

Extinction Rebellion Surrey's response to Surrey County Council's Greener Future Task Group report and Call for Action, January 2020

Thank you for asking Extinction Rebellion (XR) to respond to Surrey's Greener Future Task Group report and Call for Action. This response focusses on the issues and concerns that we consider must be addressed if the council are to robustly deliver on the ambitious greenhouse gas emissions reductions implied by declaring a climate emergency.

In addition to this response we would also recommend that the Council consider the 31 climate actions for Councils recently launched by Ashden and Friends of the Earth¹. 19 of these specifically refer to actions that can be taken by county council's but currently only 8 of these are included in the Task Groups Call for Action.

Our overarching concerns regarding the report and call for action are as follows:

1. Ambition

Whilst we welcome clarity on the deadline of 2050 for delivering a net zero carbon Surrey and acknowledge that this is in line with current Government policy, this date is by no means ambitious enough. As the birthplace of the industrial revolution and as a nation responsible for a substantial proportion of the anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions already in the atmosphere the UK has a moral responsibility to act first and to act fast². Indeed, as the wealthiest county in the UK, after London, there should be a particular onus on Surrey to get to net zero carbon as quickly as possible and certainly significantly in advance of 2050.

2. High carbon developments

The report makes no mention of how it will now deal with planning applications for high carbon developments. We would strongly recommend that you make a public commitment to, in principle, oppose high carbon infrastructure that will lock in significant direct or indirect greenhouse gas emissions for decades to come (such as oil and gas developments) combined with a commitment to proactively call on the Government to make clear that planning authorities have the right to reject planning applications specifically on climate change grounds³. Such commitments, if made publicly, would go some way to allaying the concerns of XR and no doubt the wider public that Surrey County Council are not serious about robustly contributing to the rapid and drastic reduction in greenhouse gas emissions required.

We note that the report states that *"....Surrey County Council needs to push for specific guidance for the local authority as to how to embed climate change mitigation into the planning approach⁴."* However, this is not reflected in the Call for Action table.

¹ <https://www.ashden.org/programmes/top-31-climate-actions-for-councils>

² <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2011/apr/21/countries-responsible-climate-change>

³ Indeed, we would refer the Task Group to two relevant briefings from Friends of the Earth - *Policy changes needed to enable local authorities in England to deliver on climate change*, Friends of the Earth, May 2019 (<https://policy.friendsoftheearth.uk/insight/policy-changes-needed-enable-local-authorities-england-deliver-climate-change>) and *Why our planning system must be made fit for purpose*, Friends of the Earth, April 2019 (<https://policy.friendsoftheearth.uk/print/pdf/node/128>).

⁴ Paragraph 52, page 42.

Alongside these recommendations there should be a commitment to review all relevant Council policies and strategies, specifically the Minerals Planning Policy which has not been updated since 2011⁵, to bring these in line with the commitment to tackle climate change.

3. Aviation

It is acknowledged in the report that emissions from long distance travel such as aviation are significant but that they have not been considered as options for action by the Task Group. Whilst we agree that the priority with regards to the Council should be reducing emissions from surface transport there is nothing to stop the Council from making a commitment to emphatically oppose any current or future proposals for the expansion of airports in the South East - particularly Heathrow and Gatwick which have extensive impacts in Surrey - and we would strongly encourage you to do so.

4. Divestment

Call for Action number 7 reads *“Work with pension funds and other investors to divest from fossil fuels and increase investment in energy efficiency, renewable energy, low carbon transport and low carbon heat solutions.”* We are presuming that the report is referring to the Surrey Pension Fund in this statement but would welcome confirmation of this and the inclusion of a timeframe by which the Council hope the fund will be fully divested. XR has and continues to advocate for the divestment of this fund which currently invests some £158 million in the fossil fuel industry⁶. However, we are confused as to the authority the Council has over this and would also question whether there is real motivation from across the Council to take this action forward. For example, at the meeting of the full Council on 10th December last year the Leader of the Council said that it was down to the Trustees of the fund and the pensions committee to make decisions about investments and that it was not within the Council’s remit to influence this⁷. In addition, regarding the Council’s declaration of a Climate Emergency, the Chair of the Pension Fund Committee also reiterated at their December meeting that the Committee were not bound by the policy decisions made by the Council. Indeed, the Committee currently seem intent in continuing with their policy of engagement with companies even though they do not appear to have transparent criteria for assessing the effectiveness of this.

