

Council Report

Ward(s) affected: all

Report of Director of Resources

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Petition and E-Petition: Citizens' Assembly on the Climate Crisis

Executive Summary

On 9 March 2020, a joint petition and e-petition was received, containing a combined total of 503 signatories and e-signatories, requesting the Council to

“implement a binding citizens' assembly to formulate a plan for the council to tackle the climate emergency. This could be instructed as the first meaningful action of the Climate Change Innovation Board which has the mandate to build a borough-wide plan for tackling climate change.”

As there were in excess of 500 signatures, our Petition Scheme requires the full Council to debate the matters raised by the petition/e-petition and to indicate to the petition organiser what action the Council proposes to take in response.

The Lead Councillor for Climate Change intends to propose the following motion for debate at the Council meeting, to which amendments may be put by other councillors:

“This Council recognised the urgency for action on climate change through the declaration of an emergency. However, given the scope and scale of the challenges we face, Guildford Borough Council cannot tackle the climate change crisis alone.

Because climate change is a global issue and requires the cooperation of everyone on the planet, in order to make a meaningful difference we must work as far as possible to develop partnerships and alliances across the county and region.

The Council recognises that we are not only facing great uncertainty over the borough's recovery from the impact of the coronavirus pandemic, but also imminent discussions on possible unitary local government structures in Surrey, arising from the Government's Devolution White Paper. Unitary local government in Surrey would bring about significant change to roles and responsibilities for areas and

services contributing to carbon emissions. It also has the potential to create and improve strong partnerships and alliances that are better able to tackle climate change.

Therefore, we believe “*implementing a binding citizens' assembly to formulate a plan for the council to tackle the climate emergency*” is not appropriate or practicable at this time in these circumstances. The Council notes that the Lead Councillor for Climate Change has already held informal discussions, at lead councillor level, with a number of councils in Surrey to explore possible joint working arrangements to address the climate emergency. This work will continue. We believe that we should work proactively with our partners in this regard and ensure we are best placed to meet and adapt to any changes in local government structure in the future and be strongly placed to lead action on climate change locally and across the county. Accordingly, the Council

RESOLVES: That the Managing Director be instructed to open discussions with all Surrey councils:

- (1) to explore possible formal joint working arrangements on climate change;
- (2) to seek formal agreement that the implementation of robust and sustainable policies on climate change should be the leading priority for any new unitary council(s) in Surrey with a recommendation that they explore the benefits of using a citizens' assembly as a means of engaging with the community and harnessing the power of local activism in the formulation of such policies; and
- (3) to report the outcome of these discussions to the Executive.”

Recommendation to Council:

Councillors are asked to debate the above-mentioned motion in response to the petition, which sets out to the petition organiser what action the Council intends to take.

Reason for Recommendation:

To comply with the requirements of the Council's adopted Petition Scheme.

Is the report (or part of it) exempt from publication? No

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to inform the Council of the receipt on 9 March 2020 of a joint petition and e-petition entitled “*Citizens' Assembly on the Climate Crisis*”, which has attracted a total of 503 signatories/e-signatories. The petition states as follows:

“We the undersigned petition Guildford Borough Council to implement a binding citizens' assembly to formulate a plan for the council to tackle the climate emergency. This could be instructed as the first meaningful action of the Climate

Change and Innovation Board which has the mandate to build a borough-wide plan for tackling climate change.”

- 1.2 The petition organiser’s supporting statement accompanying the e-petition reads as follows:

“We applaud Guildford Borough Council in telling the truth and declaring a Climate Emergency in July 2019. We now need to act without delay and involve the residents of Guildford in a citizens’ assembly. We do not need another slow moving local authority committee.

We need action.

Your initiative to have a Climate Change and Innovation Board (CCIB) has minimal public involvement and is to report to the GBC Executive within 12 months.

It is an emergency, not business as usual. 12 months is too late. The public need to be with you to formulate climate policies for the council, the area and for individuals – not be held at arm’s length while a committee deliberates.

The residents of Guildford have to be involved to drive climate policy by holding binding citizens’ assemblies on how to tackle our borough’s emissions. This will remove any party-political bias and corporate interest from the process, and sidestep decisions being made based on the short-term focus of re-election.

Expert individuals and organisations will be employed to present Guildford constituents with the most appropriate ways to mitigate the threat of climate breakdown and devise a strategy for Guildford reaching net zero, as per the council’s commitment on 23rd July 2019.

This will also empower the community in their efforts in tackling the climate emergency, whilst allowing for a truly democratic decision on how we, as a community, combat the climate emergency. The council must be a leader on the crisis, and take every possible opportunity to give the public the power in deciding how our tax-payer funds are used to tackle an existential crisis which affects all of us, as well as our children and generations to come.

At least a dozen other councils have already done this. A citizens’ assembly could be convened within 4 months and report back to the council with binding recommendations within 6 months.

Camden Council is renowned as the leading London borough on climate action (Friends Of The Earth study, Sep ‘19). They initiated a binding Citizens Assembly from which a detailed and realistic 17-point action plan was drawn, and which allowed for immediate action. GBC also ranked well in the FoE study, and as such it is appropriate to follow Camden’s lead and try to climb the league table.

