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# Annual Report 2024/25

## Gina Dowding - Cabinet Member for Climate Action

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### 1. Introduction

I would like to put on record my thanks to our very small and committed climate team who have worked extremely hard to achieve another encouraging year of progress regarding the City Council's journey to net zero, and its wider work to mitigate and adapt to the challenges that are presented by climate breakdown.

### 2. Climate Emergency Review of the Local Plan

One of the highlights of the year has been the long-anticipated adoption of the Climate Emergency Review of the Local Plan at January's Council Meeting. Members will recall the significant delays in reaching the adoption stage, predominantly caused by the Planning Inspectorate's stance regarding energy efficiency standards. Thankfully, after a sustained period of challenge by our Officers and Members, our proposed policies have survived and are now in force and being used to determine planning applications within the district. This raises the bar in terms of appropriate challenge to the development industry and will help deliver truly sustainable buildings that provide a higher quality of life for residents.

In June 2024 the City Council won the Net Zero Category at the prestigious Local Government Chronicle Awards. The judges noted:

*"Lancaster City Council's (LCC's) Climate Emergency Local Plan Review (CELPR) was the first of its kind in the country to partially review a Local Plan focusing purely on reassessing planning policies in terms of addressing climate adaption and mitigation. It's road towards adoption has not been straightforward with central government's inconsistency of interpretation of national guidance resulting in LCC having to be inventive in its engagement methods and applying a continued and persistent level of tenacity and determination not commonly seen in the plan making process."*

Further recognition of the progress and contribution that the Council is making on climate matters is evident in the nominations for Municipal Journal (MJ) Awards 2025. The Council has been shortlisted in the 'Leadership in responding to the climate emergency' category, and also in the 'Rising Star' category for the work of Susanna dart, the Council's Principal Climate Policy Officer.

### 3. Influencing National Policy

The adoption of the CELPR not only set a benchmark for all new development in the district, but our officers are still influencing national policy. A change of national focus from carbon reduction, towards energy use intensity (which requires that houses are constructed to require less energy to run) is considered necessary. The benefits of this alternative approach is that it would not only alleviate some of the pressures surrounding limited grid capacity, but would also simultaneously lead to a reduction in carbon emissions and significantly reduced energy running costs for our residents. In November 2024 our officers were invited by Lord Ravensdale to discuss this issue in the House of Lords, which illustrates the high standing that this Council has acquired on climate matters.

### 4. Local Area Energy Plan

In October 2024 the Cabinet approved the Local Area Energy Plan (LAEP), which establishes a vision for decarbonising the district by 2040 (i.e. beyond the City Council's own 2030 target). The LAEP, which has been produced with Energy Systems Catapult and utilised UK Shared Prosperity Funding, sets out the scale of investment (from all parties) that is necessary to deliver a net zero transition whilst also benefitting the local economy. It identifies the scale of domestic fabric upgrades (retrofitting) that will be required; the challenges around the installation of low carbon heating via heat pumps; the potential for the increased rollout of electric vehicle charging points; greater opportunities for generating renewable energy locally from solar PV and onshore wind; and the importance of investment in the electricity network to ensure that there is sufficient capacity for the rapid growth of low carbon technologies.

The process was intensive and involved key stakeholders across the energy sector. Ongoing support and collaboration will be necessary as the LAEP moves towards the implementation stages.

## **5. Climate and Nature Strategy**

A new local Climate and Nature Strategy (CaNS), funded by UK Shared Prosperity Funding to support the work of our officers, is due to be published shortly. The CaNS aims to address the climate and ecological emergencies and forge a more resilient future for our district with overarching document will set out our roadmap, case studies and actions to support the district in ensuring a liveable and vibrant future for people and the planet. The team have held many stakeholder sessions including with the public, and re-engaging with the people's jury, in the process to date.

The CaNS will bring together many of the current action plans that exist across the district within the public sector, private and not-for-profit sectors and other partners to create a joined-up strategy to aid cooperation across multiple sectors, reaching beyond the council to ensure we can holistically affect change together. There will be more to share with Members, stakeholders and our residents regarding the CaNS very soon.

## **6. Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme**

In Spring 2024 the Council learned that it has again been successful in bidding for funding to decarbonise three more council-owned sites, namely Williamson Park, The Storey and CityLab.

The fund, issued by the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero and delivered by Salix Finance, aims to support public sector facilities in reducing carbon impacts and, longer term, reduce running costs. More efficient air source heat pumps are proposed to replace gas boilers, whilst new systems to monitor, control and optimise energy consumption are also proposed. At The Storey, much-needed secondary glazing and upgraded insulation also forms part of the package of measures.

The project team is continuing to make arrangements for the submission of the necessary permissions and heritage consents. Whilst there can be no guarantee that permission will be granted, and noting the need for the council to provide match funding, the imperative to safeguard the future of these buildings and reduce our long term operational costs are notable considerations in the decision-making process.

## **7. Renewable Energy Projects**

In the last 12 months the Council was successful in obtaining planning permission for the construction of a solar farm and associated infrastructure at Burrow Beck, Scotforth. At the time of compiling this report, a second application to vary some of the approved planning conditions is due to be considered by the Planning Regulatory Committee.

The Team have also secured Prior Approval (consent) for the installation of roof-mounted solar panels at 1 Southgate, White Lund (also known as the Gateway Building). Both schemes are expected to be delivered during the next 12 months.

## **8. Local Sustainable Transport**

Our officers have more recently been invited to be involved in collaboration with colleagues at the County Council (i.e. the transport authority) regarding the potential for bus-related improvements around the congested Lancaster City Centre gyratory system. It is hoped that outcomes from these sessions will begin to deliver the suite of transport improvements that the local highway authority are required to deliver as part of the Bay Gateway Development Consent Order (i.e. the permission for the road), and build on some of the previous work that both Councils had taken forward on the City Centre Movement Strategy.

## **9. Climate solutions focussed businesses**

I have represented the Council at a couple of inspiring events organised by some of our burgeoning micro, small and medium-sized businesses operating in the climate solutions sector in this district. Most recently the ElecTech (Electronics Technology) Innovation Cluster Annual event demonstrated the success of this dynamic sector (involved in the development, manufacturing, repair and servicing of electronic and electrical hardware crucial for modern technology) in economic impact and job creation in our district.

## **10. Looking Ahead**

At the end of this year, the Council's Cabinet will receive a report setting out progress in reaching the net zero target (for the Council's own emissions) by 2030. This will become an annual report for Cabinet and will be prepared up until and including December 2030.

A number of the projects listed in this year's Annual Report are entering critical stages, particularly those that require physical works and it will be a challenging year of delivery. I am heartened by the willingness of all of the Council's services to engage in the learning and good practice necessary for climate mitigation and adaptation and in the sustained progress made by the Council led by the climate team. This, together with the evidenced eagerness of residents, businesses and other organisations to assist in the urgent need to reduce our dependency on fossil fuels and in the recovery of nature offers much encouragement.