

Review of the sustainability policies and practices of Carmarthenshire County Council

Course: MBA Sustainability Leadership

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This management report provides a review of the level of sustainability within Carmarthenshire County Council, taking a cross-organisation to assess the practices across its' various functions and services. The report will also analyse the organisation's position in terms of action on climate change within the public sector in the UK.

Carmarthenshire County Council made a public commitment to sustainability when, in February 2019, it declared a climate emergency and made a commitment to become a net zero carbon local authority by 2030 (Carmarthenshire County Council, 2019).

Twelve months following the declaration of a climate emergency the council became the first local authority in Wales to publish a climate action plan, and has recently declared a nature emergency. Both of these declarations demonstrate the organisations recognition of the impact that our changing climate is having on biodiversity across the county and how the council's activities have an impact on this. (Youle, 2022)

The commitment made by Carmarthenshire County Council is over and above the Welsh ambition for a net zero public sector by 2030. This ambition, set by the

government in 2021 (Welsh Government, 2021), is a collective one meaning that across all organisations the whole of Welsh public sector, including Health Boards, Fire & Rescue Service, Natural Resources Wales etc. must reach net zero by the year 2030. In order to meet this ambition, the organisations must reduce their carbon emissions, but the sequestration capacity of the land, such as the forests owned by Natural Resources Wales, will also provide an opportunity to offset a significant amount of emissions and there will equal to net zero overall.

Carmarthenshire County Council however took their commitment further and pledged to being operationally net zero carbon themselves. This means that they will not rely on the sequestration of carbon provided by the land of other public bodies, and will instead reduce their own emissions as much as possible and provide their own offsetting through the generation of renewables and land management. (Carmarthenshire County Council, 2020)

This ambitious commitment made by the local authority to tackle the climate and meet net zero carbon is being delivered through a number of different strategies, policies and services within the council.

The council's Corporate Strategy, *Moving Forward in Carmarthenshire*, which sets out the local authority's direction, was updated in 2021. (Carmarthenshire County Council, 2021)

An organisations Corporate Strategy is an opportunity to focus the business activities around new goals. A study from the Havard Business Review found that there were

four concepts to corporate strategizing – portfolio management, restructuring, transferring skills and sharing activities (Porter, 1987). Whilst this review is relating to the private sector business activities it has many transferable concepts to the local government sector.

Portfolio management is the councils opportunity to review its estate and services and realign them with the new strategy, restructuring within the strategy aligns the activities and staff around the new mission and vision for the organisation, transferring skills is an opportunity for sharing out the responsibilities and tasks for reaching the new goal across the variety of teams, where they have the best knowledge and skills to meet them. Thinking about sharing activities within a strategy allows the council to plan for how it must work closely with partners in the public and private sector, across the region and Wales, to reach its goal – this is a key element of a sustainable organisation as it ensures the best use of resources and collaboration on local actions for a global issue. Addressing these four concepts within the plan provides a good model for ensuring that the sustainability ambitions for the organisation are weaved through its activities.

In reviewing the council's corporate strategy it is clear that the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act 2015, the landmark piece of legislation which put sustainable development into the heart of the Welsh public sector, is a key feature of the document. (Welsh Government, 2015)

It includes a specific section on the environment, where the organisation makes a number of commitments to tackle the climate crisis and improve the natural environment such as;

“We will mitigate the effects of flooding and damage caused by rising sea levels...”

and “We will deliver actions... to become a high recycling nation by 2025 and a zero-waste nation by 2050.”

Some other sections such as “Improving the highway and transport infrastructure and connectivity” also make reference to actions being undertaken to improve the sustainability of the organisation;

“We will continue to modernise our vehicle fleet to improve efficiency and reduce emissions.”

There is however much room for improvement. Sustainability is the golden thread that underpins the wellbeing of our economy, environment and communities, and net zero is the lens through which all activities should be carried out, and therefore both of these should feature heavily within all sections and objectives within the strategy. (Carmarthenshire County Council, 2021)

Relating back to the four concepts of corporate strategy mentioned earlier in this report, the strategy produced produces overarching goals but the authority fails to identify key actions for how these will be achieved through restructuring, transferring skills, sharing activities and portfolio management. (Porter, 1987) As mentioned earlier in this report, addressing these four areas is a way of ensuring embedding the

delivery of the wellbeing goals and sustainability aspirations of the organisation across all activities.

Delivering on the commitment within the corporate strategy to create a healthy and prosperous environment, the authority published a Net Zero Carbon plan in February 2020. The plan sets out the baseline of the council's greenhouse gas emissions profile, the activities that are currently underway to reduce emissions and the future actions the authority will undertake to accelerate its transition to a sustainable organisation.

The emissions that are within scope of the plan are non-domestic buildings, street lighting, fleet mileage and business mileage, and in 2021 the council achieved an overall reduction of 2.9% compared to the 2018/19 data. (Carmarthenshire County Council, 2021)

The plan however does not include consumption-based, or procurement, emissions within its scope for reduction. In 2021 the Welsh Government launched the Public Sector Decarbonisation Routemap which identified the four areas where public sector organisations should focus their reduction efforts. These four areas are buildings, transport, land use and procurement.

Emissions reporting from other Welsh councils show that procurement emissions can attribute anywhere between 60 – 86% of the total emissions of the authority (Cardiff County Council, pg. 2) & Flintshire County Council, 2022, pg.11). Therefore, this is a large proportion of Carmarthenshire County Council's carbon footprint that is

not being reported through its climate action plan and does not have any specific actions aligned to their reduction.

