

OPEN

## **Economy and Growth Committee**

**11 March 2025**

### **Carbon Neutral Update and Mersey Forest Partnership**

---

**Report of: Peter Skates, Director of Growth and Enterprise**

**Report Reference No: EG/23/24-25**

**Ward(s) Affected: All**

**For Decision or Scrutiny: Decision**

#### **Purpose of Report**

- 1 In line with Cheshire East Council's 'Green' Corporate Plan priority, a target was adopted for the council to be carbon neutral at Full Council on 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2019. Subsequently, a target was set for the borough of Cheshire East to be carbon neutral by 2045 and the council to be carbon neutral with a minimum of offset by 2030 at the Full Council meeting of 20<sup>th</sup> October 2021.
- 2 This report provides an update of progress against the council's internal target for carbon neutrality with a minimum of offset by 2030. Nature based insetting activity provides a local source of offsetting for those emissions which cannot be eliminated by 2030.
- 3 This report also outlines the Councils partnership with the Mersey Forest which enables woodland creation and tree plantings as part of the Council's nature based insetting activity. Approval is sought for continued participation within this partnership.
- 4 Also appended to this report is the first Wider Borough Carbon Neutral Action Plan for Cheshire East and a summary of engagement and consultation for the Mersey Forest Plan refresh for 2025.

- 5 Approval is also sought for the acceptance of a Trees for Climate grant administered by The Mersey Forest to enable a 33ha tree planting scheme in the borough for the purpose of providing carbon offset.

## **Executive Summary**

- 6 The council continues to make progress towards its target of being carbon neutral for its own operations by 2030 with several projects being within the delivery phase. The programme remains on course to meet its target, but this remains contingent on all potential projects being delivered.
- 7 Since baselining of the council's carbon position was undertaken in 2019 the council has reduced its own emissions by 15.3%. The Council now offsets almost 52% of its emissions through insetting projects within the borough.
- 8 The council has been working closely with The Mersey Forest to develop and deliver woodland creation projects to support natural insetting. The current partnership agreement concludes in 2025. This report seeks approval for continued participation within the partnership and for the acceptance of a Trees for Climate grant administered by The Mersey Forest to enable a 33ha tree planting scheme in the borough.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The Economy and Growth Committee is recommended to:

1. Note the progress made towards the council's carbon neutral target and the Wider Borough Carbon Action Plan 2025-30.
2. Accept the Trees for Climate grant of £570,719.50 for woodland creation on the Batherton Estate.
3. Delegate authority to the Director of Growth and Enterprise, in consultation with Governance, Compliance and Monitoring Officer and the s151 Officer, to take all necessary steps to enter into legal agreements with The Mersey Forest Partnership.

## **Background**

### **Overall Position - Carbon**

- 9 Since baselining of the council's carbon position was undertaken in 2019 the council has reduced its own emissions by 15.3%. The council now offsets almost 52% of its emissions through insetting projects within the borough.

- 10 Overall the council has achieved 60% of its target to reach carbon neutrality.
- 11 The council has enough projects in development and delivery to be confident that it can reach its target. However, this is dependent on all projects being completed as planned. These projects include two large woodland creation schemes, electrification of food waste collections and the remaining planned phases of fleet decarbonisation.

## **Carbon Reduction**

### **12 Street Lighting**

- (a) Work continues to replace any street lights with light-emitting diodes (LED) units. Most lights within the borough have now been replaced but the target is to reach 100%.
- (b) Illuminated bollards are being replaced by non-illuminated bollards as an energy saving measure, these bollards are made from recycled plastic to reduce their carbon impact.

### **13 Building Gas and Electricity**

- (a) The work to decarbonise buildings across the corporate estate is continuing at pace where projects are being completed within budget despite the challenging economic conditions.
- (b) Recent work includes the commissioning of solar photovoltaic (PV) at Jordangate MSCP where significant solar surplus will generate income for the Council. The total building mounted solar PV capacity is now at 1.6 MWp with a solar yield around 1.3 GWh per annum.
- (c) Delamere House will see air source heat pumps (ASHP) provide heat to the building following a package of measures that saw LED lighting upgrade, new double-glazing windows and an upgrade of the heat emitters.
- (d) There are fourteen ASHP installations that were installed where the electricity supply upgrade had posed a significant challenge. Some of the schemes that were completed across the libraries and day centres have already demonstrated carbon savings.
- (e) The planning and design phase is nearing completion to introduce further ASHP at Tatton Park, Lyceum Theatre, and Crewe crematorium chapel.

