

TITLE: ECDC ENVIRONMENT PLAN (JUNE 2023 EDITION)

Committee: Operational Services Committee

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Author: Richard Kay, Strategic Planning Manager

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Contact Officer: Richard Kay, Strategic Planning Manager
richard.kay@eastcambs.gov.uk, (01353) 616458, Room 12 The Grange, Ely

1.0 ISSUE

1.1. On 17 October 2019, Full Council tasked this Committee with the preparation of an 'Environment and Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan' (which has evolved thereafter as more simply known as our *Environment Plan*). The first such Environment Plan was adopted in June 2020, and has been annually updated. A fourth, fully refreshed, Environment Plan is brought to Committee today.

2.0 RECOMMENDATION(S)

2.1. That the Committee:

- (A) Approves the Council's fourth Environment Plan, dated June 2023 (as attached at Appendix A); and
- (B) Endorses the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, and agrees to seek alignment of the Council's policies and priorities, as and when these are updated, with the overall ambition of the Goals.

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. As part of the Council's response to these declared emergencies, the Operational Services Committee is tasked with keeping up to date the Council's Environment Plan. This report is intended to meet the commitment for an annual update.
- 3.3. The updated Environment Plan (fourth edition, for 2023/24), attached at Appendix A, is broadly similar in structure to the original 2020/21 version, but of particular note are the following additions or amendments:
- The Plan has been slightly rejigged from the previous three versions, this time adding more colour and graphics, and either removing some of the 'technical' wording or moving such wording to the appendices. The formatting of the document, however, has been set so as to be as 'accessible' as possible for those using assisted reading technology.

- The Council's emissions continue to edge downwards, but has yet to be reduced by 10% from our baseline position of 2018/19. As our recent and proposed actions start to take effect, we are hopeful of a much more significant cut in emissions in the coming 2-3 years.
 - Our activities (taken and proposed) give us the confidence to bring forward our Net Zero Target to 2035/36 (from 2040/41), and interim targets are also proposed to be made more ambitious. These new ambitious targets will heavily rely on the Council implementing its proposed switch towards hydrogenated vegetable oil (HVO) fuel in its waste collection vehicles and, in the medium term, then switching to electric vehicles.
 - A new set of Top 20 actions for the coming year, including a greater emphasis on engagement and supporting our communities to take positive actions (more details on the Top 20 actions below).
- 3.4. The Environment Plan continues to set both a medium-long term vision and strategy, as well as short term targets and indicators of progress to date. It also continues to be two pronged: seeking to mitigate climate change, and doing our bit to address this global problem; and seeking to boost the natural environment, here in East Cambridgeshire.
- 3.5. It is both an inward-looking Plan (i.e. what we can do, directly, as an organisation) and an outward looking Plan (i.e. what can we do to support others to make a difference).

Top 20 Actions: review of 2022/23 and new for 2023/24

- 3.6. Perhaps the section with most interest to the majority of readers is the 'Top 20 Actions' that the annual Environment Plan proposes.
- 3.7. As usual, the attached updated Environment Plan first reviews last year's Top 20 (from page 41), and then sets a new set of Top 20 Actions for the forthcoming year (from page 49).
- 3.8. Of last year's actions, it is pleasing to report a great many successes, with the majority of the actions completed in full, and progress towards finalising any outstanding actions underway. Particular highlights include:
- Installation of solar panels on the two south orientated roofs at E-Space North, Littleport, which should halve the grid-electricity demands of the building, saving the Council over £10,000 a year and significantly reducing our greenhouse gas emissions;
 - We've reduced the amount of paper we use by 35% compared with pre-covid base-line, saving money, waste, carbon emissions and water use;
 - Exceeded our target of creating 26 new orchards across the district, with 28 community-based orchards now planted;
 - A commitment in March 2023 to move towards the use of HVO fuel in our fleet vehicles, as an interim measure before electric-based heavy commercial vehicles become more commercially available;

- This Council being independently recognised as an ‘Investor in the Environment (Bronze)’ organisation, the first Council in Cambridgeshire to do so, as well as supporting ten schools on their journey to achieve Eco-Charter accreditation; and
- Supporting our communities, whether that be direct funding to improve the energy efficiency of their homes, or indirectly. This includes advice via the launch of our own new website (www.actiononenergycambs.org) and financially supporting our local independent charity EastCambsCAN to launch their own website (<https://eastcambscan.org/>). Both websites are a great source of information, list upcoming events and provide suggested actions residents could take.

