

Dorset Climate Action Network

Draft Ideas towards a Collective Response to Dorset Council's Climate & Ecological Emergency Strategy & Action Plan

1. We congratulate Dorset Council on its determined and sustained approach to the preparation of the Strategy and Action Plan, and on the comprehensive scope and clear structure of these documents. We thank the Council for undertaking extensive public consultation and for clearly taking into account the views expressed during that process. This has contributed to the quality of the proposals and to the likelihood that the communities, enterprises and organisations in Dorset county will effectively 'co-own' this vital strategy.

2. A massive collective challenge. We endorse the Council's view that this climate and ecological emergency poses a massive challenge, which will demand leadership from the Council and widespread action by the people, communities, enterprises and organisations in the county.

3. The Council's action and influence. We understand the distinction that the Council draws between actions which are under its own control (called 'direct'); actions which the Council does not control but can stimulate and guide through its outreach programmes such as planning (called 'indirect'); and those which are largely in the hands of others, but may be susceptible to the 'influence and partnership' of the Council. But we urge the Council to play a vigorous role in projects and programmes across this whole range. For example, for many of the actions described as 'indirect', the Council can provide crucial leadership by using its powers as planning authority, highway authority and other roles.

4. The overall target. In setting timeframes for the goals of the Strategy, the Council has chosen to make a broad distinction between itself and the County, setting a target of achieving net zero carbon emissions by 2040 in areas under its direct control and 2050 for other actions in the county. **We believe that the Council, and the County, should adopt a much more urgent approach: setting 2040 as the absolute latest date for zero carbon emissions for the whole of Dorset; and 2030 for the Council's direct action.**

5. Other targets. Very soon after its original Declaration of Climate Emergency in May 2019, the Council recognised that the emergency relates also to natural systems, to the human use of the world's resources and to the well-being and resilience of mankind in the face of change. Many of the policies and actions relate to these factors, but no overall targets are set in relation to them. In our view, this is a weakness which must be urgently corrected. Moreover, for many of the items included in the Action Plan, we would wish to see reference not only to the climate targets but also to the targets for ecology and other factors.

6. Co-ownership of the Strategy. We endorse the Council’s view that the pursuit of this Strategy and Action Plan must draw on skills and resources from across Dorset Council and from a wider partnership of interests in the county. The challenge is to enlist – as co-owners of the Strategy – the communities, enterprises and organisations of Dorset; and to encourage, stimulate and coordinate their contribution to what the Council calls this ‘massive task’. We comment below on the measures which are proposed by the Council in order to stimulate this sense of co-ownership and partnership.

10. Climate Emergency Partnership. The Strategy proposes the creation of a Dorset Climate Emergency Partnership Group, as a focal point in “developing a Dorset wide partnership with key public, private and third sector partners”. We support this proposal as a focal point for achieving true co-ownership and shared responsibility for the pursuit of the Strategy. The Group should have a small staff, funded by the Council. The representatives of different partners should be there on equal terms with the Council, in recognition of this shared responsibility. The Group should have a strategic overview of targets, timetables, priorities and major projects within the Strategy programme. It should not have responsibility for the direct management or oversight of individual projects : this responsibility should rest with those partners who are directly involved in each project.

11. Town and parish councils. The Strategy proposes that Dorset Council should support town and parish councils in their actions to pursue the strategy. This is of high importance. Many of the actions set out in the Strategy and Action Plan must be conceived and pursued at the level of local communities. Dorset Council should be ready to delegate action to town and parish councils, and to provide staff expertise and financial resources to support the action of these local councils within the scope of the Strategy. It should establish urgently – which is currently missing – a formal statement of the relationship between the recently created unitary authority and the highly varied secondary tier of local authorities, many of whom currently feel under-regarded, under-resourced and even powerless to make significant things happen.

12. Help for community-led projects and organisations. Dorset is already rich in voluntary organisations at county, district or local level who are itching to contribute to the pursuit of the Strategy and Action Plan. The formal launch of a programme of support for community-led projects and organisations should be among the earliest actions under the Strategy.

