

Local Democracy Week – joint Youth Parliament and Merton Council Scrutiny exercise – climate change, 15 October 2019

Five members of the Youth Parliament (Denise, Laure-Emilia, Leanne, Lia and Rosie) plus another young person (Rose) with a particular interest in climate change were joined by four scrutiny councillors (Natasha, Paul, Peter and Sally) from the Overview and Scrutiny Commission to take part in an exercise to address the question posed by the Youth Parliament - “what is Merton council doing to address their responsibilities on climate change in order to secure the future of our young residents?”

The objectives of the event were to:

- give young people some experience of and insight into the council’s scrutiny processes
- reach agreement on recommendations and future action in respect of work on the Climate Action Plan, including the involvement of young people in this work

It was agreed that the Chair of the Youth Parliament, Denise, would chair the meeting. Denise said that the Youth Parliament has representatives aged 11-18 and that they are passionate about combating climate change.

The lead councillor for climate change work, Councillor Tobin Byers (Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care, Health and the Environment) said that this was an important topic and that the younger generation had led the way on raising the profile of climate change so that it is now accepted as a high priority. Tobin said that the council had declared a climate emergency in July 2019 and had targets for the council to become carbon neutral by 2030 followed by the whole borough by 2050. He said that this could only be achieved through support from government (through new legislation and funding) and from local residents and businesses (through behaviour change) and that the council has a key role in encouraging people to make the necessary changes.

Tobin outlined the public consultation process that was being followed to develop an action plan that would set out the steps towards the 2030 and 2050 targets. This is being steered by a working group, Merton’s Climate Emergency Working Group, chaired by Tobin, comprising local residents, community organisations (such as Sustainable Merton) and people with relevant expertise. Tobin said that the role of young people in shaping this work would be crucial and invited the young residents to share ideas on the best ways to do this.

Denise invited Dominique Hill, Climate Change Officer, to give a presentation on the climate emergency and what the council is doing. The slides are attached to this note of the meeting. Dominique drew the attendees’ attention to the main points:

- Merton Council has had a climate change strategy in place since 2009 and has already made a start on reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

- The government has made a commitment that the UK will become carbon neutral by 2050; Merton's borough-wide target is in line with this national target.
- Merton's target for a carbon neutral council by 2030 was chosen in order to lead by example within the borough.
- Almost half of Merton's direct greenhouse gas emissions are caused by domestic and non-domestic heating.
- Moving to low carbon heating is complex and requires homes to be "retrofitted" so that they are energy efficient prior to installation of electric heat pumps.
- Key elements of a low carbon strategy include future energy supply infrastructure, building stock, transport, products, waste reduction and treatment, investments and green spaces. See slide for more detail.
- The climate emergency working group is looking for one or two young representatives.

Dominique explained that the purpose of the public consultation was to engage with as many local residents and businesses as possible to find out what people are already doing to reduce their carbon footprint, what the key barriers are preventing them from doing more, and how these could be overcome. It is anticipated that consultation with residents and businesses, with the working group and with teams across the council will help identify a long list of potential actions which can then be prioritised; the Climate Action Plan will then be taken to Cabinet for approval in early 2020.

Dominique and Tom (Tom Walsh, Sustainable Merton) made further points in response to questions:

Solar energy

- The council is currently considering how the climate change policies in Merton's draft Local Plan can be updated to help decarbonise the borough beyond regional and national policies. 24 Merton schools currently have solar panels – many of these were financed through a scheme whereby the council was able to borrow money at a preferential rate. This has reduced energy costs for those schools. Bond School in Mitcham has used the savings on electricity costs to install movement sensitive lights that turn off when no-one is there, thereby generating more savings.
- Rosie said that her school had fundraised for three years to provide solar panels but had not been able to afford to cover all the roof space.

Heating

- Lia and Laure-Emilia said that their schools are currently not heated in the most efficient way and heating is often on when not needed. Dominique urged them to raise this with their schools to reduce their school's energy demand.

- Low carbon heating solutions such as heat pumps will also need to be considered alongside appropriate energy efficiency retrofit in order to work towards decarbonising the borough. Funding mechanisms for this will also need to be considered.
- Harnessing geothermal energy as a source of heating has limited potential in the UK, though there are some examples within Merton including the refurbished stable block at Morden Hall National Trust.
- There are several different types of heat pumps, including ground source heat pumps that extract heat from the ground.