3.9. There was just one of the twenty proposed action from last year that we have not made the progress we had hoped, and that was in relation to the establishment of an Environment Awards scheme (Action 3). For a variety of reasons, as explained in more detail in the Environment Plan, an awards scheme has been postponed to a future date once we are confident that we are in a position to make it a success.

3.10. For the coming year, a new set of Top 20 Actions are proposed, a flavour of which are as follows:

- Commence the use of HVO fuel in our fleet vehicles, which should reduce emissions arising from each such vehicle by 80%. With our fleet vehicles being our majority source of greenhouse gas emissions, this action should start to show a significant cut in our overall carbon footprint;
- Further invest in solar panels on our estate, following the success of our E-Space North investment;
- Supporting our communities financially, via a ‘Pride of Place’ grant scheme, so that undervalued public open spaces are brought in to better use, for people and for nature;
- Being more proactive than ever before in terms of engaging with our residents on what they can do to help boost the natural environment in East Cambridgeshire. This includes doubling up with the Cathedral’s ‘green fair’ in August for the first time; launching a long-term community-orientated ambition to install up to 40,000 bird or bat boxes; and launching a ‘public vote’ on which single animal species we should collectively get behind to support its recovery in East Cambridgeshire;
- Installing free water bottle filling stations in key public places, saving on single use plastic bottles. It will also save our residents the cost of purchasing shop-bought drinks; and
- A variety of education initiatives and policy formulation, including nature recovery, climate adaptation and carbon literacy training.

Staffing resources and skills base

3.11. In June 2022, this Committee approved the recruitment of our first ever full time permanent *Climate Change and Natural Environment Officer*. That officer was

subsequently recruited, and is responsible for taking forwards various activities outlined in the Environment Plan, as well as other duties such as up to 1 day a week acting as a Soham Commons Officer.

- 3.12. That *Climate Change and Natural Environment Officer* sits within the Strategic Planning Team, with the *Strategic Planning Manager* splitting his time 50/50 between environment related matters and planning policy related matters.
- 3.13. Overall, therefore, we have 1.5FTE staff directly responsible for coordinating activities arising from the Environment Plan, though of course many other officers across the Council contribute alongside their more substantive duties.
- 3.14. It has become increasingly apparent that, as we further step up our environment ambitions, additional resource will be needed within the Strategic Planning Team, and especially in relation to the natural environment. This is primarily because the provisions of the **Environment Act 2021** are starting to come into force, and of the many requirements within that Act imposed on local authorities, the following three are particularly notable from a natural environment perspective:
 - (i) **Mandatory Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG):** This is to be introduced into the planning system from November 2023. This means virtually all new development will be required in law to provide at least a 10% gain for biodiversity as a result of the development, then was the case before development started. There are complex rules about how this is demonstrated, validated and enforced, but a crucial aspect of it is the need for ecology expertise to review and agree proposals submitted by planning applicants.
 - (ii) **Mandatory Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS):** These are county-wide strategies, establishing a framework for where and how nature can recover in an area. The 'responsible authority' in our case is the Cambridgeshire-Peterborough Combined Authority, but ECDC is a statutory 'supporting authority' in the preparation process. Again, ecology expertise is needed to ensure East Cambridgeshire can gain the most from the proposals in the LNRS (and the inevitable funding that will arise thereafter to deliver it). The LNRS began tentative preparation in April 2023, and will take 9-18 months to prepare (and reviewed in cycles thereafter).
 - (iii) **Biodiversity Duty:** from 1 January 2023, the Act places a much stronger legal duty on ECDC to 'conserve and enhance' biodiversity in its area, and to put in place actions to achieve that. It is also now required to monitor those actions, and report on its success. Again, ecology expertise will be necessary to meet these new duties.
- 3.15. Thus, aside from any moral obligation the Council may feel it has to help boost the natural environment in East Cambridgeshire, the above new mandatory requirements compel the Council to undertake certain activities.
- 3.16. At present, the Council has no ecology officer or similar resource, and has to date relied on a very limited Service Level Agreement with the local Wildlife Trust to provide advice. However, this amounts to only a few days of assistance per year, mostly on specific planning applications we ask for its assistance. Any other

'ecology' input into planning or strategy matters has relied on non-qualified officers with an interest in the environment.