Citizens Assemblies have already proved highly effective in finding democratic solutions to the hardest issues to resolve.

This is an opportunity for GBC to be completely transparent - as per 2019 manifesto pledges - and to work with its constituents in this crisis. There are multiple individuals and bodies locally who can be consulted on this.

We demand that Guildford Borough Council set up a citizens' assembly on the climate emergency without delay".

- 1.3 Under the terms of our adopted petition scheme, the Council is invited to consider and respond to the petition.

2. Strategic Priorities

- 2.1 Formal consideration by the full Council of proposals contained in a petition is consistent with the Council's desire to be open and accountable to its residents and to deliver improvements and enable change across the Borough.

3. Background

The Council's Petition Scheme

- 3.1 The Council's adopted petition scheme provides that where a petition contains more than 500 signatures, it will be referred to full Council for debate. The Council will decide how to respond to the petition at the meeting.
- 3.2 The petition scheme states that our response will depend on what a petition asks for, but may include one or more of the following:
- taking the action requested in the petition
 - considering the petition at a meeting of the Council or Executive
 - holding an inquiry into the matter
 - holding a public meeting
 - holding a meeting with petitioners or the petition organiser
 - undertaking research into the matter
 - writing to the petition organiser setting out the Council's views about the request in the petition
 - referring the petition to the Council's Overview and Scrutiny Committee for consideration

Procedure for dealing with the petition at the meeting

- 3.3 Under the Council's petition scheme, the petition organiser, or a person appointed on their behalf, is entitled to a period of up to five minutes to speak to the subject matter of the petition at the meeting. Councillors will have an opportunity to ask questions of the petition organiser (or their spokesperson) before the formal debate on the petition.
- 3.4 In accordance with the rules of debate in Council Procedure Rule 15 (a), at the start of the debate, a motion as to how the Council should respond to the petition should be moved formally and seconded in the usual way. The Petition Scheme requires the motion to respond explicitly to the request in the petition. The Lead

Councillor for Climate Change intends to propose, and Councillor Caroline Reeves to second, the following motion:

“This Council recognised the urgency for action on climate change through the declaration of an emergency. However, given the scope and scale of the challenges we face, Guildford Borough Council cannot tackle the climate change crisis alone.

Because climate change is a global issue and requires the cooperation of everyone on the planet, in order to make a meaningful difference we must work as far as possible to develop partnerships and alliances across the county and region.

The Council recognises that we are not only facing great uncertainty over the borough’s recovery from the impact of the coronavirus pandemic, but also imminent discussions on possible unitary local government structures in Surrey, arising from the Government’s Devolution White Paper. Unitary local government in Surrey would bring about significant change to roles and responsibilities for areas and services contributing to carbon emissions. It also has the potential to create and improve strong partnerships and alliances that are better able to tackle climate change.

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- (3) to report the outcome of these discussions to the Executive.”

3.5 As with any such motion, it may be subject to amendment. If any councillor wishes to propose an amendment, they should inform the Democratic Services and Elections Manager as soon as possible. Details of any amendments

received will be circulated to all councillors and to the petition organiser and will be included on the Order Paper.

- 3.6 After the debate and before a final decision or vote is taken on the Council's response to the petition (as set out in the motion – amended or otherwise), the petition organiser will be granted a right of reply for a further period of up to five minutes.
- 3.7 Councillors' comments during the debate shall not exceed five minutes in length, although the proposer of the motion will have up to ten minutes.

4. Equality and Diversity Implications

- 4.1 Public authorities are required to have due regard to the aims of the Public Sector Equality Duty (Equality Act 2010) when making decisions and setting policies.
- 4.2 This duty has been considered in the context of this report and it has been concluded that there are no equality and diversity implications arising directly from the report.
- 4.3 No Equality Impact assessments (EIA) have been conducted in relation to the subject matter raised by the petition, although, subject to the response, an EIA may be required.

5 Financial Implications

- 5.1 There are no direct financial implications arising from this report, although we do have budgets in place for work on climate change. However, subject to the Council's response to the petition, councillors will be advised as to any financial implications.

6. Legal Implications

- 6.1 If the action proposed in a motion responding to a petition is an action requiring the exercise of an executive function, it would normally require the matter to be referred to the Executive for a final decision. In this case, the motion, if carried, is merely instructing the Managing Director to explore possible formal joint working arrangements on climate change and to seek undertakings on prioritising the climate change agenda for any new unitary council(s) in Surrey including exploring the benefits of using a citizens' assembly as a means of engaging with the community in the formulation of robust and sustainable policies to tackle climate change. Any decision to be taken as a consequence of this action will be referred to the Executive.
- 6.2 Under the Council's petition scheme, the full Council is obliged due to the number of signatories to this petition to debate the issues raised therein and to pass a resolution in response.

7. Human Resource Implications

7.1 There are no human resource implications arising directly from this report.

8. Climate Change/Sustainability Implications

8.1 This Council declared a climate emergency at its meeting on 23 July 2019. The Council is taking action on climate change in a number of ways and the recently revised Climate Change Board is leading on the various work streams.

9. Conclusion

9.1 The Council should debate the matter raised by the petition as set out in the Petition Scheme and agree a way forward.

10. Background Papers

None

11. Appendices

None