

Cornwall's Climate Emergency Development Plan

Cornwall Council

Wednesday 23 August 2023

Summary

Cornwall Council has developed a Climate Emergency Development Plan to reinforce the existing Cornwall Local Plan and help accelerate and simplify the delivery of the Council's Climate Change Action Plan. It comprises a range of policies from revitalising town centres and securing nature based solutions to increasing active travel and adapting to flooding and coastal change. Through this innovative approach, the plan is also pushing the envelope of what such policies can do to increase energy efficiency, laying a path for future progress in this critically important area.

Cllr Oliver Monk, Portfolio Holder for Housing and Planning at Cornwall Council, said:

"It is never a quick win or easy to produce planning policy, but I am proud that our new policies are driving change. We have worked hard to create a plan that is as ambitious as possible, but still allows development that provides vitally important new homes and business to be realised in a viable, sound and practical way. We have also worked to support other Councils to realise their ambition by sharing our experience and evidence. Putting in place these policies provides us with tangible gains, whilst maintaining the impetus for change and we will use these policies and the experience we have gained to ensure that our next local plan continues the drive to carbon neutrality and resilient communities."

The problem

After declaring a climate emergency in 2019 and an ecological emergency in 2022, Cornwall Council were keen to identify a suite of measures they can take to deliver on their ambitious target of carbon neutrality by 2030. Like many councils, they developed a Climate Change Action Plan which set out three priorities to achieve this.

Firstly, the climate change action plan actions recognise that built development and transportation in Cornwall contributes around 60% of its greenhouse gas emissions. Without positive policies to tackle these areas more thoroughly the carbon neutral target was unlikely to be met.

Secondly, as Cornwall has one of the largest planning caseloads of any authority in England with around 2,700 homes built every year, every house that is not subject to increased energy efficiency will be a candidate for expensive retrofitting in the coming years. This meant housing was a priority.

Thirdly, with the longest coastline of any county in England, increased coastal change and flooding risk required an updated and positive approach to adaptation and mitigation, as well as addressing the ecological emergency. This meant land use was a priority as a common theme within these varied challenges.

While Cornwall is renowned for its distinctive and scenic landscape it is not immune to loss of biodiversity. The declaration of an ecological emergency and a long standing commitment to environmental growth recognise that as development will impact biodiversity and resilience that a nature recovery approach to development is essential.

The Cornwall Local Plan, adopted in 2016, was developed in the wake of the 2015 Written Ministerial Statements on energy, but did not have the allocations or policies needed to tackle climate change, energy and biodiversity loss issues. This left the Council less able to require the actions needed for its ambitious carbon reduction targets under their existing policies.

The solution

The council set about finding a pragmatic solution that would enable the Local Plan to deal with these new and increasingly vital climate and nature recovery challenges and created the Climate Emergency Development Plan. This plan sits alongside a wide range of specific projects to increase carbon reduction, including the Forest for Cornwall and plans to decarbonise housing, transport and the Council's estate and workforce. It also sits in the context of a revised Local Transport Plan and transport decarbonisation approach, Climate Change Action Plan, ecological emergency and nature recovery focus and the formation of a Carbon Neutral team within the Council.

The comprehensive document, which secured cross-party and community support tackles a wide range of policy requirements that link together to address both climate change and nature recovery aims, key areas include: securing nature based solutions, including natural flood management; agricultural diversification that increases public benefits; town and village centre revitalisation; coastal change and flood management; sustainable transport and one planet development. It provides the local actions required to increase renewable energy installations (turbine permissions had halted since 2015 due to the Written Ministerial Statement on wind power) and sets energy efficiency standards that exceed nationally set Building Regulations, one of the first to do so in England. The project recognised from the earliest stages that a whole package of associated measures across the planning sphere of influence needed to be addressed in the document to maximise its impact and reach.

Timeline

The declaration of a climate emergency was a recognition that action needed to be taken on an emergency footing. Whilst the general speed of the creation of a planning document would not normally seem compatible with this timescale, it was recognised that this longer action would have greater longevity and impact on the ability to deliver change.

With this in mind the council were able to declare the Climate Emergency in January 2019, with an Action Plan adopted within the next 6 months. Work started on the development of the Development Plan Document soon after and incorporated four periods of evidence gathering and stakeholder engagement. The plan was submitted in November 2021 for Examination in public which was held on June 2022. The document has been in use since February 2023.

The development of planning documents is notoriously slow, so the development of a whole document from concept to submission within 2 years was a relatively speedy response.

Stakeholders

The development of the document involved a wide range of stakeholders. The approach taken included an early soft scoping stage separate to the formal plan process that collected ideas from groups, Councillors and statutory

consultation bodies and led to the expansion of content and policy linkages. The scoping and development of the document was very much a team effort across a number of Council departments, particularly the Carbon Neutral and Nature Recovery teams.