- (f) Following the successful application to the Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme (3c), a further £1.4M of grant funding has been made available for the corporate estate.
- (g) LED lighting schemes are ongoing where recent schemes include libraries and day centres.
- (h) The Trend Building Energy Management System was upgraded to the latest version to ensure corporate buildings heating, ventilation and air conditioning (HVAC) systems can continue to operate at optimum performance levels.
- (i) Provisions are being made for electric vehicle (EV) charging that have seen new chargers at Council offices, leisure centres and car parks whilst supporting a programme to introduce EV charging for the Councils fleet vehicles.
- (j) As the largest energy consumers, the Council continue to work closely with Everybody to better manage energy and water within their leisure facilities.
- (k) The decarbonisation of buildings programme is anticipated to result in CO<sub>2</sub> savings of around 900 tonnes per annum following LED lighting upgrades, solar PV installations, Air Source Heat Pumps, and fabric measures.

#### 14 Fleet

- (a) The Carbon Neutral Action Plan baselined the carbon from council fleet at 3,543tCO<sub>2</sub>e and targeted a reduction of 30% to 2,498tCO<sub>2</sub>e.
- (b) Our work time charge network continues to improve; the council now operates a total of 23 dual charge points with 5 more dual charge points due for commissioning. These are located at Delamere House, Macclesfield Town Hall and Westfields, plus the Environmental Hub, Jordan Gate multi storey car park as well as Macclesfield & Congleton leisure centres with additional points coming online in Crewe Town Centre. Use of publicly available chargers at Macclesfield Leisure Centre has increased significantly.
- (c) We have seen the council business mileage steadily rise since the end of the pandemic. The Car Club is now in its third year with over 46,000 miles travelling by 40 regular users saving over 15 tCO<sub>2</sub>e. Other measures are in place to reduce emissions from business miles with a green travel plan in development with HR as well as seeking partnership for an Electric Car salary sacrifice scheme.

- (d) Funding was secured through the MTFs for the electrification of up to 90 vehicles. Recent reduction in fleet sizes at the Environmental Hub through cost saving efforts means that the total will likely be less on completion of the project.
- (e) This project has been split into three phases representing the charge infrastructure locations. At Cledford Lane now has 22 dedicated charge bays within the operational area as well as a 120kW rapid charger for shift time boost charging.