13. Public engagement. We welcome the statement that the Council will “build support from stakeholders and the wider public by informing and educating on the benefits and opportunities of acting on climate change and creating, maintaining and developing partnership working on all aspects of climate change action”. We note also that the Council intends to “provide more accessible and digestible information on climate change and ecology and the actions we can all take through a range of channels : these will include upgrading our climate change website, developing an online information hub for sharing information and best practice, and ... encouraging an open and ongoing dialogue between the Council and Dorset residents.” We see this as a crucial dimension in the pursuit of the Strategy, and we urge the Council to place greater emphasis upon it, in partnership with town and parish councils, schools, the Press, social media, community-led organisations and others.

14. Dorset Climate Action Network. Our Network has been set up in response to rapidly growing public concern about the impact of climate change, the use and abuse of the world's resources, the loss of wildlife and the related threats to social justice at global, national and local level. We are in process of building our membership, particularly among town and parish councils, community-led organisations and individuals. We stand ready to work with Dorset Council in implementing the measures summarised above. We ask to be considered for membership of the Climate Emergency Partnership. We are ready to work with Dorset Association of Parish and Town Councils and other county-level organisations in articulating and stimulating the role of second-tier local authorities and community organisations throughout the county. We are ready to contribute to the public engagement activity proposed by Dorset Council.

15. Shared Prosperity Fund. Enterprises and community initiatives in many parts of Dorset have benefitted substantially in recent years from grants through the EU-funded LEADER programme. Most of these EU funds have stopped and we have been waiting for the launch of the Government's **Shared Prosperity Fund**. We hope that the aims and elements of the Shared Prosperity Fund will be geared towards the climate and ecological agendas and we believe the shrewd use of these funds could substantially contribute to the funding of the Dorset Strategy. If the deployment of the Shared Prosperity Fund rests with the Dorset Local Enterprise Partnership (DLEP), we urge Dorset Council to ensure that funding is fairly deployed – in proportion to social and economic needs – across the whole area served by DLEP.

16. Equity capital. The Strategy refers to “securing innovative financial arrangements for climate change projects and programmes”. We see high potential for securing ‘equity capital’ from residents and organisations within the county, as a source of crucial finance for the necessary action on climate change and related purposes. A clear example of the willingness of residents to provide such equity capital is shown by the rapid and complete response to the offer of 5% interest shares in Dorset Community Energy. The county has many people with the financial means to help with action in this way, some of them elderly, keen to help but unable to contribute physically to the climate action. Their funding could enable not only action at county level, such as that of Dorset Community Energy, but also action at the local level by Community Land Trusts or similar non-profit organisations, which collectively could play a major part in making the Strategy happen. We urge the Council to be ready to offer advice to local organisations of these kinds as they search for ways to turn their aspirations into action.

Priorities for action

Action Plan. We warmly welcome the Action Plan, including the statement of provisional timing of the action on each item. Together, this would represent an immediate and long-term agenda for the Dorset Climate Emergency Partnership, and a checklist for the annual report that the Council proposes. We suggest that higher priority should be given to the following items which fall outside the direct and urgent programme which the Council has set for itself.

