



CABINET - 7 FEBRUARY 2025

REVISED ENVIRONMENT STRATEGY AND NET ZERO ACTION PLANS

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF ENVIRONMENT AND TRANSPORT

PART A

Purpose of the Report

1. The purpose of this report is to seek the Cabinet's approval for the revised Environment Strategy Action Plan (attached as Appendix A), and the revised 2035 Net Zero Council Action Plan and 2050 Net Zero Leicestershire Action Plan (attached as Appendix B).
2. The Cabinet is also asked to approve a common Mink Control Policy (attached as Appendix C) for all members of the Leicestershire and Rutland Water Vole Steering Group and to allow for delegated responsibility to be given to the Director of Environment and Transport to approve any future similar control policies in relation to invasive and non-native species.

Recommendations

3. The Cabinet is recommended to approve:
 - a) The revised Environment Strategy Action Plan, 2035 Net Zero Council Action Plan and 2050 Net Zero Leicestershire Action Plan;
 - b) The common Mink Control Policy for all members of the Leicestershire and Rutland Water Vole Steering Group;
 - c) The provision of delegated responsibility to the Director of Environment and Transport to approve any future similar control policies in relation to invasive and non-native species, following consultation with the Cabinet Lead Member and relevant service areas within the Council.

Reasons for Recommendation

4. The revised Action Plans are more realistic and achievable and reflect the current financial position of the Council and the current available staff resources.

5. The revised Action Plans allow for supplementary actions to be undertaken where additional staff capacity and/or financial resources are found to be available.
6. The Mink Control Policy allows for a common policy across Leicestershire and Rutland which will increase the effectiveness of any collective efforts made to control the invasive non-native species of Mink.
7. The provision of delegated responsibility to the Director of Environment and Transport to approve any future similar control policies in relation to invasive and non-native species, following consultation with relevant service areas within the Council will enable quicker and effective implementation of such policies in the County. Consultation with the Cabinet Lead Member will ensure that any public interest issues are picked up.

Timetable for Decisions (including Scrutiny)

8. The Environment and Climate Change Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered a report on 22 January 2025 and its comments will be reported to the Cabinet on 7 February 2025.
9. The Mink Control Policy will be put into practice once all members of the Water Vole Steering Group have approved the policy, so a common, co-ordinated and more effective approach can be taken.

Policy Framework and Previous Decisions

10. The Cabinet approved the Environment Strategy 2018-2030 on 6 July 2018. The vision of the Strategy is that “Leicestershire County Council will minimise the environmental impacts of its own activities and will contribute to the improvement of the wider environment through local action. The Council will continue to play a significant role in protecting and enhancing the environment of Leicestershire, meeting the challenges and opportunities of climate change, and seeking to embed environmental sustainability into both social and economic development in the county.”
11. A revised Strategy was subsequently adopted by the County Council on 8 July 2020, to account for the Council’s declaration of a Climate Emergency in May 2019.
12. The climate emergency declaration committed the Authority to achieving net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 for its own operations. Furthermore, the declaration committed the Council to working with partners and lobbying government to work towards limiting global warming to less than 1.5°C in line with the Paris Agreement.
13. Subsequently, the County Council signed up to the UK100 Race to Zero Pledge and committed to achieving net zero emissions for Leicestershire by 2045.

14. In December 2022, the County Council adopted the 2030 Net Zero Council Action Plan and the 2045 Net Zero Leicestershire Strategy and Action Plan.
15. Since these commitments were made the Council has been subjected to an increasingly constrained financial position with a significant deficit forecast. In February 2024, in light of this and the estimated increased resources required to reach net zero, the Council resolved to extend the net zero targets to 2035 for Council operations and 2050 for Countywide emissions, in line with the national target.
16. National legislation is in place to support the UK's transition to net zero – the Climate Change Act 2008 (2050 Target Amendment) Order 2019 commits the Government to a 100% reduction of greenhouse gas emissions by 2050 compared with 1990 levels.