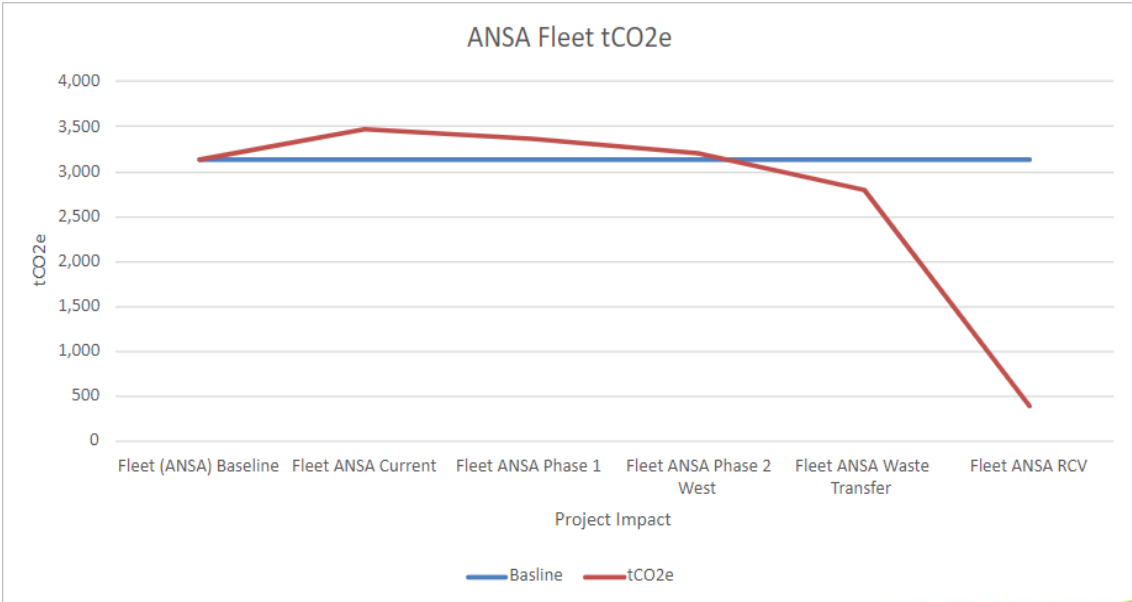


- (f) Phase 1A of the fleet electrification project has now been delivered. The street cleansing, waste collection and bin delivery teams based in Cledford Lane now have 11 E-Transit tippers of various configurations and 5 small team leader vans. We were also able to convert 6 of the 7 Community Enforcement Teams vehicles to electric and they are now operating. There is enough infrastructure at Cledford Lane to electrify the remaining 5 street cleansing vehicles once a market option for Crewe cab vehicles becomes available.



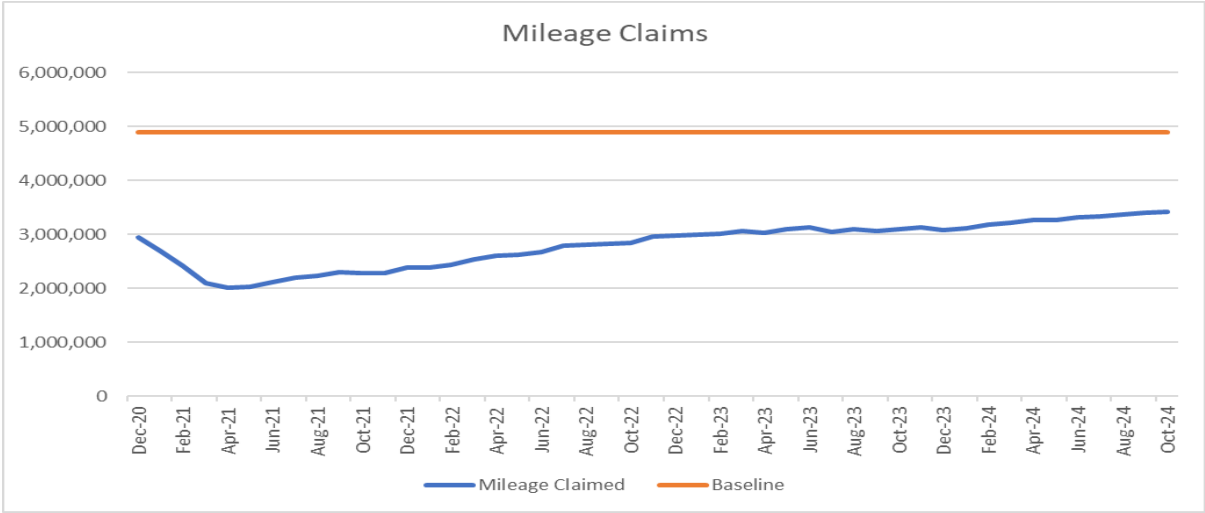
- (g) Phase 2 is currently having the infrastructure designed and with the fleet being specified. There remains a challenge of the capabilities of the electric offerings ability to tow, without significant limitations on range. This remains a key requirement for our ground's maintenance teams. A first trial was unsuccessful; however, we anticipate more market options in the coming year.
- (h) Phase 3 has now reached delivery stage with the supporting infrastructure for a new substation located on our west park depot now delivered. This will give the site the necessary power to support fleet electrification with up to 24 vehicles now specified and quoted for by the market.
- (i) The waste transfer station project has gained approval for a feasibility study for a fully electrified operation. In the interim period, through discussions with our current Energy from Waste contract, it may now be possible to cease the need for processing waste at all removing an energy intensive process in our waste management. This could save up to 412 tCO<sub>2</sub>e per year.
- (j) The RCV fleet remains challenging, however technology has progressed and there now could be solutions which would meet our requirements. Trials are being arranged for this and as a solution to the upcoming food waste collection requirements.
- (k) Whilst progress has been made on reducing the council's emissions from its fleet, there continues to be significant

challenges in meeting the council's requirements for fleet. The graph below shows how each project will decrease emissions from the ANSA fleet vehicles.



15 Business Travel

- (a) Although business travel remains lower than baseline, due mainly to the changes in working practices arising from the Covid-19 pandemic, it is noted that the miles driven has trended upwards for the last few years as the graph below shows.