However, despite the carbon reduction plan not providing a comprehensive strategy for the reduction of all the organisation's greenhouse gas emissions, there are a number of functions that are delivering their services through the lens of sustainability. Housing is one of these functions.

A housing strategy with sustainability throughout its core presents a significant opportunity for tackling the climate crisis. Research from the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors (RICS) suggested that retrofitting homes with efficiency measures like insulation and heat pumps could save between 12kWh/m² and 16kWh/m² (RICS, 2020). Efficient homes have the potential to make a vast contribution towards net zero carbon, alleviate fuel poverty and improve peoples living standards.

Carmarthenshire Council's Housing Strategy, Carmarthenshire Housing Standard Plus (Carmarthenshire County Council, 2020), recognises this contribution to the net zero ambition for the authority and has a section dedicated to the plan to decarbonise council owned social housing.

The standard provides a comprehensive plan for decarbonising its' homes by not only outlining the retrofitting standards to be achieved but also by recognising the need for training officers in new skills to design and install new technologies and the opportunity this presents the local supply chain, which supports the transition to

green skills and jobs.

The impact that tenant behaviours can have on home efficiency has also been highlighted in the strategy, with the authority committing to run an engagement programme to maximise the benefit of their sustainable homes.

This housing strategy demonstrates well the way in which sustainability and emissions reduction can be weaved through the different functions and activities of a service area.

Transport is another key function of the authority which has the potential to deliver significant emission savings for the organisation and community. The authority published a joint transport plan for South West Wales with the other three councils in the region – Swansea, Pembrokeshire and Neath Port Talbot. (Carmarthenshire County Council, 2015)

The plan was published in 2015 prior to the council's declaration of a climate emergency, but it includes a number of commitments to reducing the emissions of transport such as;

- Facilitating and promoting improved rail and bus services
- Securing realistic alternatives to single car occupancy
- And encouraging the take up of travel planning to reduce single occupancy car commuting

These commitments can make a significant reduction to the impact the organisation and community of Carmarthenshire will have on the environment.

However, there are some suggestions within the plan that are deeply incompatible with the authority's commitment to being net zero, such as the potential for development of the airport in Pembrey for business or leisure travel.

The authority has historically been ahead of the curve in terms of recognising the climate crisis and its role as authority to decarbonise. However, an analysis of the performance of other councils on their sustainability objectives and decarbonisation action plans shows that there are a number of improvements that could be made to the organisation's practices, policies and targets.

Climate Emergency UK is a voluntary run organisation that reviews and scores climate action plans of local authorities across the UK on an annual basis. Their review framework was developed by Non-Governmental Organisations and businesses with a breadth of expertise in climate action such as Friends of the Earth, APSE energy and the Centre of Alternative Technology. (Climate Emergency UK, 2022)

The 2021 review gave Carmarthenshire County Council an overall score of 32% and ranked the authority as 9th out of the 22 Welsh local authorities. The council scored zero on Diversity and Inclusion as the organisations climate plan did not address how the people most vulnerable to climate change in the community will be helped. A zero score was also given to the councils recognition of the ecological emergency, though this was prior to the organisation declaring a nature emergency and therefore we can expect to see some significant changes in the scoring in this area in the 2022

review.

Another “benchmark” of the current sustainability level of the organisation amongst other councils, and an area of improvement for Carmarthenshire council is the inclusion of targets within the climate action plan.

Manchester University has undertaken a research project to quantify the necessary emissions reduction for each local authority in the UK to ensure the organisations stayed within the commitment of the Paris Climate Change Agreement to limit global warming to 1.5C (Kuriakose *et al.*, 2022). The report for Carmarthenshire said that an annual emissions reduction of -13.5%, and reaching zero emissions by 2041, across the whole county area, must be met to ensure the organisation contributes its fair share towards the UK carbon budget and plays its part in ensuring the commitments made at Paris are upheld.

Whilst the authority has committed to reaching net zero carbon by 2030, this is specifically related to the authority’s own operational emissions and does not include targets for the rest of the county. Many of these emissions will be out of the control by the organisation, however the UK Climate Change Committee report “Local Authorities and the Sixth Carbon Budget” stated that councils have the potential to influence around a third of their territory emissions through their policies and priorities. (UK Climate Change Committee, 2020)

There have been examples of local authorities within the UK rising to the challenge of reducing territorial emissions and using the carbon budget set by the Tyndall

Centre to inform their carbon reduction plans and set ambitious targets. Cheshire West and Chester is one of these local authorities whose carbon plan has used the budgets developed by Manchester University to inform its pathway for emission reduction, and shows ambition and best practice within the sector. (Cheshire West and Chester Council, 2020)

Carmarthenshire County Council is positioned well in terms of its sustainability, its commitment to being net zero carbon by 2030 and the actions it is taking to reduce its impact on the environment. But there is plenty of room for improvement.

Sustainability should underpin every function and service of the council and the commitment to emissions reduction should be documented within all strategies and plans. In order to have a truly cross organisation approach to sustainability it requires all functions to identify their impacts on the environment and to put in place commitments and targets to reduce them.

The council is ambitious in its work, and this can be reflected through its climate change targets by aligning itself with the Paris Climate Agreement and designing its climate action on the Tyndall Centre carbon budgets. This would position Carmarthenshire County Council as the Welsh council leading the way on sustainability and tackling the climate and nature emergencies.

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