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Dear Ian

Wrexham County Borough Council – Decarbonisation Progress Update

Whilst the Council is making progress on its decarbonisation ambition, further work is needed to confirm its carbon footprint, develop and prioritise actions, and identify resources to achieve this.

Context

In July 2022, the Auditor General published Public Sector readiness for Net Zero Carbon by 2030, which looked at decarbonisation actions in 48 public bodies, including all councils. This report found uncertainty that the collective ambition for a net zero public sector by 2030 will be met. Our work identified significant, common barriers to progress that public bodies must collectively address to meet the collective ambition. We found that while public bodies are demonstrating commitment to carbon reduction, they must now significantly ramp up their activities, increase collaboration and place decarbonisation at the heart of their day-to-day operations and decisions.

In the report, the Auditor General makes the following five calls for action from public bodies:

- strengthen your leadership and demonstrate your collective responsibility through effective collaboration;
- clarify your strategic direction and increase your pace of implementation;

- get to grips with the finances you need;
- know your skills gaps and increase your capacity; and
- improve data quality and monitoring to support your decision making.

The following paragraphs set out the findings of our local audit work on the Council's decarbonisation action plan. These findings sit within the wider context of the Auditor General's July 2022 report that calls for increased pace and stronger leadership across Wales in reducing carbon emissions.

What we looked at:

We undertook an assessment of the Council's arrangements to develop and deliver their Decarbonisation Plan. We gathered evidence through interview, document reviews and the Council's returned Call for Evidence on for the Decarbonisation Baseline Review.

What we found:

In 2019 the Council declared a Climate and Ecological Emergency and has outlined its vision for how it intends to become a carbon neutral Council by 2030 in its current Decarbonisation Plan 2021-2030. The Council identifies decarbonisation at a strategic level by its inclusion on the corporate risk covering the environment more generally. This strategic focus has been further strengthened with the former Wellbeing Objective around the environment that encompassed decarbonisation, being recently amended to focus specifically on 'Developing and Decarbonising our Environment'.

The Council has a good understanding of the risks and opportunities around climate change and this knowledge has informed its Decarbonisation Plan. The Council has undertaken work to understand its emissions footprint. The Council is also undertaking an audit to understand the full potential for decarbonisation within its asset base and its re-evaluation of its footprint data. Once complete the improved data should help enable the Council to better understand the gap between current activity and its net zero 2030 target, and if its planned actions will enable it to deliver Net Zero.

The Council is strengthening its governance arrangements to support delivery of its Decarbonisation Plan. The Council Plan Priority Board supported by a cross party working group oversees the delivery of the Plan. The Plan has also been scrutinised by the Homes and Environment Scrutiny Committee, with updates on progress reported to this committee three times per annum. The Council is developing a

decarbonisation prioritisation tool to support its decision making on which projects to invest in and when. Whilst the tool considers how projects contribute to the National Wellbeing goals, the Council could further strengthen the tool by reflecting how the decision has applied the sustainable development principle through consideration of the five ways of working

In addition to this the Council has also worked with other authorities and develop a specific carbon impact assessment tool and is in the process of integrating this into its Council wide impact assessment process. The Council has reported publicly on the progress it is making around decarbonisation in its 2020-21 Annual Focus on Performance. But it is aware that it needs to develop and monitor a broader suite of Carbon related performance metrics.

The Council has engaged with citizens, members, and other stakeholders in the development of its Decarbonisation Plan. It is including offering Carbon literacy training to all its Members and Senior officers. In addition the Council is seeking to work with two communities, in order to develop a better understanding of how communities can best be involved with and contribute to carbon reduction. The Council has also worked with 3rd sector partners to deliver community engagement and awareness raising activities. However, the Council recognises it needs to improve its approach to involving the full diversity of the population in helping it to achieve its net zero targets.

There are several examples where the Council is working collaboratively with others to deliver its ambition around decarbonisation, such as:

- its audit of all assets to identify publicly owned land that can be enhanced and enriched through planting and supporting biodiversity,
- the creation of a Tree and Woodland pledge, and the successful award of funding from the Woodland Trust to create new areas of woodland across the county, and
- the work with partners from the North Wales Economic Ambition Board, around the development and delivery of the North Wales Energy Strategy, Smart Local energy Systems and project such as the around the creation of the Deeside Hydrogen Hub.

However, the Council will need to continue to collaborate closely with neighbouring Authorities and other stakeholders to identify best practice and joint projects to achieve their net zero targets.

The Council has historically invested in several decarbonisation initiatives and has identified some resources to deliver against its net zero target. The Council has not

identified all the resources required, particularly in relation to capital funding. There is therefore a significant risk that the Council will not meet the net zero emissions target by 2030. The Council currently has a specific resource ringfenced for the decarbonisation called the “Carbon Emissions Reserve” of £661k which it uses to pump prime projects and undertake feasibility studies to expedite any potential grant funding for Carbon projects. The Council has also recently appointed a Climate Change and Decarbonisation Manager. However, services need to undertake further work to develop the cost benefit and carbon impacts analysis of planned interventions.

Recommendations

Exhibit 1: recommendations

The table below sets out the recommendations that we have identified following this review

Recommendations
R1 The Council should ensure that the high-level actions in its decarbonisation plan are: <ul style="list-style-type: none">- prioritised based on clear criteria, including carbon and financial impact;- aligned with its Medium-Term Financial Strategy and Capital Programme; and- integrated into business plans.
R2 The Council should develop a robust set of metrics to measure and report progress on its decarbonisation journey.

Yours sincerely

Alan Hughes

Audit Lead