- **16. Retrofit of existing housing stock.** The Council should launch – in cooperation with town and parish councils, housing associations and other collective property owners – an urgent and sustained programme to update the energy efficiency of dwellings throughout the county, in order to save energy, cut greenhouse gas emissions, reduce costs for householders and increase health and well-being. This should use funds available under the Government’s Green Homes initiative and the Council’s own Low Carbon and Warm Homes programmes. Where appropriate, it should embrace the installation of heat pumps, solar panels and other forms of renewable energy.
- **Dorset Local Plan.** We look to the early adoption of a countywide Local Plan, replacing outdated local plans. It should incorporate crucial imperatives related to energy saving, support for renewable energy, protection of wildlife and enhancement of wildlife habitats, promotion of sustainable transport and of a circular economy, and measures to secure the long-term resilience of buildings, structures and communities in the face of climate change and economic uncertainty. We urge the Council to take full account of the responses to the forthcoming consultation on the draft Local Plan, as they did in relation to the Climate and Ecological Emergency Strategy. The aim should be to secure a general endorsement of the Local Plan policies from residents of the county. To this end, the plan should have a clear focus on the meeting of needs generated within the County, rather than those imposed from outside. The Plan should adopt, as formal supplements, those Neighbourhood Plans which have already been approved. The Council should encourage and support the production of further Neighbourhood Plans.
- **Housing standards.** At a time when all sectors must contribute to the goals of reducing carbon emissions, economising in the use of water and other resources, and recovery of nature, it is vital to ensure that new housing meets those goals. Moreover, the pandemic experience has shown the need for resilience and flexibility in housing design. All new housing should meet high standards on sustainable design, with carbon-neutral performance and low levels of embedded energy.
- **Behavioural change.** Retrofit of existing homes, and standards of sustainable design in new housing, will enable householders and their families – if they wish – to “live more lightly on the land” in terms of their carbon and ecological footprint. But the radical reduction in this footprint depends also upon widespread behavioural change. This calls for the urgent launching of the engagement programme which Dorset Council envisages. The Council states its intention to “continue and extend activities related to awareness and behaviour change”. We urge that community-led organisations be involved in this process. There is scope for widespread community-led initiatives, such as Climate Assemblies and the Green Living project initiated by Sustainable Dorset, which enables groups of households to work together in reducing their call upon energy, water and other resources and thereby also saving money.
- **Balanced communities.** Government policies and Local Plans tend to place excessive emphasis upon housing, as if its provision will ensure the long-term viability and resilience of

communities. That is not the case. The crucial need is to ensure balance and mutual support between the main physical elements in our communities, in order to achieve quality of life and enable people to find that life without having to travel far from home. People of working age will only come to a place or stay in it if they have ready access to services and to jobs. Elderly people will only be able to live in a village if they have access to services. Young people, on leaving school, will only stay in Dorset – or return to it after studies and early careers elsewhere – if they can find here the elements of a good life. It is the duty of Dorset Council, as planning authority, to sustain the balance between housing, services and jobs.

- **Workspace.** A crucial element in balanced development of homes, services and jobs is the provision throughout the county of workspace, and particularly of modern, well-equipped and flexible workspace suited to use for offices, laboratories and workshops or light industry. The rural areas in Dorset have been, and should remain, rich in small and medium-sized enterprises, evolving over time as circumstances change. At a time of fragility and increased unemployment caused by the pandemic, existing and new enterprises may need access to modern energy-efficient workspace, created either by retrofit of existing buildings or by new build. The ‘Economy’ section of the Council’s Strategy refers to the provision of new workspace, but the Action Plan refers only to new workspace at Dorset Innovation Park. That Park may have high value as a seedbed and focus for enterprise, but it does not meet the need for workspace near where people live throughout the county. The local plan should provide for the creation of workspace; the rigorous protection of land zoned for that purpose; and vigorous action to promote the development of that land for that purpose.
- **A timber initiative.** The Council’s Strategy is rich in references to farming, food and drink, the protection of natural capital, and the enrichment of natural habitats by tree planting and other methods. But it makes only limited reference to the county’s woodlands and the potential which they represent for the provision of building materials with low embedded energy. We urge the early launch of a research and development initiative focused on the potential of the county’s woodlands to produce timber for the purpose of buildings, furniture and other products. This could build on the experience of the many timber-using enterprises who meet each year at the Stock Gaylard Oak Fair; John Makepeace and the alumni of his former college at Parnham; the Architectural Association’s campus at Hooke; and the long-established Welsh Woodlands (Coed Cymru) initiative. Such an initiative could bring useful secondary income to farmers and other woodland owners; create local employment; and enable builders to reduce the use of concrete and other building materials which have heavy loads of embedded energy.