Resource Implications

17. The revised Action Plans have been produced assuming that the level of core revenue resource available remains constant.
18. The Director of Law and Governance and the Director of Corporate Resources have been consulted on the content of this report.

Circulation under the Local Issues Alert Procedure

19. This report will be circulated to all members.

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PART B

Background

20. To enable the County Council to reach its environmental commitments, significant investment will be required, both in terms of financial and staff resources.
21. The change to the net zero targets, coupled with the inability of the Council to support additional resource requests to deliver associated activity, has led to the need to revisit the action plans for the Environment and Net Zero Strategies.
22. In addition, there have been a number of new statutory duties that have arisen from the Environment Act 2021, which place new or additional responsibilities, and in some cases additional financial and staff resource requirements, on local authorities. These include the requirement to develop a Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS), the introduction of Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG), the strengthened biodiversity duty and new biodiversity reporting requirements. These have resulted in new activity to be led or supported by the Council.

Prioritisation Exercise and Efficiency Review

23. In light of the above, a prioritisation exercise and efficiency review have been undertaken of all activity delivered by the Environment and Carbon Reduction teams to ensure the revised Action Plans are deliverable by the staff resource that is available.
24. The efficiency review was undertaken by the Council's Transformation Unit and found that the Carbon Reduction team and Environment team are working efficiently and prioritising effectively and recognised that the environment agenda is bigger than the resource capacity available. It identified a few small-scale opportunities for the service area to consider which may support the environment agenda going forward but noted that prioritisation work would be required which will reflect delivery of activity against existing capacity.
25. The prioritisation exercise established the following points:
 - a) Overall, the teams are largely doing the most important actions already and were working beyond capacity.
 - b) The prioritisation exercise has clearly demonstrated that there is no or limited capacity to undertake some additional key activities such as climate adaptation, sourcing external funding and organisational development to ensure that Council staff are capable of embedding environmental priorities within their service delivery.
 - c) Due to restricted resources, the risk remains of the County Council not meeting its net zero targets and other environmental commitments and duties.

26. The prioritisation exercise highlighted several areas of activity that could be reduced in order to release some staff capacity:
- a) A reduction in reporting to allow more time to focus on delivering environmental actions.
 - b) Consider necessity for ISO14001 certification (international Environmental Management System standard).
 - c) Ensure a light touch internal governance approach to delivering the environment agenda.
 - d) Being more selective with certain activities such as consultation responses and partnership working where this has limited direct impact on delivery of strategic commitments.

Revised Action Plans

27. The approach to revising the Environment Strategy and Net Zero Action Plans has taken account of the results of the prioritisation exercise and has been based on what can be delivered by the existing staff resources rather than what is needed to meet the Council's environmental targets or commitments.
28. The following principles were taken into account:
- a) The review has been centred on the Environment Strategy being the overarching strategy with the Net Zero Strategies being sub-strategies.
 - b) The review has been careful to mitigate duplication within each strategy - with the Environment Strategy Action Plan containing the overarching actions while the Net Zero Action Plans contain the more detailed actions.
 - c) The revised Action Plans include new statutory duties and actions such as the LNRS, Biodiversity Duty, and BNG.
29. The revised Environment Strategy Action Plan can be found in Appendix A of this report. The Action Plan covers the five-year period from 2025-2030 and will be refreshed annually. The revision has resulted in many actions being high level in nature and highlights the importance of working with partners in order to deliver this large-scale agenda. It does not include a small number of actions which are important for the Council to undertake, but which are currently not deliverable within the present staff resources available, such as for climate adaptation. Where spare capacity or additional funding can be found, such actions will be progressed.
30. The Action Plans ensure that the Council delivers its statutory and legal / contractual duties such as the LNRS, the strengthened biodiversity duty, Tree Preservation Orders, as well as projects that attract external funding such as Leicestershire Collaborate to Accelerate Net Zero.
31. The revised Environment Strategy Action Plan continues to include actions in relation to the Council's environment and climate change risks, the maintenance of the Environmental Management System, and environmental performance and reporting system and reviewing of governance structures on the environment.