- (b) The council has taken steps to refresh the Travel Mode Hierarchy to ensure that staff have a focus on sustainability when making travel mode choices.



## 16 Waste and Water

- (a) Waste and water represent a very small percentage of council emissions.
- (b) Focus continues on encouraging recycling in all council offices and minimising the use of single use plastics.

## Carbon Inset

## 17 Green Electricity

- (a) Cheshire East Council has continued its policy to purchase 100% Renewable Energy Guarantees of Origin (REGO) backed green electricity.
- (b) The current contract is in place until 2027.
- (c) As more heat becomes electrically generated the purchase and generation of green electricity provides more carbon savings to the council.

## 18 Energy Generation

- (a) The council's first solar farm was opened in September 2024.







- (b) The solar farm at Leighton Grange is a 4.1MW array and is expected to generate approximately 3,750KWH per annum.
- (c) The electricity generated will supply the council's composting plant with the residual power being exported to the grid.
- (d) The Carbon Action Plan provided for a minimum of 10MW of ground mounted solar, therefore a second solar farm will need to be developed.
- (e) The Environment and Communities committee has previously provided agreement to develop and build out a second solar farm on Cheshire East Council owned land. It is anticipated that this will be a grid only connected scheme and will be brought forward for a planning decision during the next financial year.

## 19 Natural Sequestration

- (a) The Carbon Neutral Action Plan targeted an inset of 3,529 tCO<sub>2</sub>e annually from nature-based solutions.
- (b) To date projects totalling 53 hectares of council owned land have been completed to achieve 47.5% of this target.
- (c) Woodland creation and tree plantings have contributed significantly to this achievement, with over 108,000 trees planted to date across a variety of different sites e.g. schools, countryside parks, roadside, pocket parks and community plantings.
- (d) In the 2023/24 season, a total of 28,558 trees were planted on a 15.5 hectare site at Long Lane, Goostrey.



- (e) During the 2024/25 season a further 35.5 hectares of council owned land will be planted with trees bringing the total to 88 hectares providing a total of 1,671 tonnes of carbon offset.
- (f) Each new woodland has been designed to allow for existing natural features, utilities, historical features and consideration of neighbours. There is no public access to the new woodlands, apart from one site where there are existing public rights of way.
- (g) Further tree planting projects are planned for the 2025/26 planting season on 73 hectares of council owned land to support the inseting target. These pipeline woodland projects are anticipated to benefit from further Trees for Climate grant funding through the Mersey Forest Partnership.

## 20 The Mersey Forest Partnership

- (a) The Mersey Forest is one of 15 Community Forests in England, covering a designated area across Merseyside and Cheshire. The Forest Partnership comprises a core group of local authorities, supported by the Forestry Commission, Environment Agency, and Natural England.
- (b) Since 1994, the Mersey Forest has been responsible for a long-term environmental regeneration programme that delivers a wide range of benefits, aligning with the Council's strategic priorities, including:
  - Climate Change: Contributing to net zero targets through carbon sequestration.
  - Biodiversity: Enabling nature recovery, habitat creation and enhanced connectivity.
  - Community Wellbeing: Enhancing green spaces, improving health and wellbeing, particularly in areas of deprivation.
  - External Funding: Leveraging significant external investment to support local priorities.
- (c) Cheshire East Council have been a core partner in the Mersey Forest since 2020, actively participating in the Steering Group, approving strategic plans and budgets, and supporting the delivery of one of the UK's largest and longest-running environmental transformation projects.
- (d) The scale and scope of activity needed to meet climate and nature objectives locally and nationally can only realistically be delivered by joined up action. The Mersey Forest Partnership has shown its efficacy in enabling collaborative action to help tackle some of our most pressing issues.
- (e) Over the past 30 years, the Partnership has:
  - Created 3,600 hectares of new woodland.
  - Planted nearly 10 million trees.
  - Improved woodland management across the Mersey Forest area.
  - Engaged local communities in environmental improvements.
  - Transformed over 10,500 hectares of land into community woodland and associated habitats.
  - Provided 600km of new access routes.
  - Delivered 42,000 community events.

