

# Minutes of the Climate Change and Ecological Emergency Working Group Meeting

<b>Date</b>	10/07/ 2024
<b>Time</b>	14:00 to 16:00
<b>Location</b>	Microsoft Teams
<b>Present</b>	Cllr Barry Mellor (Chair) (BM), Cllr Bobby Feeley (BF), Cllr Jonathan B. Harland (JBH), Cllr Martyn Hogg (MH), Cllr Delyth A. Jones (DAJ), Cllr Cllr Peter Scott (PS), Cllr James Elson (JE), Cllr Arwel Roberts (AR)
<b>Apologies</b>	Cllr Paul Keddie (PK), Michelle Walker (MW)
<b>In attendance</b>	Supporting Officers: Gary Williams (GW), Jane Hodgson (JH), Liz Wilcox-Jones (LWJ), Michael Bennion (MB), Jon Chapman (JC), Aileen Charteris (AC) (Minute Taker)
<b>Apologies</b>	Helen Vaughan-Evans (HVE)

## 1. Welcome, Apologies and Introductions

Chair BM welcomed everyone to the meeting and thanked them for their time.

Apologies were noted.

## 2. Minutes/ actions from the last meeting and matters arising (Chair)

The minutes from the last meeting (28/02/24) were inspected and accepted (Proposer: Cllr. Peter Scott, Seconder: Cllr. Bobby Feely)

## Eco4 scheme

DAJ asked if the Eco4 scheme had been revised and was now available to people on low incomes whose homes are connected to the gas mains.

***Action - AC to check eligibility of the Eco4 scheme with the Flintshire Domestic Energy Team.***

## New Climate Change Manager

Jane Hodgson (JH) introduced herself and explained she had previously worked at DCC as maternity cover for the same role (2022) and had been employed by a different organisation for the last 18 months. JH stated that she was very impressed with the positive work that had taken place since she was last with DCC and was excited to start work on the revised Climate and Nature Strategy.

## Forward plan changes

Requested agenda item 'Reducing single use plastics in schools' and 'More environmentally friendly options for weed control': LWJ explained that no progress has been made on reducing single use plastic in schools or in use of more environmentally friendly weed control. LWJ reminded everyone that JW was available to discuss nature recovery and wildflower meadow work later in the meeting.

## Climate and Nature Strategy adoption

BM was very happy to let the group know that the revised Climate and Nature Strategy was passed by full Council on 9/07/24. BM appreciated all the hard work that had gone into the revised strategy. He was especially thankful on behalf of all the Councillors that the team had been to all of the MAG meetings for comment and feedback before taking the document to the whole Council meeting.

LWJ thanked all the Cllrs for their support, feedback and time in helping to produce the revised strategy. LWJ said that the communications about the strategy had been sent out publicly and directly to all Councillors.

## 3. Denbighshire Local Area Energy Plan (LAEP) (Liz Wilcox-Jones)

The final documents (LAEP Main Report and Technical Report) and path for endorsement of Denbighshire's Local Area Energy Plan (LEAP) were circulated to Cllrs with meeting papers. LWJ provided a brief verbal update.

Key upcoming dates for presentation of the LAEP reports:

- 22 July – Strategic Planning Group
- 2 September – Cabinet Briefing
- 5 September – Communities Scrutiny Committee
- 24 September - Cabinet

There will be multiple opportunities to give more feedback and questions.

MH noticed that in a recent LEAP session the planning team had a negative reaction about changes needed for a national net zero scenario. This was mainly due to recommendations about onshore wind farms and how that would impact protected landscapes within the AONB. MH asked how discussions around onshore wind had progressed with the planning team. LWJ responded that she and JH will be meeting with the planning team to discuss the LEAP in more detail and address any concerns they have. LWJ assured the group that the LEAP is an assessment of the most appropriate energy sources for our area. The LEAP is an information tool for planning. JH had recently attended the Wales LEAP forum. JH seconded LWJs statement that the LEAP is an evidence-based piece of research which can, and has been, used by other LAs to make energy production decisions. The LEAP may suggest a certain course of action is the most appropriate but that does not mean it needs to be followed exactly. MH said that it would be very tricky to navigate where onshore wind should be placed in the county.

