

Sustainable Futures Strategy: Warwickshire County Council

Focus Group Qualitative Research



Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

Just over half of the people attending the focus group meetings were aware of the Sustainable Futures Strategy, via a personal interest in climate change and sustainability issues or through their employment, voluntary or Council related work. Some practitioners across the groups expressed disappointment that they hadn't been contacted for their views before the focus group meetings and were pleased to be able to contribute to the Strategy and strengthen the document in their particular field. Some attendees had completed the online survey.

There was widespread acknowledgement in the groups of the difficulty bringing young people into the discussion, particularly students, people early in their careers and those with young families who may be juggling multiple demands on their time. Participants discussed WCC using social media platforms to engage with their audience, newsletters and 'in-person' events. Attendees thought the latter is particularly important for those who are seldom heard where WCC representatives need to go into the community, to venues at a time that is convenient to their audience to talk about the Strategy.

Participants also agreed that engagement needs to start early and thought that WCC should be going into schools and talking to children and students about the importance of living sustainable lives, suggesting young people would take the messages home and educate their siblings, parents and grandparents using 'pester power'.

Attendees across the groups were keen to continue the discussions initiated by the focus groups which the Council can progress, to develop and cement their communication channels in communities across the County.

The discussions across the focus groups highlighted areas where there is broad consensus across the stakeholder groups on WCC's Sustainable Futures Strategy. Participants agreed that the six core themes, the priority areas WCC has highlighted where changes can be made to meet net zero carbon emissions are correct, confirming the Council is focussing on the right themes. There was discussion in the community, subject specialists and residents' groups that 'food' should be a stand-alone theme looking at the production of locally grown produce. Reference was made to several organisations (cited in the report) that WCC should engage with on this issue. Some respondents thought there were some omissions in the Strategy with participants in the community, subject specialist and business groups commenting that an Adaptation Strategy is missing from the document and strongly advised that the document be updated to include this.

Whilst participants felt that the themes are correct participants did not believe the Strategy is sufficiently ambitious to deal with the scale of the challenges ahead. All of the groups agreed that the Strategy is very high level and said the document should include key milestones and dates to measure and monitor WCC's success in achieving net zero carbon emissions by 2050. Participants also agreed that WCC cannot deliver the ambitions on their own and need to work in partnership with other Councils and organisations in the public and private sectors to be achieve the goals set out.

This was particularly true in relation to the design and construction of new buildings. Schools and new housing were talked about and several residents and practitioners considered new buildings a long way from being net zero carbon emissions. Participants talked about low carbon and energy saving designs being a prerequisite for planning permission, to avoid the expense of retrofitting at a later date.

All of the groups expressed an interest in working with WCC and were keen to support the Council on their journey, sharing expertise, knowledge and project experience. When asked about the challenges to deliver the ambitions, participants talked about a lack of funding hampering their efforts and said

that funding if it is secured it can be short-term meaning that long term strategies are challenging. Collaborative working was a very clear message emanating from the discussion. A reoccurring theme was that Councils across Warwickshire each have conflicting priorities, dictated by the current cost of living crisis, and have different levels of resource in terms of finance and personnel. It should be noted that there is some confusion surrounding the core functions of differing layers of Councils with examples including District and Borough Councils having the responsibility for waste collection and therefore refuse collection vehicles, and the majority of planning matters, Participants generally agreed there needs to be more collaborative working between all Councils in Warwickshire and across Council boundaries including with Coventry City Council or the West Midlands Combined Authority for example. Town and Parish Councils also have significant local knowledge of projects and programmes that are underway, such as bottle recycling projects in schools and can share this experience with the County Council so that it can be used elsewhere.

Attendees also talked about the need for behaviour change if WCC and society more generally are to make a difference. Change comes from the top, led by the Council and its Councillors who can play a role in encouraging the public to embrace change and lead by example. This could include approving planning applications that represent change, such as for bio-digesters, solar and wind farms for example – projects that have been unpopular in Warwickshire to date.

