

West Suffolk Environment and Sustainability Working Group 2023 Report

Report number:	CAB/WS/23/039	
Report to and date:	Cabinet	19 September 2023
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Decisions Plan: The decisions made as a result of this report will usually be published within 48 hours and cannot be actioned until five clear working days of the publication of the decision have elapsed.

Wards impacted: All wards

Recommendations: It is recommended that:

- 1. Cabinet confirms its commitment to addressing the Climate and Environment Emergency and, in particular, to reaching net zero by 2030 in respect of Council operations.**
- 2. Cabinet approves the review, and implementation, of the action plan as set out in Section 2 of Report number CAB/WS/23/039, with draft plan at Appendix A.**

1. Context to this report

- 1.1 In 2019, West Suffolk Council set up an Environment and Climate Change Taskforce and declared both a climate and environmental emergency. That taskforce made recommendations to Cabinet and an action plan was agreed. The Council committed to achieving Net Zero in respect of its own operations by 2030. The action plan was then reviewed annually and reported to Cabinet in July.
- 1.2 In June 2023, the Leader of the Council announced a new working group to review the existing action plan, and in particular to consider additional actions the council could take to support and encourage West Suffolk residents and businesses to address the climate and environmental challenge. The terms of reference were agreed by Cabinet on 13 June 2023 ([CAB.WS.23.025 Appendix D - West Suffolk Environment and Sustainability Working Group.pdf](#)).
- 1.3 The Environment and Sustainability Working Group (ESWG) was set up under the chair of Cllr Julia Wakelam and was made up of members from all groups. It has reviewed the existing plan, the Council's performance and Annual Environmental Statement, work underway across Suffolk and this report summarises its initial findings, including considerations for 2024-2025 budget planning.
- 1.4 In support of the Council's commitment to reduce paper and mileage, meetings were minimised, were conducted hybrid and without papers being printed.

2. Proposals within this report

The existing action plan is structured under the following themes:

- Council consumption and accreditation
- Waste and Recycling
- Travel and Transport
- Housing
- Renewables
- Environment and Biodiversity

- 2.2 The ESWG considered a range of evidence against these themes include the work underway across the County as through the delivery of the [Suffolk-Climate-Emergency-Plan.pdf \(greensuffolk.org\)](#). The ESWG noted that the Suffolk plan, jointly funded by Councils across Suffolk, was a positive way of working together to reach communities and businesses and noted a number of positive initiatives being delivered through it such as the [Suffolk Climate Action Community Match Funder](#) and [25 by 25: Suffolk's Challenge to Businesses to Tackle the Climate Emergency](#). As a result of considering the priorities and challenges and work underway across Suffolk it proposes that a new Action Plan is put in place that is structured as follows

- a. **Communities and Communication.** The Committee on Climate Change reports that to achieve carbon neutrality, 62 percent of emissions reductions will come from behaviour change. Technological change alone is not enough; residents and businesses need to be encouraged and supported to make positive changes to their behaviours. The ESWG recognise then the importance of all parts of West Suffolk being involved in the plan and for Communications and engagement to take centre stage in the plan. Transport, particularly in rural areas is an important part of this strand.
- b. **Corporate Action.** This section will bring together the activity that the Council is taking to address its own environmental performance, for example in regard to fleet electrification, less use of resources and decarbonisation of its buildings and our role in waste collection.
- c. **Existing Housing.** Housing remains a key issue, with over 25 percent of CO2 emissions across Suffolk coming from homes. Poorly built and insulated homes contribute the most as well as adversely impacting house dwellers' health and pockets. Whilst planning and building regulations can address the standard of new homes that are built in West Suffolk, the Council should do more to support homeowners to improve the efficiency of existing housing stock.
- d. **Planning and Regulatory.** This theme focusses on the key role of planning, building control, licensing, housing and environmental health play in addressing climate change.
- e. **Environment and Biodiversity.** This theme brings together all activity that protects and enhances West Suffolk's natural environment, including land owned by West Suffolk Council.

2.3 In practice, some of the actions associated with each of the themes will link together, with communications and engagement being a common thread. Many of the actions included are carried over from the original 2020 action plan.

2.4 The draft 2023- 2025 Action Plan is included as Appendix A. In considering the current plan and current challenges there are a number of specific opportunities the ESWG want to highlight, and these have been included in the draft plan.