In relation to this it is worth noting that work carried out by Climate Action 100+ to engage with companies on behalf of investors regarding actions to address the climate crisis has identified that within the oil and gas sector 79% of the companies are still considered to have a significant amount (more than 40%) of potential capital expenditure that would not be needed in a 2 degrees centigrade scenario⁸. This percentage would be significantly higher had the initiative considered the need for the world to stay below 1.5 degrees centigrade.

⁵ We note that the Task Group report (page 87) states that the Minerals Planning Policy will be revised this Spring.

⁶ Paragraph 2, page 82 of the Task Group report.

⁷ Noted in the draft minutes from the meeting as *“Acknowledged Extinction Rebellion’s call for divestment in the Council’s Pension Fund away from fossil fuels and halting planning permissions for oil drilling companies but noted that this was a matter for the trustees of the Pension Fund”* - <https://mycouncil.surreycc.gov.uk/documents/g6661/Public%20minutes%20Tuesday%2010-Dec-2019%2010.00%20Council.pdf?T=11>

⁸ Surrey County Council Pension Fund Committee meeting, 20 December 2019 – company engagement and voting (<https://mycouncil.surreycc.gov.uk/documents/s65118/Item%206%20-%20Company%20Engagement%20Voting.pdf>)

5. Community energy

Although there is some reference in the report to the consideration of installing a large-scale solar PV array on Council owned land we would encourage you to be more ambitious. We consider that the Council should install solar PV to generate electricity wherever reasonably feasible on its estate, including the school estate, to reduce the Council's carbon footprint. This can be done without charge to the Council and could even save money.

If the Council does not want to fund the capital costs of renewable energy generation there are alternatives available, particularly SALIX loans and working with community energy. In many cases, even without the Feed-in tariff subsidy, electricity produced from solar panels costs less than electricity from the grid, so the solar panels are self-funding. With a portfolio there is scope for cross subsidy, to increase delivery of solar PV. Alternatively, a modest grant may be needed in some cases.

A number of community energy organisations work in Surrey delivering solar PV very cost effectively. An example is Wey Valley Solar Schools Energy Co-operative (WVSS), a Godalming based community energy organisation, primarily funded by local residents, that has installed solar panels on 9 Surrey and 1 Sussex school (including Godalming College, Rodborough, George Abbot, Jubilee and The Beacon). It installs the solar panels free of charge to the school and operates and maintains them at WVSS's expense. The electricity they generate is used by the school and is bought by the school from WVSS at a discount to the price of electricity from the grid. At the end of the contract (usually 25 years) the solar panels are given to the school fully maintained, with years of life left in them. WVSS then pays its entire surplus back to participating schools. So far it has paid its schools over £34,000, and it is currently paying schools a total of between £10-15,000 per annum.

Even without the Feed-in tariff WVSS could install solar panels on Council buildings free of charge on the basis that the Council buys the electricity generated and used in the building at a price that is no higher than, and may be as much as 25% less than, the current price being paid for electricity from the grid. Better sites could cross subsidise the less good to maximise the solar PV installation possible and on occasion a modest grant towards the capital cost may be needed.

Incidentally, LEDs can be installed free of charge too (in for example community centres) on the basis that they are paid for out of the value of electricity savings for buildings with a heavy use.

6. A strategy that is embedded across the entire Council

The concerns and issues raised here and in the Greener Future Task Group report are of course of great and fundamental importance and are pertinent to the development of policies and the delivery of services in almost every single area of the County Council's work. For that reason it is crucial that the climate change strategy is not seen as the remit of the "environment bit" of the Council but a plan which must underlie and direct work in all departments and areas, for example in health, energy, finance, transport, children and family services. Indeed, it might be preferable for the development of this strategy to be led not by an environment group but a newly constituted department reflecting its central strategic importance.

Finally, we would welcome clarification regarding the relationship between the development of the Council's climate change strategy and the work that will be undertaken by the Surrey Climate Commission.