- 3.17. It is clear that the present arrangement will not be sufficient to fulfil our new legal duties set out above.
- 3.18. Accordingly, corporate management team is in the process of securing much greater ecology officer support, perhaps in the region of up to 2FTE overall. The precise quantity and implementation of this resource is flexible at this stage, as it is extremely hard to recruit ecologists nationwide (all councils and developers are presently attempting to boost their ecology officer support, in order to meet the new duties). Thus, it might be the case we recruit direct, share support from another Council or purchase a service from an external consultant. Most likely, it will be a combination of these options.
- 3.19. To pay for this additional resource will be a mix of one or more of the following:
 - 'New burdens grant' from Government (because the provisions of the Act are deemed to be a 'burden' imposed on local authorities, and hence a payment is made. Whilst we've been advised that we will get such a grant, we do not know how much, and it is unlikely to cover the full cost or be a recurring long-term payment); and/or
 - Top slicing some of the additional fee income we expect from the increase in planning application fees that are proposed by Government. However, again, this is uncertain, because we do not yet know what the increase will be, when it will be introduced, and, ultimately, the total fee income depends on the volume of planning applications we receive; and/or.
 - From our own existing budgets: essentially, we will have to fill any financial gap not covered by above.

Green Team Update

- 3.20. In addition to the direct staffing resource discussed above, one of the highlights of the past year has been the establishment of the internal staff 'Green Team', and the activities it has undertaken. The Green Team is open to any staff member to join on a voluntary basis, and so far comprises 14 staff spread across many service areas. Some successes of the Green Team include:
 - Running a staff travel survey, with an exceptionally high return rate, and turning the results into a draft 'Travel Plan' for the Council. That Travel Plan is currently with the Management Team for consideration.
 - Taken the lead on the paper reduction campaign, now aiming to achieve a 70% reduction in paper over a 10 year period.
 - Started work on revitalising The Grange's Courtyard, so that it becomes a useable, green space.
 - Identified the large electricity consumption of the staff food vending machine, resulting in a replacement one being secured with a c85% reduction in electricity consumption, saving both carbon emissions and over £2,000 in annual electricity costs (Note: over an average year, the old

and large vending machine consumed the same amount of electricity as two UK domestic homes!).

- 3.21. Ultimately, it is the activities of the Green Team which were instrumental in the Council achieving its Bronze *Investors in the Environment* accreditation in late 2022, and is coordinating work towards achieving silver in 2023. The *Climate Change and Natural Environment Officer* provides the overarching administration support for the Green Team.

United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals

- 3.22. The UN's 17 Sustainable Development Goals are a call for action by all countries – poor, rich and middle-income – to promote prosperity while protecting the planet. They recognize that ending poverty must go hand-in-hand with strategies that build economic growth and address a range of social needs including education, health, social protection, and job opportunities, while tackling climate change and environmental protection. More details at:

<https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/>

- 3.23. The Local Government Association (LGA) has already explicitly committed, at its 2019 General Assembly, to support local councils “to continue their work on linking their local priorities with the overall ambitions of the SDGs” (see <https://lga.moderngov.co.uk/mgAi.aspx?ID=13534>), and has a dedicated resource on its webpage (see <https://www.local.gov.uk/un-sustainable-development-goals-guide-councils>).

- 3.24. Much of what the Council does is already in alignment with the Goals, where practical and relevant to do so, but it is recommended that the Council formally endorses the principle of the Goals, and agrees to start the process to explicitly embed them into its wider policy making and decision taking.

4.0 ARGUMENTS/CONCLUSION(S)

- 4.1. The updated Environment Plan 2023 recommended to Committee is deemed ambitious, yet realistic. It provides a clear set of updated short-term actions, medium term targets and long-term vision and ambitions.
- 4.2. The Environment Plan is founded on robust evidence base, an analysis of the realistic options available and a clear targeting of those areas which will deliver the greatest impact.

5.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS / EQUALITY IMPACT STATEMENT / CARBON IMPACT ASSESSMENT

- 5.1. There are no immediate direct financial implications arising from the recommendations. However, delivering the actions in the Environment Plan will require investment, most of which are available from existing resources. Where resources are not presently available (e.g. for significant capital expenditure), these will be a matter for a future decision.
- 5.2. The ecology resource noted in the report will be met from a combination of external funding, fee income and/or exiting Council budgets. There are, therefore, no financial implications.

- 5.3. Equality Impact Assessment has found no direct positive or negative impacts.
- 5.4. An Environmental Impact Assessment has found no direct benefits arising from approving the Environment Plan, but indirectly there will be considerable benefits, should the actions it proposes be taken forward.

6.0 APPENDICES

Appendix A – Environment Plan 2023.

Appendix B – Equality Impact Assessment

Background Documents:

None