2.5 **Solar for business scheme.** The solar for business scheme is a significant success with currently 86 businesses supported and a reduction of 1665 tonnes CO2 saved since the scheme began. Given the current challenges with utility costs the ESWG see real opportunity to expand the scheme, so more businesses are supported. It acknowledges that this was referenced in the Councils Net Zero Investment fund, however it is recommended that a clear business plan is set out for the scheme that can significantly increase the number of West Suffolk businesses that benefit from it.

2.6 **Communications campaigns.** There are a number of areas where a dedicated communications campaign will be very important. The ESWG noted since April 2023, work has been undertaken to develop a framework for communications, cross referenced against events to date and national/local

campaigns. This should be developed further to ensure there are regular environment communications to residents and public and alongside this the content of the Council's environmental web pages should be enhanced. The ESWG has identified some initial areas of focus:

- a. Recycling and Waste Campaigns.** Minimisation of waste produced then an increase in the recycling rate of remaining waste is essential and the ESWG proposes that the Council increases its activity to promote waste and recycling campaigns to local businesses and residents. It recognises the work of the Suffolk Waste Partnership (SWP) in this regard but wants to see increased visibility in West Suffolk. It recommends that this is delivered by the Communications team using existing resource and an annual plan is brought together with a variety of resources that can be used by Councillors to promote in their wards and which is complementary to countywide communications delivered through the SWP.
- b. Promote local food production.** It is recommended that the council runs a communications campaign, in conjunction with its Economic Development team, to promote locally produced food. Food miles is a significant contribution to CO2 emissions and residents should be more informed as to the locally produced options available to them. The campaign could be run in partnership with local business and trade organisations.
- c. Biodiversity and grass cutting.** Linking to the review of grass cutting further information and educational information needs to be shared with residents and parishes including the impact on biodiversity that changes to the cutting regimes have made.

2.7 **Reverse Vending Machines.** The ESWG is very concerned about the delays to the implementation of the Resources and Waste Strategy (RAWS) in particular the deposit return scheme. It recommends that the Council considers opportunities to pilot a local return scheme using "reverse vending machines" in order to increase recycling and help our communities become familiar with the concept before the Government introduce the long-awaited Deposit Return Scheme (DRS) in 2025. Whilst it is challenging to make such schemes work without a national deposit scheme, initial conversations with machine suppliers and companies working in this market show there could be an opportunity to pilot a scheme with support from other partners and sponsors. Whilst details are still being investigated, the cost of an initial 6 month scheme in Bury St Edmunds and Newmarket could be between £2,000 and £4,000. The trial could be extended if, as hoped, the scheme becomes financially self-sustaining. If it doesn't, we can withdraw from the trial after 6 months at minimal cost. Officers can investigate further and prepare a proposal for consideration by the Portfolio Holders for Governance and Regulatory and Operations.

2.8 **Environment performance reporting.** The ESWG is concerned that some of the indicators reported in the Annual Environmental Statement are not

showing the trajectory of improvement needed for the Council to meet its ambition of Net Zero by 2030. It recognises that actions have been identified to move this forward, particularly around fleet and building decarbonisation. However, it is essential that this performance is more closely monitored so it is recommended that key indicators in relation to emissions, business travel and water consumption are added to the quarterly performance reports to Performance and Audit Committee in addition to the cross cutting environmental information already included.

- 2.9 **Housing.** the Environmental Performance of the Housing stock in West Suffolk is of concern, particularly given increasing levels of fuel poverty. 44.76 percent of homes in West Suffolk are EPC band D and below (source: Suffolk Observatory) and the [Suffolk-Local-Energy-Asset-Representation-Report](#) (2022) showed across Babergh and West Suffolk (the study area) noted that at least 80 per cent of the dwellings in the Suffolk West and Babergh sub-region that would benefit from additional loft insulation. Of particular concern are the 42,000 dwellings (34 per cent of the housing stock) that have no loft insulation recorded. This issue should be referenced in the Council's new Housing Strategy ensuring there is a coherent approach to improving the environmental performance of housing across the district.
- 2.10 The ESWG noted that the [Warm Homes Suffolk](#) scheme already provides grants to low-income households and a new interest free loan scheme is about to be introduced across Suffolk, supported by a government grant. That scheme is currently being procured and it is recommended that once the details are confirmed officers investigate if there is scope to further support the scheme or deliver a local scheme so that more West Suffolk residents can benefit. Further, once that scheme is confirmed there is active communication undertaken to West Suffolk residents. In addition, officers should seek to scope and improve signposting to all sources of funding available to residents – and this should feature in the communications and website enhancement plan.
- 2.11 **Local Plan.** The emerging West Suffolk Local Plan provides a crucial opportunity to set policy that enhances the performance of new homes in Suffolk. The ESWG has welcomed the commitment to sustainability in as a result of consultation at an earlier stage of the plan and will feed in its comments through the Local Plan Working Group (LPWG). It is important that the Council is ambitious in its environmental policies and ensures that opportunities to reduce carbon emissions (and running costs) are not missed. In addition, it is recommended that the LPWG and Cabinet actively investigate the opportunity to set the Council's minimum biodiversity net gain target for new developments at 20 per cent.
- 2.12 **Renewables:** The ESWG noted the excellent work that had been undertaken on solar across the district and is interested in opportunities to further develop the approach to renewables. The Council should investigate opportunities for the development of renewable energy sources including wind and hydrogen.

