

TITLE: Climate and Nature Monitoring Report and Action Plan 2025

Committee: Finance and Assets Committee

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1.0 Issue

- 1.1. To provide an update on our climate and nature activities over the past 12 months and to agree a set of activities for the coming year.

2.0 Recommendations

- 2.1. Members are requested to:

- 2.1. Note the Climate and Nature Action Plan and Monitoring Report 2025 (Appendix A).
- 2.2. Approve the Climate and Nature Top 20 Actions for 2025/26 (Appendix B).
- 2.3. Approve a fee of £100 for each Eco Flex 4 or Great British Insulation Scheme Flex declaration provided by this council to appropriate retrofit contractors.

3.0 Background/Options

- 3.1. On 27 June 2024, this Committee approved a Climate and Nature Strategy 2024-28, together with a set of 'top 20 actions' for the Strategy's first year (June 2024-June 2025).
- 3.2. The medium-term 2024-28 Strategy focuses on three themes:
- Bring Back Nature
 - Reducing our Carbon Emissions
 - Adapting to a Changing Climate

Each theme has a set of Priorities and Goals By 2028, with the entire strategy set out on a single 'A3 poster' rather than a lengthy document. The poster is available here:

<https://eastcambs.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2024-11/Climate%20and%20Nature%20Strategy%202024-2028%20-%20adopted%20June%202024.pdf>

- 3.3. The Top 20 Actions for 2024/25 were based around making progress towards the above Strategy and is available here, again in a single A3 poster style:

<https://eastcambs.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2024-11/Our%20Climate%20%26%20Nature%20Top%20%20Actions%202024%20-%20adopted%20June%202024.pdf>

Performance Review for June 2024- June 2025

- 3.4. It is fair to say that 2024/25 has been a mixed year, with many of our Top 20 targeted actions completed as well as additional unplanned activities achieved. However, it is disappointing to report that some of our Top 20 actions were not achieved, and, separately, our own latest reported carbon emissions (or 'carbon footprint') remains stubbornly close to our baseline emissions of 2019/20.

- 3.5. Taking the positives first, the highlights of the past year are:

- Nine of our top 20 actions for the year were either completed or predominantly completed. This included:
 - solar panels installed on The Hive (which are forecast to save at least c£18,500 in electricity running costs and generate 91MWh of electricity per annum, resulting in a c19tonnes CO₂e annual saving; the investment has a forecast payback of 3.9 years for a product which should generate electricity for at least 25 years);
 - moving our refuse collection vehicles away from diesel to HVO fuel (which is forecast to cost slightly more than using traditional diesel, but should deliver up to 80% saving in emissions);
 - Approximately 100 East Cambridgeshire properties had substantial energy efficiency retrofit measures installed on or in their homes in the 2024/25 financial year, at average investment of c£17,000 via HUG2 funding. Measures are primarily solar panels, heat pumps, batteries and insulation;
 - assisting a further 32 households to receive eco-flex funding, which is similar to HUG2 funding but available to a wider audience;
 - Our Pride of Place Grant scheme has been hugely successful, with 31 community groups benefitting from 100% grant funds to help transform a local area for the benefit of both nature and people. The scheme has resulted in animal boxes, tree planting, green space creation, flower planting and pond rehabilitation projects spread right across the district (see summary report at Appendix C for further details);
 - successful commencement of 'biodiversity net gain' in the planning system, plus two thirty-year 'habitat bank' legal agreements signed between ECDC and landowners;
 - hedgehog training course delivered by nationally renowned hedgehog expert Hugh Warwick to our open space staff as well as local landscape and gardening operators, as well as a potentially national first 'Hedgehog

Recovery Supplementary Planning Document' adopted and being used by our planning team;

- 134 staff (over 2/3rds of all staff) completed an accredited carbon literacy training day.

- A very successful 'Net Zero Villages' programme, culminating in ten village halls (or similar) across the district successfully being awarded a collective £150,000 for solar panels, batteries and insulation, helping our vital community facilities reduce their running costs and their carbon emissions. Within 8 months of launching the bidding process, half of the successful applicants have already got their solar panels installed and the other half are on track to do so very soon, with a collective forecast saving of £20,000 a year of electricity costs, around 20 tonnes CO₂e annual saving, and an average payback of the investment in under 8 years. Electricity bills are a major financial burden for village halls, so this investment helps maintain their financial viability and deliver services to their local community.

- 3.6. However, it is disappointing to report that over the past year, eleven of our Top 20 actions for the year were either not started or with only limited progress towards completion (full details of these projects are in the attached Monitoring Report at appendix A).
- 3.7. The reasons for not meeting all our intended actions in the past year are primarily down to three matters.
- 3.8. First, our Climate Change officer resigned from the council in October 2024, and the vacancy filled in March 2025. This resulted in a significant capacity gap to deliver projects, especially those programmed for the winter. We are pleased to report that this vacancy is now filled and fully up and running.
- 3.9. Second, meeting our Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) requirements (which commenced from Spring 2024) was an even greater resource burden than anticipated and the demands on the council continues to grow, virtually fully occupying our senior ecologist through the year. This resource demand was partly compounded by the substantial training that was required by our senior ecologist to our own planning teams as well as many planning agents who themselves were struggling to get to grips with the requirements. That said, BNG is starting to prove to be an exceptionally useful tool at ensuring new development in the district is treating nature and open space as a fundamental part of the planning process. It is also pleasing to report that we have increased our ecology capacity to two full-time ecologists from May 2025, thus enabling not only BNG to be successfully delivered, but other proactive projects to help bring back nature to our district.
- 3.10. Third, we have taken on other significant projects over the year, which have been prioritised over some of the original top 20 actions, none more so than the successful Net Zero Villages programme reported above.

Progress towards our 'Goals by 2028'

- 3.11. Of the three themes, we are probably making the greatest progress towards the '**Bring Back Nature**' theme. For example:
- Biodiversity Net Gain is delivering meaningful results on the ground already;

- Our Pride of Place grants programme has delivered significant gains across our district; and
- We have commenced preparation and delivery of new wildlife friendly management plans for our own parks and open spaces such as leaving patches of grass uncut for longer, creating a haven for invertebrates and the animals which feed on them such as hedgehogs (Note: these management plans for around 20 council owned sites will be published on our website in autumn 2025, and their implementation commenced thereafter).

3.12 The second theme of '**reducing our carbon emissions**' has been more challenging, both in terms of the council's own emissions, as well as for the territorial area of East Cambridgeshire as a whole. This Committee set the target of '*By 2025/2026 reduce our direct emissions by 50% (compared with our baseline year of 2019/2020) and be on track to meet our target of an 80% reduction by 2030/2031*'. There is always a lag on data, but so far we are broadly flat in terms of emissions, though the latest data does not include our shift to HVO fuel in 2024. Once that data is available, for the year 2024/25, we should see our emissions approaching the 50% reduction we set ourselves. Having said that, other than paper use, we are yet to establish a pathway for calculating (and then reducing) our scope 3 emissions, these being emissions associated with an organisation's value chain that are not directly controlled by the organisation. For the council, these emissions primarily occur upstream (e.g. from suppliers of materials we buy) and can only be meaningfully tackled when we put a procurement policy in place which requires such emissions to be considered in the purchasing process, and then reported as best as we are able for all products we purchase.

3.13 The final approval was given to the Bereavement Centre on 22 May 2025 and is intended to open in Summer 2026. The electric cremator will have a significantly better carbon footprint than a traditional gas cremator, however until the national grid decarbonises the impact of the cremator will reduce our ability to reach our carbon reduction targets. One of the stated objectives for Bereavement centre was to produce on-site renewable energy. Despite two applications to the CPCA for solar PV, to date no grant funding has been secured for project, and therefore only a very limited amount of energy will be produced on site, via solar panels on the roof of the Crematorium. This will clearly have an impact on the Councils short term net zero targets. The bereavement centre project team must continue to seek funding for renewables on site, otherwise this project will place a risk to achieving our net zero target by 2035.

3.14 Away from the council's own emissions and turning to the district as a whole, there is a gradual downward trend in emissions from our territorial area. The latest national published data for East Cambridgeshire indicates:

- c17% decline in emissions, between 2005 and 2022, to presently sit at 1,356kt CO₂e for 2022
- 2.4. c28% decline in emissions on a per capita basis (i.e. to account for our population growth) over the same period.
- 2.5. c36% decline in emission from 2005 to 2022 on a per capita basis when excluding Land Use, Land Use Change and Forestry (LULUCF) emissions

(a slight improvement of the previously reported c35% decline for the period 2005 to 2021).

- 3.15 However, the declines are presently not yet steep enough to achieve the c50% per capita decline (excluding LULUCF) by 2028 we set ourselves in our Strategy. In the next 6 years, we need, as a district as a whole, to double the rate of decline in per capita emissions to meet our target.
- 3.16 Turning to our third theme of '**adapting to climate change**', we have made limited progress towards our Goals by 2028, but there is significant work to do to keep our targets on track. One of the four goals we set in 2024 for this theme is no longer achievable because we are not now updating our Local Plan (for reasons as agreed at Full Council meeting of 25 February 2025). Instead, officers will consider what alternative planning related measures could be achieved in the absence of a full Local Plan update.

4.0 Arguments/Conclusions

Top 20 Actions for June 2025-June 2026

- 4.1 Presented at Appendix B is a new set of top 20 actions proposed for the coming year. Such actions have been established based on aiming to meet the Goals by 2028 in our main Strategy, as well as taking account of the latest opportunities and resources available.
- 4.2 Of particular note is the number of actions proposed around the topic of water. Members will be well aware that climate change is already causing unpredictable and extreme weather evidence, especially in terms of rainfall. The last two winter/spring seasons has seen the wettest winter/spring on record in 2023/24, to now the driest spring on record in 2025. This unpredictability is having considerable impacts on our economy and our wildlife, as we repeatedly appear to be shifting from having too much water, to then having too little, and back again. Water use also has a significant carbon impact, from the processing and pumping of such water for domestic, industry and agricultural use (as well as embodied carbon impact of infrastructure measures to either stop flood water or capture water for use in drought periods).

Accreditation and 'scorecards'

- 4.3 Over the past year, it can be reported that:
- We successfully retained our annual ***Investors in the Environment silver accreditation*** for 2025
 - Well over 2/3rds of ECDC staff (134) have completed the accredited day long ***carbon literacy course***, 90 of which have gone on and successfully completed their evidence forms and become officially carbon literate. We hope to run a more occasional course, to pick up new staff arrivals and those who missed out last year.
 - On 17 June 2025 (post writing this report), we will find out where we have been placed nationally for our climate action according to the independent ***council scorecards*** prepared by Climate Emergency UK.

Update on preparation of a full plan to achieve an 80% reduction in emissions

- 4.4 At the Operational Services Committee on 19 June 2023, Members agreed the following resolution alongside approving that years' Environment Plan:
"That officers be instructed to draft a full plan that details how to achieve a reduction of at least 80% in carbon emissions for all the Council's operations by 2030."
- 4.5 That resolution matches our Climate and Nature Strategy 2024-28 target of being *"net zero by 2036"* with an *"80% reduction by 2030/31"*
- 4.6 At the Audit Committee on 25 February 2025, it was further agreed for Q3 of the present financial year that Internal Audit will *"provide assurance over the Council's plans for reaching Net Zero and how this has been informed/developed."*
- 4.7 Progress on preparing such a plan is yet to commence in detail, for the same reasons reported earlier on why we didn't achieve all our targeted actions in 2024/25. However, it is proposed that this Committee receives such a plan at the November 2025 meeting, thereby also aligning with audit committee's request.

ECO 4 Flex and Great British Insulation Scheme Flex Declarations

- 4.8 The Energy Company Obligation (ECO 4) is a government energy efficiency scheme that is administered by OFGEM and funded by large energy suppliers. Its aim is to help reduce carbon emissions and tackle fuel poverty by improving the energy efficiency of homes occupied by low income, fuel poor and vulnerable households. The standard ECO 4 programme does not involve council activity, other than officers and our website providing general advice on its availability.
- 4.9 However, in order to increase the availability of ECO 4 to a wider number of our residents, we have voluntarily entered into a national 'flex' agreement. In simple terms, the 'flex' element has the effect of slightly stretching some of the qualification thresholds, which means those residents who just miss out on the standard ECO 4 programme might qualify under the 'flex' programme.
- 4.10 For the resident, it is largely immaterial whether they secure grants through ECO 4 or the flex arrangement. However, for this council, unlike standard ECO 4, we are required to undertake certain checks (such as financial checks) for all flex applications and then issue a 'declaration' to confirm that the resident does qualify for a grant. That declaration is applied for and given to the contractor, so that the contractor can then undertake the works.
- 4.11 We have done this declaration process over recent years, as we have been keen to support as many of our residents qualify for grants as possible. However, it is a time-consuming process, with the checking and declaration process taking anywhere between 2-8 hours of officer time, depending on the circumstances of the resident. We get no funding to do this process.
- 4.12 As part of the Top 20 actions, we want to encourage and assist more homeowners to retrofit their homes (with solar panels most often being the most cost effective), including taking advantage of as many national grants as possible. But we are to a degree becoming a victim of our own success, and we risk having to deal with increasing numbers of declaration requests, at a cost to the council. Having reviewed other councils that undertake ECO 4 flex schemes, it is clear many

(perhaps most) do charge for each declaration they provide, and an average charge is around £100 or so. Contractors are indicating a charge of around £100 is also reasonable and would not put them off applying for declarations. For a contractor, the more 'flex' declarations the better, as it widens up the market for potential retrofit measures to take place. For the council, a £100 charge will ensure our costs are covered for this voluntary service we provide.

- 4.13 As this is a new charge, this Committee is requested to approve introducing such a fee with immediate effect.
- 4.14 For the avoidance of doubt, the £100 charge will not be paid by homeowners, and we will ensure no contractor attempts to recoup such a fee off the homeowner.
- 4.15 For more background information on ECO4 and other energy efficiency schemes, please see <https://eastcambs.gov.uk/housing/heating-and-energy/energy-incentives-and-schemes>.

5.0 Additional Implications Assessment

5.1 In the table below, please put Yes or No in each box:

Financial Implications No	Legal Implications Yes	Human Resources (HR) Implications No
Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) No	Carbon Impact Assessment (CIA) Yes	Data Protection Impact Assessment (DPIA) No

Legal Implications

- 5.2. The Council has no direct statutory responsibility to mitigate climate change. However, it does have a statutory responsibility via the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006 to "[further] *the conservation and enhancement of biodiversity in England through the exercise of [its] functions*" (s40(A1)) and "*determine such policies and specific objectives as it considers appropriate for taking action*" (s40(1A)(a)) to meet that duty to conserve and enhance biodiversity.
- 5.3. The Act (s40/s40A) also requires a number of reports to be published setting out how it will achieve the above duty.
- 5.4. The projects as reported in this agenda item will assist in meeting the above requirements and are considered entirely compatible with what the statutory duty seeks.

Carbon Impact Assessment

- 5.5. The assessment of the impact of the recommendations from a carbon impact perspective has been limited to those actions within the recommendations which are not agreed through a separate Council consideration.
- 5.6. Further, any proposals in the recommendations which are 'target setting' or encouraging others to take action to reduce carbon emissions do not score

positively or negatively in the CIA for this agenda item because directly they will not reduce or increase carbon emissions.

- 5.7. The scope of the CIA for this agenda item is therefore limited to those actions to be taken directly by the Council and which are not to be subject to a separate Council decision making process.
- 5.8. Consequently, the positive or negative implications are, directly, somewhat negligible arising from the recommendations of this agenda item and are limited perhaps to some planting.
- 5.9. However, indirectly, it is anticipated that by approving the actions for the coming year will consequently lead to (or help lead to) such actions being implemented, which in turn should lead to considerable net positive carbon emission savings, either directly for this council or directly for residents or organisations.

4.0 Appendices

- (A) Climate and Nature Action Plan and Monitoring Report 2024
- (B) Climate and Nature Top 20 Actions for 2024
- (C) Pride of Place summary outcome report

5.0 Background documents

"Our Climate and Nature Strategy 2024 to 2028" – East Cambridgeshire District Council, June 2024, <https://eastcambs.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2024-11/Climate%20and%20Nature%20Strategy%202024-2028%20-%20adopted%20June%202024.pdf>