## Phosphorus in the River Dee

The topic of phosphorus in the River Dee was raised by BM, who is concerned about phosphate levels in the River Dee following its discussion at a recent meeting. The levels of phosphate could mean that planning permission in areas near the Dee would be restricted. This could also impact climate change work. BM asked if there was a plan to replace AL as DCC officer representative attendee at these meetings. AR is also concerned about phosphate levels and has a relative who is a fly fisher and seeing the issue first hand. AR asked how we can approach the Welsh Government for them to take action on this. JBH suggested that phosphate levels are coming from manure on farms. BM stated that it can be runoff from fields and farm fertiliser. AR said it is also due to human sewage and waste too.

## 4. Nature Recovery and Wildflower Meadow Project Update (Joel Walley)

Joel Walley gave a presentation (circulated with minutes).

Key points –

- We are making good progress against our targets but there is risk of slowing down.
- The impact of climate change on animal species is already being felt eg movement of animals northwards to avoid increased temperatures.
- The biodiversity team follow the Welsh Governments DECCA framework:
  - Diversity
  - Extent
  - Condition
  - Connectivity
  - Aspects of ecosystem resilience
- To measure progress towards our ecologically positive goal, the biodiversity team devised bespoke assessment criteria based on scientific research on the benefits of species richness.
- The percentage of DCC owned and operated land in highest categories of species richness has increased by 12% since the baseline of 2019/20, meeting the Strategy's interim trajectory target for the ecologically positive goal.

- Wildflower Project, a joint Biodiversity and Street Scene project with project management from the Climate Change Team, is DCC's most significant biodiversity project and the major contributor to meeting our ecologically positive goal.
  - 133 wildflower sites
  - approximately 71.9 acres of grassland under wildflower meadow management (including verges and roadside nature reserves)
  - by 2022, there were 340 wildflower species recorded across the sites, including 44 scarce, 7 scare/rare and 9 rare
  - *Vicia bithynica* which has been classed as vulnerable in Britain has been found at a site in Denbighshire, as well as different species of orchid
- One of the aims of the biodiversity work is to increase the connectivity of species rich sites. This aim is being realised with the benefits of our projects extending beyond the borders of Denbighshire and Wales eg working with Flintshire County Council on verge management.
- The biodiversity team have also worked closely with schools and community groups for tree and wildflower plug planting, as well as DCC Housing managing 2.27 acres of their land as wildflower meadow.
- We are creating a new nature reserve next to St Asaph Tree nursery, opening April 2025. It will have almost 20 new ponds, new wildflower meadow, hedge planting, 20% canopy cover, scrub, and permissive access routes.
  - The tree nursery now has resident bats and great crested newts.

## Challenges

- Recording and reporting on the work is challenging; the method used does not factor in all aspects of the work and capture all successes, for example volunteering, projects focusing on vulnerable species such as adders and little turns, work in and with schools. The current method focuses on area (m<sup>2</sup>).
- The method does not account for harmful things we do and does not provide a focus on stopping harmful actions. Some business-as-usual approaches and actions by DCC are harmful to the environment, for example
  - cutting of grass at times when they have high level of wildflower cover.
  - tree protection not being followed in works near mature trees

- outside lighting and internal work impacting bat roosts
- gully pots can be fatal for amphibians which become trapped once they have fallen in <https://www.conservationevidence.com/actions/782>
- Impact of public perceptions around some works is a challenge. For example, the wildflower project, which is key to delivering our ecologically positive goal, has not continued to grow (no new sites added) this year, which risks not meeting targets.
  - JW highlighted a recent Bangor University study, with focussed interviews in Rhyl, that showed that there is a lot of public backing for the project <https://www.bangor.ac.uk/news/2023-10-20-most-people-would-welcome-more-trees-and-wildflower-meadows-in-their-townscapes>
- Time and finances
  - projects have been mostly additional to existing workloads rather than a change in business-as-usual; need to ensure staff are trained and supported to make this change
  - staffing and funding challenges to carry out actions in the revised Strategy

BM thanked Joel for the presentation and for all of the work he and the team are doing.