- 2.13 **Decarbonisation Initiatives Fund and LED Streetlights:** The ESWG noted that Cabinet will be considering a separate proposal to create a Decarbonisation Initiatives Fund, with the first call on that fund to create a grant scheme for the upgrade of streetlights owned by town and parish councils. The ESWG supports this proposal and notes both the energy saving (up to 80%) and carbon saving this scheme will provide.
- 2.14 **Reducing impact of our activities:** Across the Council all moves to reduce carbon should be progressed. In particular the Development Management function should continue to reduce promote the paperless approach to residents, Parish councils and developers and committees should be run as paperless by default. The use of virtual or hybrid meetings should continue to be championed, ensuring that the technology supports this to work effectively. At the same time the Council should ensures that it understands the impact of its digital footprint.
- 2.15 **Decision making:** While there are a range of specific actions the Council can take, it is important that a clear evaluation and consideration of environmental impacts is undertaken when the Council makes any key decisions. The current report format provides for this to be done via a short paragraph at the end of each report (under implications). The Council should look at how it makes this consideration more robust, so clear information is provided regarding the environmental implications of all decisions moving forward, including having regard to the Council’s new Biodiversity Duty.

3. Alternative options that have been considered

- 3.1 The Council could continue to deliver its previous action plan with no changes. However, this will miss opportunities to support businesses and communities with their own environmental improvement and carbon reduction activities.
- 3.2 There is no “do nothing” option. The ESWG members are all aware of national and international reports and events, in particular the reports of the [Climate Change Committee \(theccc.org.uk\)](https://theccc.org.uk).

4. Consultation and engagement undertaken

- 4.1 The EPWG has not undertaken business or community engagement, but has referenced events undertaken across Suffolk, including Suffolk’s first Youth Climate Conference that was held in Bury St Edmunds in July. A summary of the event can be found here: [Young People Make Their Voices Heard At Suffolk's First Youth Climate Conference – Green Suffolk](#)

5. Risks associated with the proposals

- 5.1 There is an ongoing risk that the resources required to implement the actions will not be available. However, this risk will be monitored by the

Environment Management Group, with any opportunities for securing external resources monitored and pursued as appropriate, and Cabinet advised of any serious delays in implementation or resource requirements.

6. Implications arising from the proposals

- 6.1 Financial - There are no specific financial implications arising from this report. Where individual projects require investment, this will be a separate report.
- 6.2 Legal compliance - No implications
- 6.3 Personal data processing - No implications
- 6.4 Equalities - The working group expect that equality impacts should be positive as a result of their work, however this would need to be subject to further assessment based on each action.
- 6.5 Crime and disorder - No implications
- 6.6 Safeguarding - No implications
- 6.7 Environment or sustainability - The recommendations will have a positive impact on the environment.
- 6.8 HR or staffing - No implications from this report; further activity may require additional staff to support, and this will be subject to business cases or separate requests.
- 6.9 Changes to existing policies - No implications
- 6.10 External organisations (such as businesses, community groups) - The working group's recommendations specifically state potential partner organisations that will need to be involved with implementing recommendations. Officers maintain a dialogue with partner organisations

7. Appendices referenced in this report

- 7.1 Appendix A – Environment and Climate Change Action Plan Update

8. Background documents associated with this report

- 8.1 14 January 2020 Cabinet Report number: [CAB/WS/20/009](#)
- 8.2 21 July 2020 Cabinet Report number: [CAB/WS/20/045](#)
- 8.3 20 July 2021 Cabinet Report number: [CAB/WS/21/032](#)
- 8.4 19 July 2022 Cabinet Report number: [CAB/WS/22/040](#)