Resistance to the document contents was limited and in many cases was based on a desire to see more stringent policies or opening up of greater opportunity for renewable deployment. As always, a carefully balanced approach was needed in these cases to make sure that the plan was as ambitious as possible, whilst deliverable and able to be found sound at Examination in Public. Despite the ambitious policies for energy efficiency improvements, objection from the development industry was limited.

Impact

The Development Plan Document provides the planning policy contribution to securing carbon reductions in Cornwall. It has increased the focus on actions that may be taken as part of development to reduce carbon emissions and to provide suitable adaptation and mitigation measures.

The plan will impact all major development and the majority of smaller scale development across Cornwall. The energy efficiency requirements will for instance impact around 2,700 dwellings per annum and gradually reduce the future need for retrofit of new homes. The document also allows the granting of permission for wind turbines (other than repowering) for the first time since 2015, which is critical to delivering the council's target of 100% renewable electricity supply by 2030. The inclusion of energy efficiency standards will decrease carbon emissions, stimulate domestic renewables and produce co-benefits of better health and wellbeing and reduce the high levels of fuel poverty in Cornwall.

The wider impact of the development and adoption of the document has been to raise the profile of the climate and ecological emergencies in planning decisions. It has also allowed multiple strands of more informal policy work around biodiversity net gain (the Council early adopted a BNG requirement in March 2020), increasing tree cover, environmental growth/nature recovery and increasing and improving green infrastructure into formal, linked policy.

The decision to develop a separate planning document as opposed to a revision to the Cornwall Local Plan has helped to create the space for a more focussed debate over the opportunities to address climate change that might otherwise potentially have been overshadowed by debate over housing numbers.

The broadening of the document to include nature based solutions, net gain and natural flood management measures have increased the opportunity to increase biodiversity and nature based improvements. These set new standards for integrated green infrastructure that delivers 10% net gain, natural flood management and a new minimum canopy cover for major development. These requirements are woven through the policies to ensure that nature recovery is integral to decisions rather than a standalone consideration.

The development of a document that focuses on actions to address the climate and ecological emergencies has also positively charged the debate regarding the content of a future local plan and will allow important lessons to be learned through its implementation, allowing for improvement.

Lessons learned

The development of the plan has proven the opportunity to create more climate conscious policy in planning. The creation of a standalone, but complementary set of policies shows the benefit of being able to concentrate efforts on novel policy concepts away from the intensive debate around housing numbers that usually accompanies Local Plan creation.

It is vital however that new policy must still be driven with delivery in mind. Considerable effort was made to ensure that policies are ambitious and challenge convention, but still ensure that good development remains

viable. Some groups will still not feel that enough is being done to address climate change, but planning is always a balance and the policies have moved the authority significantly forward.

Policies must create value and benefit for communities that are tangible now. Tackling the climate emergency is a vital cross-generational challenge, but must also provide wider tangible benefits such as tackling fuel poverty, making it easier for our communities to access services and facilities by sustainable means and supporting biodiversity net gain. Early engagement of a wide range of stakeholders has been vitally important, as has giving them time and space to constructively contribute to the content of the plan.

Change that goes beyond national standards is hard and requires new systems and additional learning to deliver, but it is worth it for the additional impact created.

Ultimately, the changes that have been made here could have achieved greater national consistency if made at national policy level. This would help to move every authority to deliver development that is necessary to meet the 2050 net zero commitment. National planning policy change would make a considerable difference by creating a level playing field, providing greater steer to the market and spreading the benefit of more energy efficient and accessible development.

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The document was developed using an internal climate change budget and was completed below the usual budget for the development of a Local Plan document, well below half of the average of £1 million spent on Local Plan preparation. This reflected the opportunity of creating a standalone document and the ability to draw on

expertise from across the Council's departments. Additional studies required to evidence the approach to energy efficiency were jointly procured with the South West Net Zero Hub and have been shared with a number of other authorities.

Next steps

The Climate Emergency DP has created an impetus for future policy making to continue the drive to carbon neutrality. With planning reforms due to be embedded over the next 12 months, the document will soon need to be incorporated into the scope of a new style local plan. In the meantime, the experience gained from using the policies will help determine the best ways forward for Cornwall to tackle the climate emergency and the right policies to help. The new policies are already in use and have enhanced work in areas such as biodiversity net gain, following the Council's decision to become an early adopter of the approach.

The planning policy team has already shared the knowledge and experience of the development of the policies with others through our work with other authorities and good practice has been shared nationally with lessons learned provided in seminars and conferences. The Council intends to continue to share our experiences of implementation with a wide group of authorities to increase knowledge and good practice on aligning planning with the ecological and climate emergency.

The positive engagement relationships built with communities, statutory consultation bodies, interest groups and other authorities will be maintained and transitioned into the next Local Plan.

Links, contact, and credits

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