## Discussion

JBH thanked JW for the slides and presentation. JBH asked how the Biodiversity team is linked to Countryside Services and if the Biodiversity team have any involvement in the Barkby beach project. JW explained that the Biodiversity team sit within the Countryside Service but are a bit more corporate and are less involved with the protected landscape work. The team has Ecological Support Officers (working on legal issues, planning, support other officers on projects which need specialist information, and SPF), Biodiversity Officers (focused on improving biodiversity, including the wildflower meadow project and working with schools), officers who work at the tree nursery and at Bionet. Bionet is focused on regional work collaboration and can signpost/connect groups to the correct people. The Biodiversity Team were involved in the planning application for Barkby beach. Their role was to take part in that work and give biodiversity/ecological compliance advice. MH thanked JW for the presentation. MH supported the consideration of new ways to measure the good work which is being done that does not fit with the current reporting processes. MH suggested that we work on aligning with sections of the climate scorecards

to make sure our biodiversity work scores highly on those. MH asked how we monitor if one species is becoming too successful and to the detriment of another species. JW said that it is best to avoid species specific conservation and instead our focus should be on creating habitats which can support multiple species.

PS said that Greengates tree nursery and nature reserve is brilliant, and the ponds are great work. PS believes that St Asaph is the biodiversity centre of Denbighshire! BM asked if the new nature space at Bodelwyddan Castle could be linked to the Tree nursery and nature reserve at Greengates. JW said that the Biodiversity team are not involved with the current work at Bodelwyddan but there is interest in linking the sites if funding is available. Connectivity of sites comes under the DECCA framework.

BF is aware that people are not always appreciative of the biodiversity work which is being done and asked if we could introduce vegetable and fruit growing as it allows more engagement for residents. JW agreed that was a good idea and directed BF to DCC's allotment strategy. JW said that allotments are also brilliant for encouraging biodiversity.

AR believes that some species need to be controlled where they are becoming too successful (eg goosanders taking fish). In regard to gully pots AR thinks we could look to actions being taken in the Netherlands to add a cover underneath the top gully pot cover which saves frogs and other animals. AR asked how we could engage with external companies to ensure they improve biodiversity after completing work which requires ground movement (underground pipe work etc). AR was keen to celebrate the brilliant improvements in biodiversity across his ward. JW said it was great to hear that councillors are competing as to who has the most diversity in their ward. JW said there are a couple of options for gully pots – they could be moved away from the kerb (which gives an 85% reduction in animal deaths) or they could be covered in some way, but all options would have some extra cost and maintenance requirements. Greener alternatives to gully pots could also be considered and are being trialled in some areas. In regard to birds and fisherman, JW said that birds are changing their feeding habits due to food availability. He suggested we need to make sure that fish are protected within the river and have spaces to hide. Ground works by external companies has been a problem on occasions and although some have then seeded the site with wildflower seeds, they have used non-native seeds which does not support our project.

DAJ congratulated JW and his team for all of their successful work and said what a fascinating topic it was to learn about. DAJ spoke of a brilliant project in their ward which has involved the community in a grant funded food growing with the support of Garry Davies (Countryside Officer who manages allotments). This project has created a community group that are now doing more local work. DAJ highlighted the importance of soft successes and how they are reported. DAJ asked why more wildflower meadow sites were not currently being added and what the future aim is. DAJ is also concerned about harm to tree roots during developments and asked if protection plans could be put in place before developments begin. DAJ stressed that it was important for work to be done with contractors before and during developments.