32. The Environment Strategy is seen as the overarching strategy on the environment. The revised Environment Strategy Action Plan includes actions to deliver in-house waste management services and the Leicestershire Resources and Waste Strategy, to support delivery of the environmental actions within the Council's fourth Local Transport Plan, and to work with the Business and Skills Partnership to deliver opportunities that support a green, low carbon economy in Leicestershire. The detail of these is now within the respective strategies and action plans that cover these thematic areas. The full revised Environment Strategy Action Plan can be found at Appendix A.
33. The revised 2035 Net Zero Council Action Plan and the 2050 Net Zero Leicestershire Action Plan can be found at Appendix B. These Action Plans have been developed in response to the Council's difficult financial position, resulting in the need to stretch the targets from the original dates of 2030 and 2045 respectively. In addition, the current staff capacity does not match the requirement in order to deliver this broad and complex agenda and therefore activities have been reprioritised to take account of what is realistically deliverable.
34. The new Net Zero Action Plans have been condensed down from 234 to 55 actions. Both Action Plans also have a five-year timeframe for delivery and provide an indication of when activities are planned to be carried out over this period, rather than an unspecified timeframe as per the original Action Plans. Additionally, the new 2050 Net Zero Leicestershire Action Plan focusses on activities that can be delivered by the County Council rather than including all partner-led activities as in the original Action Plan. However, the Action Plan takes account of the fundamental need to work with others in partnership on certain actions.
35. Where actions have been completed or moved into 'business as usual', these have been archived (such as the "Development of the Freeport around East Midlands Airport integrating low carbon solutions and pilots"). Any actions that have a delivery timeframe over five years have also been removed and added to a supplementary 'long list' (such as to "Invest in additional research to improve understanding of the carbon impact of different land management"). These actions will also be reviewed annually and, if it is possible to commence them sooner, they will be moved onto the 5-year plan.
36. Some of the detailed actions in the original Action Plans have been reviewed and are now considered sub-activities of other higher-level actions. Where this is the case, they have been captured on a detailed working list which officers will use to support work planning and action delivery.

Monitoring and Reporting

37. The prioritisation exercise and efficiency reviews have made clear that staff are currently working at full capacity on the correct activities and that in order to release more capacity to cover key areas, such as fundraising and climate adaptation, parts of the current workload need to be reduced. An area identified

for this reduction is reporting. The net zero agenda has a previously requested enhanced level of reporting on detailed Net Zero Action Plan activities which, if removed from the Annual Reporting process, would release staff time towards delivery of these other key work areas.

38. It is therefore proposed that action plan reporting will be covered on a regular basis as part of staff Team Plans. This will provide more regular and closer monitoring of activities at a team level and ensure that risks and issues are picked up and mitigated at an early stage and allow managers more opportunity to support and drive forward actions.
39. Reporting on an annual basis, including to the Environment and Climate Change Overview and Scrutiny Committee, will still take place, but this will take the form of shorter and more concise Annual Performance Report which will summarise the key deliverables from these Action Plans within the report.
40. Other opportunities to make efficiencies in the monitoring and reporting processes will also be explored in order to release staff capacity that can be better used on delivery of actions.

Mink Control Policy

41. The Council is a member of the Leicestershire and Rutland Water Vole Steering Group. The group has a vision 'to facilitate the conservation of Water Voles across Leicestershire and Rutland by taking actions that will increase their numbers and allow them to disperse more widely across the two counties'.
42. The group wishes to introduce a common Mink Control Policy for all members, so that there is an agreed and consistent approach to the control of Mink, therefore increasing its effectiveness.
43. The Mink Control Policy proposes to follow best practice, as set out by the Waterlife Recovery Trust, in the strategic and humane control of Mink that ensures the maximum benefits for Water Voles. The best practice guidance has been created by a panel of national experts and practitioners in wildlife management and follows current legislation and best practice. Any projects to control Mink must be well planned, ecologically sound, properly resourced, time limited, monitored, and resourced. Only live-capture traps are to be used, and any non-target species released unharmed. Mink control will be co-ordinated in parallel with habitat restoration projects to provide long-term protection for Water Vole. Further details of the Mink Control Policy can be found in Appendix C.
44. Subject to the Cabinet's approval of the Policy, it is proposed that delegated powers be given to the Director of Environment and Transport to approve any future similar control policies in relation to invasive and non-native species, following consultation with the Cabinet Lead Member and relevant service areas within the Council.