Fuel emissions

- Lia expressed concern at NO₂ emissions from cars, especially in the vicinity of schools. Dominique said that there is an air quality team in the council that is working on anti-idling and other measures to improve air quality.
- The councillors said that they had recently completed a scrutiny review of road safety and this had included recommendations that would help to improve air quality – ACTION: Julia Regan to send the scrutiny report and Cabinet action plan to Chelsea Renehan to share with the Youth Parliament.
- The councillors said that young people are influential in changing parents' behaviour and urged the Youth Parliament to consider how they could take this forward.
- Tom suggested that young people could walk to school along quieter roads where the air quality is much better. Laure-Emilia and Leanne said they had been advised to walk along main roads for personal safety. This was discussed and it was agreed that clean air information should be shared in order to encourage more people to use those routes and therefore improved personal safety along those routes too, including through the establishment of walking groups.

RECOMMENDATION 1: that Cabinet should ensure that the council shares air quality street maps with schools so that they could be used to inform the development of school travel plans in relation to identifying cleaner air walking and cycling routes to school

RECOMMENDATION 2: that Cabinet should identify the most appropriate way for the council to facilitate the provision of educational programmes on cleaner air routes for schools and parents.

- Rose suggested that the council should talk to other boroughs to improve walking and cycling routes that cross borough boundaries and to promote sustainable travel. Dominique undertook to raise this with pan London climate officer groups.

Cycling

- Laure-Emilia commented on the lack of new clearly defined cycling routes in Merton and asked if the council could ask for more. Peter said there had been a bidding round but that Merton had not been successful. However Kingston had which is why there is a cycle route between the two boroughs. He said that it would be helpful to have a London-wide approach to this rather than piecemeal bidding processes. Dominique undertook to raise this issue with the pan London group.
- Rosie and Lia said that the new dockless hire bikes were a good idea and cost efficient for people who want to cycle now and then. Dominique highlighted the benefits of sharing resources such as bikes and cars through car clubs in reducing our carbon footprint.

RECOMMENDATION 3: that Cabinet should work with commercial providers to ensure there is an adequate supply of dockless hire bikes for use by Merton residents

Light pollution

- Leanne said that there is a high level of light pollution in Merton and that, although safety is important, there may be street and other lights on that are not necessary. She suggested that the council could hold an event at which lights were turned off so that people could see the stars.

RECOMMENDATION 4: that Cabinet investigate the feasibility of using an open air Film Merton event as an opportunity to turn all light sources off for a short period of time (perhaps at the start of the event) so that attendees could look at the stars.

Recycling

- Merton's approach to the disposal of recyclables and landfill waste will be fully investigated as part of the climate emergency work.
- Recycling is important but is just a small part of the solution. It is better to reuse items, such as clothes, and to avoid buying products with unnecessary packaging in the first instance before recycling. Tom said consumers have a choice on who they buy products from and can use this to put pressure on suppliers.
- The youth parliament representatives asked for more bins on the street for recycling plastics and pointed out that there is no plastics-recycling receptacle in the Civic Centre's reception area.

Council activity

- The role of the council's procurement systems and existing contracts in working towards becoming carbon neutral will also be considered in the climate action plan.
- The council's targets for 2030 and 2050 were carefully considered and drew on the globally accepted evidence in the IPCC's special report on Global Warming of 1.5C (2018).

- Dominique undertook to find out what the council is doing to promote walking and cycling for young people.
- Natasha (Councillor Natasha Irons, Chair, Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel) undertook to invite Youth Parliament representatives to the February meeting of the Panel so that they could join in the discussion of the sustainable travel agenda item.

There was a discussion about what would be the one significant thing that people could do to contribute to combatting the climate emergency. Various suggestions were made including reducing meat consumption, less plastic packaging, buying fewer clothes, borrowing books from the library rather than buying books, eating local produce (consider food air miles). Tom said that Sustainable Merton was producing a list of “100 things you can do to save the planet”. Dominique directed the group to the ‘What you can do’ section on the council’s Climate Emergency web pages.

RECOMMENDATION 5: Cabinet should use My Merton to promote the practice of putting things that you don’t need out on a table in front of your home for others to take – for example fruit, vegetables, books...

The youth parliament members suggested that the climate emergency consultation should reach out to young people through schools and youth groups. Their previous experience is that face-to-face consultation methods are more successful in reaching young people than online methods.

The youth parliament members and councillors **AGREED** that the note of this meeting should be presented to a meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Commission so that the recommendations could be endorsed and referred to Cabinet for consideration.

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