JW agreed that community food growing is really beneficial especially as it connects people to where their food comes from. JW highlighted the challenges of adding more sites but said that the team were having regular discussion while addition of new sites is paused. JW said that the Ecological Compliance Officers in the Biodiversity team do regular site checks on developments and use enforcement when needed. The new Local Development Plan will help to make sure developers are making nature positive decisions. Rules on developments needed a net benefit for biodiversity also gives more power to the team's work.

JE asked about seed collection in Denbighshire, especially collection of acorns of important oak trees. JW said that the team had been identifying important local trees and collecting seeds from them. A call for residents to let the team know about the location of oak trees so a collection of acorns could take place was more successful than anticipated. Where trees have been identified they have been given batch numbers, which means that any seeds collected and then grown can be easily identified at the tree nursery.

***Action - JW to identify the location of the oak tree which JE is referring to and check if any oak saplings have been grown from them.***

MH had been in a meeting which touched on the topic of glyphosate. MH understands that it is efficient in dealing with weeds but hopes that we can move away from its use due to the damage it can cause. MH asked if we could trail a location to go free of glyphosate and suggested St Asaph. MH asked what JW would say to MB about use of the chemical for weed control. MB replied to this by saying that the Street Scene teams do not want to be



using glyphosate but at the moment it is the most cost-effective way to deal with weed control. Alternatives to glyphosate have been trialled but they are not as effective or would require more staff time, which is not possible with the current funding situation and recruitment freeze. JW said that it is difficult to consider an alternative to the use of chemical weed control as the funding and recruitment issues are so bad. However, the cost of using glyphosate appears lower because we do not factor in the cost and damage to the ecosystems it can enter. Glyphosate is incredibly damaging to freshwater habitats and is also carcinogenic. Some LA's do not use glyphosate and it is banned in all public spaces in France. Switching to another chemical method of weed control is not the answer as they can all have damaging effects. Option to be considered would be more road/pavement sweeping, to ask communities to remove weeds themselves, or understand that we need to be more tolerant of weeds. Not removing weeds will bring more complaints from the public. MB said that in previous years when weed spraying was not completed correctly by contractors there were a lot of complaints from residents. If the Street Scene team could have more operatives who could physically remove the weeds rather than spraying, that would be great. JC agreed that glyphosate is very unpleasant, but the financial benefit of its use means there isn't an alternative option at the moment.

JE asked about grass cutting near road junctions and the issues it can cause with visibility. JC said that there was a site which had been given to residents to manage which had caused a visibility issue. The Street Scene team bring in an officer to check the visibility of any sites they manage and if there is an issue it will be cut. JW stated that wildflower meadow sites do have visibility splays cut and safety is the priority on roadways.

LWJ agreed with BF and DAJs comments on food growing. LWJ said that teams ensure that fruit producing hedge plants and fruit trees are used on school and nature sites. LWJ pointed to actions in the new Strategy which are assigned to the Behaviour Change Officer to help encourage community food growing. In regard to the wildflower meadow project, LWJ said that it will take time for sites to establish. The programme is providing funding to maintain the sites. More cutting of the wildflower meadow sites will be taking place this year and we have emailed an update on that to all councillors. New sites are not being added to the project at present and progression is being discussed. LWJ thanked councillors for their support in making the wildflower meadow project successful.

BM thanked JW for coming to talk with the group and appreciates all the work which is being done

## 5. Forward work programme and AOB

Next meeting: **Friday 8 November 2024 10:00-12:00 hrs:**

- Climate and Ecological Change Annual Reporting update (definite)
- Renewable Energy Generation (definite)
- Litter management involving 'community power' eg community litter picks
- Agricultural Estate Review outcome

### AOB

BF is meeting with a voluntary community organisation who are interested in litter picking in Denbighshire and have asked where they could do this. JC said that Street Scene are aware of the request. Street Scene refer requests to do litter picking to Keep Wales Tidy and have done that in this instance. JC said that litter picks in parks is always helpful but there are risks where volunteers may take part in litter picks on roadways.