Comments of the Environment and Climate Change Overview and Scrutiny Committee

45. The Environment and Climate Change Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered the report on 22 January 2025 and its comments will be reported to the Cabinet on 7 February 2025.

Conclusion

46. In order to support the delivery of the revised Action Plans, it is recommended that an emphasis be placed on staff time being used to drive forward actions with a reduction in detailed reporting at a political level. Therefore, it is recommended that annual updates of detailed activity on individual actions be monitored using departmental Team Plans. Officers will prepare an annual overview of key highlights of the Actions Plans which will be submitted as part of the Annual Environmental Performance report to the Environment and Climate Change Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

Equality Implications

47. Equalities Impact Assessments (EIAs) were undertaken in full when the original Environment Strategy Action Plan, the 2035 Net Zero Council Action Plans and the 2050 Net Zero Leicestershire Action Plans were developed and subsequently adopted by the Cabinet. Therefore, as the Action Plans have not been altered in their scope (the actions have just been reduced or condensed), it has been agreed with the departmental equalities officers that additional EIAs will not be required.

Human Rights Implications

48. No human right implications were found when the original Environment Strategy Action Plan, the 2035 Net Zero Council Action Plans and the 2050 Net Zero Leicestershire Action Plans were developed and subsequently adopted by the Cabinet. There are no changes to the revised Action Plans that would have human rights implications.

Environmental Implications

49. The report demonstrates how the County Council intends to take forward environmental activity to deliver mitigation on climate change, support the circular economy and enhance nature. The Action Plans which are appended demonstrate how the Council intends to use its limited resources effectively to do this.

Health Implications

50. A Health and Wellbeing Impact Assessment has been completed in relation to the revised Action Plans. This can be found in Appendix D.

Risk Assessment

51. A risk assessment of the revised Actions Plans was carried out and the key risks identified were as follows:

- a) **Risk of not meeting net zero targets and other environmental commitments** – the revised Action Plans have been developed based on current available staff and financial resources rather than the level of resources that would be required to deliver on the targets and commitments. Therefore, there is a risk of not meeting them; however, where the opportunity arises to access external funding or capacity becomes available, this will be utilised to progress additional activity.
- b) **Reputational damage** – this could arise from not meeting the environmental targets and commitments as set out above. This will be mitigated by presenting a more realistic plan for what can be achieved and by utilising external funding or additional capacity where it becomes available.
- c) **Risk of reducing partnership working opportunities due to lower ambition** – some partners and funders may be less willing to work with the Council due to the lower ambition of the Action Plans. This will be mitigated in part by explaining to partners and funders the reasons for the lower ambition, and seeking to work collectively where possible to achieve common objectives.

Background Papers

Environment Strategy 2018-2030

<https://www.leicestershire.gov.uk/sites/default/files/field/pdf/2020/7/13/Environment-Strategy-2018-2030-delivering-a-better-future.pdf>

2030 Net Zero Council Action Plan

<https://www.leicestershire.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2022-12/net-zero-council-action-plan.pdf>

2045 Net Zero Leicestershire Strategy & Action Plan

<https://www.leicestershire.gov.uk/environment-and-planning/net-zero/net-zero-leicestershire-strategy-action-plan-and-reports>

Action for Nature document -

<https://www.leicestershire.gov.uk/sites/default/files/field/pdf/2021/8/16/action-for-nature-strategic-approach-to-biodiversity.pdf>

Appendices

Appendix A: Revised Environment Strategy Action Plan

Appendix B: Revised 2035 and 2050 Net Zero Action Plans

Appendix C: Mink Control Policy

Appendix D: Health and Wellbeing Impact Assessment

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