planning Committee but with a more focused remit on climate action and biodiversity enhancement.

The Council is committed to becoming carbon neutral by 2028, ahead of West Oxfordshire District Council and Oxfordshire County Council's targets of 2030 and requires a structured approach to achieve this ambitious goal.

Current Situation

Following the establishment of the Climate & Biodiversity Committee and in line with the draft terms of reference reviewed at this meeting, the Committee requires a clear set of objectives and a work programme for the 2025/26 municipal year to drive progress on the Council's climate emergency declaration and biodiversity commitments.

The proposed objectives and work programme are informed by:

- The Council's Climate Emergency declaration of June 2019
- The draft Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan Roadmap
- The Witney Lake and Country Park Management Plan 2024-2034
- The Council's Biodiversity Policy (November 2024)
- The Open Spaces Strategy (July 2021)

Proposed Committee Objectives for 2025/26

1. Develop and adopt a comprehensive Climate Change Strategy and detailed Climate Emergency Action Plan for the Council by October 2025.
2. Establish baseline carbon emissions for Council operations (Scope 1 and 2) and set specific, measurable reduction targets to achieve carbon neutrality by 2028.
3. Implement "Phase 1: Baseline Assessment and Strategy" and begin "Phase 2: Quick Wins, Operational Change and Community Support" from the Climate Emergency Action Plan Roadmap.
4. Oversee the management of the Council's Environmental Spaces with particular focus on biodiversity enhancement at Witney Lake and Country Park.
5. Provide effective oversight of the Council's tree stock management across the town to enhance carbon sequestration and biodiversity.
6. Develop partnerships with other local authorities, organizations, and community groups to promote collaborative climate action.
7. Promote community engagement and awareness of climate change and biodiversity issues through educational initiatives and outreach activities.
8. Ensure climate and biodiversity considerations are integrated into all Council operations and decision-making processes.

Proposed Work Programme for 2025/26

The work programme for the 2025/26 municipal year will focus on the following key areas:

1. Climate Change Strategy and Action Planning

- Establish a Climate Action Working Party to assist officers in drafting the Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan
- Commission a full carbon audit of Council operations, estates, vehicle fleets, and supply chains.
- Develop and adopt a comprehensive Climate Change Strategy and detailed Climate Emergency Action Plan
- Set specific, measurable targets for carbon reduction with clear milestones.
- Establish regular monitoring and reporting mechanisms.

2. Operational Changes and Quick Wins

- Arrange Carbon Literacy training for all staff and Councillors.
- Review and update the Council's Procurement Policy to prioritise local, low carbon suppliers.
- Review Events and Hiring Policy to integrate sustainability requirements.
- Conduct energy efficiency audits of Council buildings and develop retrofit plans.
- Review vehicle and machinery fleet for decarbonisation opportunities.
- Maintain 100% renewable energy procurement for Council buildings.
- Develop a climate action handbook for staff and Councillor induction.

3. Environmental Spaces Management

- Review implementation of the Witney Lake and Country Park Management Plan 2024-2034
- Oversee the management of the Council's tree stock across the town.
- Support ongoing habitat enhancement projects including hedgerow management.
- Expand wildflower areas across Council-managed land.
- Review management regimes for all green spaces to enhance biodiversity.
- Support the implementation of community orchard projects.
- Develop winter tree planting programme.

4. Community Engagement and Partnership

- Engage with Central Government, West Oxfordshire District Council, Oxfordshire County Council and other stakeholders.
- Develop Council website climate action webpage.
- Plan community climate action events.
- Launch community consultation on climate priorities.
- Develop resources to support residents with home energy efficiency.
- Work with OCC and WODC on sustainable transport initiatives.
- Support renewable energy and community energy scheme development.

5. Monitoring, Evaluation, and Reporting

- Conduct regular progress assessments against Action Plan
- Report to Full Council on implementation progress.
- Complete annual carbon emissions assessment

- Prepare annual climate action progress report.
- Identify areas requiring additional focus or resources.

Impact Assessments

The Town Council has a duty to consider the effects of its decisions, functions and activities on equality, biodiversity, and crime & disorder. Consideration should also be given to effects on the environment, given the Council's Climate Emergency declaration in 2019.

- a) **Equality** - The implementation of the Committee's work programme will benefit all residents equally. Special consideration will be given to ensure climate adaptation measures support vulnerable groups who may be disproportionately affected by climate change.
- b) **Biodiversity** - The proposed work programme includes numerous actions specifically designed to protect and enhance biodiversity across Witney, particularly in the management of the Lake and Country Park and other green spaces. Biodiversity considerations will be integrated into all climate actions.
- c) **Crime & Disorder** - No direct crime and disorder implications have been identified in relation to this report. However, environmental improvements can contribute to creating safer, more attractive public spaces.
- d) **Environment & Climate Emergency** - The entire work programme is designed to have significant positive impacts on the environment and directly address the Council's climate emergency declaration. The proposed actions will contribute to reducing the Council's carbon emissions and support wider climate mitigation and adaptation measures across Witney.

Risk

In decision making Councillors should give consideration to any risks to the Council and any action it can take to limit or negate its liability.

Key risks identified include:

1. **Resource limitations** - The ambitious work programme may require additional staff time and financial resources. This will be mitigated through careful prioritisation, seeking external funding, and maximising use of available support from partner organisations.
2. **Technical capacity** - Some climate actions may require specialised knowledge. This will be addressed through training, partnerships with expert organisations, and potentially commissioning external support where necessary.
3. **Stakeholder engagement** - Success depends on effective engagement with Council staff, residents, and other stakeholders. The work programme includes specific actions to ensure robust communication and involvement strategies.
4. **Monitoring and accountability** - Without clear targets and regular monitoring, progress may drift. The proposed quarterly review process will ensure accountability and allow for adjustments as needed.

Social Value

Social value is the positive change the Council creates in the local community within which it operates.

The Committee's work programme will deliver multi-dimensional social value:

1. **Environmental benefits** - Reduced carbon emissions, enhanced biodiversity, improved air quality, and more resilient green spaces.
2. **Economic benefits** - Support for the local green economy, potential energy cost savings, and improved infrastructure.
3. **Social benefits** - Enhanced community engagement, educational opportunities, improved public spaces, and healthier environments for residents.
4. **Health and wellbeing** - Access to quality green spaces, opportunities for active travel, and climate resilience measures that protect vulnerable residents.

Financial implications

- The development of the Climate Change Strategy and baseline carbon audit may require external expertise and resources. Budget allocation for this should be considered.
- Implementation of retrofit measures and infrastructure projects will require capital investment, however many will deliver operational savings over time through reduced energy consumption.
- Staff training and community engagement activities may require additional resource allocation.
- All external funding opportunities will be explored to support climate action costs, including relevant government grants, partnership funding, and community energy schemes.

Recommendations

Members are invited to note the report and:

1. Approve the proposed objectives for the Climate & Biodiversity Committee for the 2025/26 municipal year, if possible.
2. Support the establishment of a Climate Action Working Party to assist officers in developing the Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan.