

**TITLE: Climate and Nature Strategy 2024-28 and Climate and Nature Monitoring Report and Action Plan 2024**

Committee: Finance and Assets

Date: 27 June 2024

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Report number: Z23

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## **1.0 Issue**

- 1.1. To consider a new approach to reporting and engagement relating to the Council's Environment Plan and an extension to the Pride of Place grant scheme.

## **2.0 Recommendations**

- 2.1. Members are requested to:

- (i) Approve the Climate and Nature Strategy 2024-2028 (Appendix A)
- (ii) Approve the summary Climate and Nature Top 20 Actions for 2024 (Appendix B), together with the more comprehensive Climate and Nature Action Plan and Monitoring Report 2024 (Appendix C)
- (iii) Supports the principle of our website to have a greater focus on live information and campaigns associated with climate and nature, as well as the home for any detailed technical and monitoring information
- (iv) Approves the extension of the Pride of Place grant scheme into 2024/25, with a maximum of £60,000 available to bid for this financial year on a first come first served basis, with the fund closing for applications no later than 31 October 2024 (for spend by March 2025).

## **3.0 Background/Options**

- 3.1. On 17 October 2019, Full Council approved a wide-ranging motion relating to climate change matters and which, in short, had the effect of this Council declaring that there is a climate emergency. In November 2022, the Finance and Assets Committee also agreed to acknowledge "*the global biodiversity emergency and the local impact this could have on the communities and businesses we serve.*"
- 3.2. Since June 2020, the Operational Services Committee has been tasked with keeping up to date the Council's Environment Plan. With the recent constitution changes, it is now within the remit of the Finance and Assets Committee to agree the Council's approach and actions relating to climate and nature issues.
- 3.3. For the previous four years, an annual 'Environment Plan' has been approved as a single comprehensive document covering everything from long term aims and

targets, various monitoring statistics, annual actions and activities, and detailed technical matters.

- 3.4. Broadly speaking, the approach has worked well, and has brought various environment related matters to the attention of our communities. It has also helped focus our internal activities by staff and members across the Council, in a coordinated way.
- 3.5. However, the fundamental drawback of the approach of the past four years has been the arguably repetitive nature of the Environment Plan each year, including some detailed technical matters which are perhaps only of interest to a limited few whereas the elements of most interest to most people (especially the 'Top 20 Actions') can get somewhat lost within it.
- 3.6. Having reflected on both the success of the current approach, as well as its drawbacks, it is proposed that we adjust how we establish our approach to making short- and long-term commitments on climate and nature, and how we report on activities and progress we are making. It is also proposed that we publish such commitments and reporting in a way which is as accessible and engaging as possible.
- 3.7. It is therefore proposed we establish the following three strands as a substitute for the current all-encompassing annual Environment Plan.
- 3.8. First, we separate out our 'strategy' and longer term aims/targets into a single strategy document which is updated every four years, with the update taking place approximately one year after all-out elections at this Council (thereby giving the new administration a year to develop its own updated strategy and targets for the coming four years). It is also proposed to make the strategy as accessible as possible by making it fit on a single A3 sheet of paper. By reducing it to a single side of paper, presented in a 'poster' style, there is a much greater chance people will find the time to flick through it and capture the key elements of what we are trying to achieve.
- 3.9. Second, and partly as a consequence of the first, it is proposed we have a greater focus on placing content on our website. Busy people do not want to download lengthy pdf documents on their mobile phone to try to find what they want. Modern organisations capture people's attentions through short downloads where necessary, but then focus the detail and attention via weblinks and additional resources (not pdfs). Thus, detailed technical matters can be located on our website rather than as appendices in lengthy pdf documents. A more active and engaging website is also much easier at running campaigns, updating on actions and providing 'live' information.
- 3.10. Third, it is proposed we broadly continue the successful approach of setting annual 'Top 20 Actions', but instead of doing so slightly hidden away at page 59 of the Environment Plan (as it is in our June 2023 version), we bring it out more prominently in two ways: first, in summary form on a single page and again in a 'poster' style; and second in a more comprehensive format via an annual 'Action Plan and Monitoring Report' which also includes reporting on performance.
- 3.11. The following sections elaborate on the above approach in more detail.

#### **Four Year Climate and Nature Strategy 2024-2028**

- 3.12. Assuming the 'strategy on a page' is agreed in principle, it is proposed the strategy is structured around three themes: Bring Back Nature; Reducing our Carbon Emissions; and Adapting to a Changing Climate.
- 3.13. Each theme then has a small number of longer-term priorities which are expected to remain priorities until at least 2028 and probably beyond (but with an opportunity to review them every four years). Each priority is then complemented with 'Goals by 2028'. These Goals are specific measurable actions or targets we hope to achieve in the four-year lifetime of the strategy.
- 3.14. The collection of 'Priorities' and 'Goals by 2028' are a blend of what we hope to achieve in terms of our own operations (such as how we manage our own land and assets for nature, or how we are going to reduce our own carbon emissions) and what we hope to achieve in terms of supporting our communities to make changes to help nature, reduce emissions or adapt to a changing climate.
- 3.15. The 'Priorities' and 'Goals by 2028' are, as much as we are able, quantifiable or otherwise specifically worded so progress can be demonstrated whether we are on track to achieve them. However, they are also broad enough to allow for flexibility and innovation in the 'Top 20 Actions' we will set each year.
- 3.16. Overall, the 'Priorities' and 'Goals by 2028' are, as a package, intended to deliver meaningful change which can be identified by the public. Whilst ambitious, they are also realistic, taking account of the resources at our disposal and the degree of influence we have. They avoid matters which are predominantly outside of our control or influence (such as road travel and public transport) and focus on matters where we do have at least a reasonable degree of influence.
- 3.17. Members are asked to approve the Strategy at Appendix A, which then forms the starting point for establishing this years' Top 20 Actions, as well as establishing the Top 20 Actions for 2025/26, 2026/27 and 2027/28.

### **Top 20 Actions**

- 3.18. Reporting on our successes and challenges of the past year is just as important as establishing our new Actions for the coming year. However, just like the 2024-28 Strategy described above we need to make this reporting as accessible and engaging to the public as possible.
- 3.19. Appendix B therefore sets out on a single A3 page both a summary of our successes in 2023/24 together with a summary of our Top 20 Actions for 2024/25.
- 3.20. For more detail on our successes (as well as challenges) from the last 12 months, together with the new Top 20 actions in more detail for the coming year, then Appendix C provides the fuller Action Plan and Monitoring Report.

### **Successes in 2023/24**

- 3.21. There are a number of achievements we made in 2023/24 which the Council should be proud of which include the following:
  - Awarded more than £60,000 towards **18 community nature projects** across East Cambridgeshire, delivering new ponds, tree planting, hedgerow planting, bird and bat box installations, churchyard restoration, wildflower sowing and much more.

- Committed to the **long-term recovery of hedgehogs** in the district, after the public voted for hedgehogs as the species most wanted to be seen supported.
- **Gave away 75 oak trees to 21 communities** to mark the King's Coronation and 75<sup>th</sup> Birthday.
- Set up a **Biodiversity Net Gain system in our planning department**, meaning all new development now must deliver a gain for nature as part of their planning applications. This included funding the recruitment of the Council's first ever senior ecologist.
- Commenced the use of Hydrotreated Vegetable Oil (HVO) fuel in all our refuse collection vehicles from April 2024. HVO fuel has the potential to more than **halve** the Council's entire carbon emissions.
- Reduced the amount of paper we use by more than a third! That's a whopping **250,000 less sheets of paper used**. If stacked up, it would exceed the height of four adult giraffes standing on top of each other!
- **Reduced our electricity bill by nearly £14,000** in the first year of operating our newly installed solar panels at our business start-up office block at E-Space North, Littleport. The solar panels saved around 7.3 tonnes of carbon dioxide emissions, and produced enough electricity in a year to boil around 200,000 full kettles!
- Achieved **Investors in the Environment silver accreditation**, and moved into the **top 20% of best rated district council's** in the country for our climate action according to the independent Climate Emergency UK organisation.
- Commenced **carbon literacy training for all staff**, with around half of staff accredited by June 2024, and more training for remaining staff underway.
- Continued to **support households with advice and tips** to reduce energy use and adapt/retrofit their homes. Our joint website is a great starting point: <https://www.actiononenergycambs.org/>.
- Adjusted how we **manage our parks and open spaces**, with earlier grass cuttings due to warmer wetter winters, and being prepared more for hotter drier summers.
- Carried out a review and started to investigate key risks to the Council and our communities from a changing climate.

### Challenges encountered in 2023/24

3.22. Notwithstanding the above successes, it is important we recognise the challenges we faced in 2023/24, and what action we took (or intend to take) for them:

- Decided against launching the planned bird/bat box campaign (Action 6 of 2023/24), so we could focus more on the hedgehog recovery campaign.
- We have shifted our trees and woodland strategy (Action 8) preparatory work into 2024/25, early work on the strategy has been prepared but it is not ready for Council consideration.
- We did not manage to reduce our black bin waste volume across the district as hoped (Action 14), though with an ever-growing number of households

(c1.5-2% increase in households per year recently), it is always a challenge to reduce total waste collected.

- We were unable to identify any easy-win electric vehicle (EV) charging point grants (Action 12), either for use on our own land or for supporting parish council's with their EV charging point bids.
- We postponed to 2024/25 further investment in solar panels on our own estate (Action 2). This was partly to align to, and take advantage of, government funding for solar panels for public swimming pools (which we successfully gained a grant for in 2023/24, for spend in 2024/25).
- We were unable to reduce our overall carbon emissions in our latest reporting year (2022/23) and our overall emissions remain stubbornly near to our baseline year of 2018/19, but we are hopeful of a significant reduction in the coming year due to the use of HVO fuel.
- We only made limited progress on preparing a new climate and nature chapter for the Local Plan (Action 17), as a result of new limitations on the content of such chapters set by Government in December 2023.
- We struggled to engage with a wide range of our community on developing a 'climate action plan' for the district as a whole (Action 18). We therefore postponed the establishment of such an action plan, but intend to re-look at this option once further work at the county level has been completed relating to what Cambridgeshire (as a whole) should establish as its 'locally determined contribution' to mitigating climate change.

### **New Top 20 Actions for 2024/25**

- 3.23. In establishing a new set of Top 20 Actions for 2024/25, we are proposing to build on our past successes, we have listened to what our communities are asking us to support and we have reflected on the challenges we faced in 2023/24.
- 3.24. Officers have focussed on a preparing a set of Actions which will not only deliver meaningful outcomes but will involve engagement with communities and will deliver visible results. As usual, they are a mix of direct action on our own estate together with advice, support and grants to assist communities to make a difference.
- 3.25. Perhaps the most headline grabbing proposed actions are:
  - Further Hedgehog Recovery projects, including a 'hedgerows for hedgehogs' campaign to support the increase in native hedgerows, helped by a hedgerow plants giveaway (similar to how we have successfully given away orchard trees and oak trees in past campaigns).
  - Several on-the-ground nature projects, including a new accessible woodland in Bottisham, an extension to our Pride of Place grant scheme and the creation of a butterfly mound to support butterflies and other pollinators.
  - Confirmation of a shift to HVO fuels in our refuse collection vehicles, potentially halving the carbon footprint of the Council's operations.
  - Installation of solar panels on The Hive swimming pool.
  - A new focus on helping both the Council and our communities be resilient to a changing climate, including a special focus on water.

- Children/youth interest actions, including a fun (but important) awareness raising on invasive species as well as a poll to help chose the design of the butterfly mound.
  - Actions to attract investment (with a financial return) in climate or nature, such as creation of habitat banks or investment in energy efficiency, together with an update of our procurement policy to encourage suppliers to be more aware of the impact of the goods and services they supply to the Council.
- 3.26. Members are asked to approve the new set of Top 20 Actions, as set out in summary form (Appendix B) and in slightly more detail in the separate Action Plan and Monitoring Report (Appendix C)

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

- 3.27. At the Operational Services Committee on 19 June 2023, Members agreed the following recommendation 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.”*

- 3.28. Preparation of that Plan has commenced, though detailed work has not been undertaken to date. The primary reason holding back detailed work has been that it took some time to resolve the issue of our fuel use in our fleet vehicles.
- 3.29. In early 2024, we commenced a trial of the use of HVO fuel in one of our refuse collection vehicles (RCVs). With no apparent impact on vehicle use or service delivery, Council agreed to fund the commencement of HVO fuel use in all its RCVs from April 2024. We now use HVO fuel in all our RCVs.
- 3.30. Thus, now we have made significant inroads to reducing emissions form our fleet vehicles (or at least on an interim basis for the coming years, until an alternative even lower carbon fuel can be considered, such as electricity or hydrogen), we can concentrate on working out how to tackle our remaining emissions and thereby establish how to reduce our overall emissions (including as many indirect ‘scope 3’ emissions) by 80% by 2030. Work on that ‘full plan’ as requested by Members in June 2023 will now begin in earnest.

**Pride of Place Grant Fund Extension**

- 3.31. On 30 March 2023, the Finance and Assets Committee approved the Pride of Place grant scheme criteria and application form (Decision reference X186). This included a commitment of “up to £100,000” available to distribute in 2023/24, out of the total SPF funding pot for ‘Pride of Place’ of £180,000 over the two-year period 2023-25.
- 3.32. The grant scheme has been very well received by communities, and some excellent projects have had funding approved (and are now being delivered) across East Cambridgeshire. Very close to £60,000 was paid out in 2023/24, though interest has continued, with some further grants approved in early 2024/25 (following applications received in late 2023/24). It is requested by way of recommendation in this agenda item to formalise an extension of the Pride of Place grant scheme into 2024/25, and make available up to £60,000 of the SPF funding for the period to October 2024 (for spend by March 2025 at the latest). All other fundamental terms

and conditions are to remain the same, and the opportunity is taken to emphasise that this is a first come first served 100% grant scheme, with no set application deadline dates (other than the end date of 31 October 2024 for last applications to be received by, or earlier if the fund has been fully subscribed before then). Any application received is targeted to be approved and funded (if appropriate to do so) in approximately one month after receiving the application.

- 3.33. If approved, this would result in up to £120,000 in total being made available for Pride of Place community projects over the full two-year period, with the remaining £60,000 (of the total £180,000 available) being for council-led projects on council-owned land which equally deliver ‘pride of place’ positive outcomes for nature and for people.

#### 4.0 Arguments/Conclusions

- 4.1. Members are asked to approve a package of documents which, collectively, establish the Council’s overall strategy towards climate change and the natural environment, together with targets and actions for both the next four years and the immediate year.
- 4.2. Funding the package presented will be from a variety of sources, including: the Council’s agreed £100,000 annual environment revenue fund; carried over capital funding from 2023/24 (for The Hive solar panels); Combined Authority funding (for the Pride of Place programme and the Habitat Management Plans); the increased management fee that Council has agreed for ECSS (to cover, in part, the additional cost associated with HVO fuel); and a ‘new burdens’ funding contribution from DEFRA as a part contribution towards BNG implementation costs. No additional funding is required from Council as a consequence of the recommendations in this agenda item, and officers will of course seek out grant opportunities should they arise during the course of the year if this enables a project to be expanded in scope.
- 4.3. The proposals are considered ambitious, achievable and affordable. They engage across all communities and all age groups. Collectively, they should help achieve the Council’s priority of a *Cleaner, Greener East Cambridgeshire*.

#### 5.0 Additional Implications Assessment

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

<b>Financial Implications</b> No	<b>Legal Implications</b> Yes	<b>Human Resources (HR) Implications</b> No
<b>Equality Impact Assessment (EIA)</b> No	<b>Carbon Impact Assessment (CIA)</b> Yes	<b>Data Protection Impact Assessment (DPIA)</b> 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 documents as recommended for approval 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. For example, the reduction in carbon emissions arising from the use of HVO fuel is not considered in the CIA for this agenda item, because the decision to move to HVO fuel is not a matter being agreed today (because it has been agreed by a separate Council decision).
- 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 gains from tree planting (hedge plant giveaway; Bottisham wood creation). However, indirectly, it is anticipated that by approving the Strategy and associated actions will consequently lead to (or help lead to) such actions being implemented, which in turn should lead to considerable net positive carbon emission savings, such as through: use of HVO fuel; carbon-capturing habitat creation via Pride of Place, habitat banks and habitat management plans; solar panels on The Hive; behavioural change via the carbon literacy training; and retrofit/adaptation measures to make homes and businesses more energy efficient.

## **6.0 Appendices**

Appendix 1 - Climate and Nature Strategy 2024-2028

Appendix 2 - Summary Climate and Nature Top 20 Actions for 2024

Appendix 3 - Climate and Nature Action Plan and Monitoring Report 2024

## **7.0 Background documents**

None