Participants in the subject specialist group thought that some areas of the Strategy were weak including on biodiversity and expressed disappointment that stakeholders' views were not sought on the Strategy before the draft was published. It was agreed that the draft could potentially have been a lot stronger, and more evidence based if stakeholders had been invited to feed into the Strategy a little earlier in the process. Participants in all of the focus groups offered advice on how WCC should be engaging with different stakeholder groups and several people in the public sector group specifically mentioned WCC going into schools to talk to children about climate change, including about the provenance of food, so they learn about the challenges and how to lead a sustainable life at a young age and take that learning home. Groups also talked about setting up advisory groups by subject area to include participants who attended the focus groups or representatives of their organisations to discuss collaborative working and share invitations to significant events such as the launch of other Councils' or organisations' sustainability plans.

Significantly there was a clear interest in all groups for ongoing engagement with WCC before the final Strategy is approved by Cabinet later this year. WCC will be writing to all of the participants thanking them for their contributions during the focus group meetings and inviting them to get in touch for further engagement activities. Further meetings are already planned to take place.

Key conclusions include:

- The Sustainable Futures Strategy is very high level. Further detail is required to understand the direction of travel and how the ambitions will be delivered. That includes targets and timelines.
- The challenges around sustainability are enormous and there needs to be an honest debate about the difficult decisions and challenges ahead, including about the cost of delivering the ambitions.
- There is strong willingness across all sectors in working with the Council to share expertise, knowledge and project experience and ultimately support the County Council on the journey set out in the Strategy for Warwickshire to be net zero carbon emissions by 2050.
- The Strategy should be aligned with those of other Councils across Warwickshire recognising each tier has differing core responsibilities. The discussions have created an opportunity for a more joined up and ambitious approach for WCC to work in partnership with others.
- WCC should look at best practice within and outside of Warwickshire, drawing on the experience of other Councils to strengthen the ambitions in the document and set out exactly how net zero carbon emissions can be achieved.
- Sustainability should become part of our everyday language and should be accessible and affordable to all.

Recommendations:

- Be more ambitious in the vision and change all reference to low carbon to zero carbon.
- Consider including key milestones and dates into the Strategy, to measure and monitor WCC's success in achieving net zero carbon emissions by 2050.
- Integrate actions from WCC's detailed adaptation work, in line with comments made by participants in several of the focus groups, that adaptation is missing from the Strategy.
- Work with developers and planners across the County to ensure low carbon and energy saving designs are standard in all applications for new buildings, including housing, work places and public buildings, and become a prerequisite for planning permissions.
- Look to other Councils to identify best practice and strengthen the Strategy, specifically Cambridgeshire, Leicestershire, Bath and North East Somerset Councils, and the West Midlands Combined Authority, which was mentioned with regard to public transport.
- WCC to consider follow up engagement activities at the earliest opportunity with participants in the focus groups, or representatives of the organisations present to discuss comments made and establish areas of collaboration and partnership working. Multiple offers to support WCC were made by experts, practitioners, academics and community volunteers across the groups and their experience should be seized upon.
- Set up a series of advisory groups connected to specific themes that include researchers with expertise in that area to advise WCC on what is required to drive things forward. Include participants from the focus groups.
- The draft Strategy talks about emphasising prosperity where the focus should be on improving quality of life, at a time when people are struggling financially. This should be considered in a future draft and the word prosperity replaced with commentary around improving peoples' quality of life.
- Appoint a Sustainability Tsar at WCC who will drive the Strategy forward.
- Some of the delivery principles have caused confusion and are misunderstood. Consider rewording these so the intention is clear.
- Generate energy in Warwickshire through onshore wind and solar energy.
- With regard to Council vehicles – a full business case should be signed off by a Cabinet member if a vehicle in the Council's fleet cannot be zero emission.
- Consider implementing a workplace parking levy as a form of investment and to deter single car usage.
- Identify where and from which sectors emissions are coming from to be able to target actions better, and establish emission targets for the County by sector.
- Align the Strategy with those of other Councils across Warwickshire. The focus groups have created an opportunity for a more joined up and ambitious approach for WCC to work in partnership with others.