- Leveraged over £150 million of external funding, consistently achieving a 6:1 funding ratio.
  - Pioneered initiatives such as the Natural Health Service and the Thrive education programme.
  - Implemented flood mitigation measures.
  - Led research and development, including the "Ideas Lab" and innovative natural capital data assessment.
- (f) The Mersey Forest Plan provides the strategic framework for the programme and has driven substantial progress since its inception in 1994. A wide range of stakeholders contribute to the delivery of the Mersey Forest Plan. ([www.merseyforest.org.uk/plan](http://www.merseyforest.org.uk/plan))
- (g) A refreshed Forest Plan has been developed over the past two years. The Steering Group and an advisory group of over 40 key stakeholders have helped to ensure that it incorporates the best available science and reflects current policy. The refreshed plan retains the original vision while incorporating updated objectives to address contemporary challenges e.g. representation from the Groundswell project to feed in health information, landowner perspectives through the NFU, and young people's voices through the Future and Digital Voices of the Future programmes.
- (h) Effective delivery of the Forest Plan relies on local adoption and the continued collaboration of the wider Forest Partnership, supported by the Mersey Forest Team, to secure external funding.
- (i) Partnership in the Mersey Forest delivers significant financial benefits and specialised technical expertise, enabling the Council to access external funding to deliver local priorities and reduce the burden on Council resources. To date the partnership has leveraged £1.482m of grant funding for the Council through the Trees for Climate grant and a further £0.137m from the Urban Tree Challenge fund along with valuable professional design and forestry support.
- (j) The Trees for Climate grant funding administered by The Mersey Forest has enabled woodland creation to take place across five sites and a grant is now offered for a sixth woodland creation site on the Batherton Estate. This 33ha tree planting project would be delivered during the 2025/26 planting season.
- (k) The current Partnership Agreement expires on 31st March 2025. To enable the Council to continue its partnership with the Mersey Forest, including access to future grant funding for pipeline woodland creation and tree plantings, a new partnership agreement for the period April 2025 to March 2030 will be required.

The partnership fee is £20,000 annually and is accounted for in existing revenue budgets.

## 21 Peat

- (a) CEC commissioned a desk top review to identify any recorded areas of peat on council owned land. The review identified several sites of potential peat, however the majority of sites presented constraints that meant that it would not be possible or practical to rewet and restore those areas.
- (b) The review did indicate that peat was present on a site that had already been identified for natural insetting. However, field investigations conducted by Mersey Forest and Natural England concluded that deep peat was not present, and restoration was therefore not viable.
- (c) Information from the desk top review will be added to the council's internal GIS system to flag the necessity for further investigation where peat is indicated.
- (d) The 1.5 hectares of peat that was previously rewetted at Pastures Wood farm is being monitored annually and any adjustments to water levels or removal of scrub arranged as necessary. The change from pasture to arable farming on the surrounding land has impacted the site and the level of maintenance required to maintain water levels and manage scrub has increased.
- (e) The Pastures Wood peat restoration project was funded with Section 106 funds plus a capital contribution. Currently, there is little grant funding available for peat restoration and most is only applicable to landscape size projects. In order to be effective, any restoration scheme needs to allow funding for future maintenance.

## Wider Borough

- 22 The council's Environment and Communities Committee approved the adoption of the Wider Borough Carbon Action Plan 2025-30 in January of 2025.
- 23 This action plan (Appendix 1) provides the framework through which the council will seek to engage with partners to encourage and enable the decarbonisation of buildings, transport and businesses throughout the borough over the next five years.

## Consultation and Engagement

- 24 Full public consultation was undertaken to inform the wider borough action plan. A copy of the consultation report can be found at [Carbon Action Plan Consultation](#)
- 25 Appendix 2 provides a summary of the engagement and consultation conducted by the Mersey Forest on the Forest Plan refresh 2025. This includes public consultation between 23<sup>rd</sup> January and 2<sup>nd</sup> March 2025 [Our Plan page of our new look website](#)

## Reasons for Recommendations

- 26 The council has a corporate objective to be green and targets for the council to be carbon neutral by 2030 and the borough to be carbon neutral by 2045. It will not be possible to achieve the carbon neutral target without continuing to take actions as described in both action plans.
- 27 Cheshire East Council needs to work in partnership with other organisations in order to achieve its carbon neutral ambitions. The partnership with the Mersey Forest Partnership is a good example of how collaboration with other local authorities and specialist organisations can leverage additional funding and expertise to benefit the Council's carbon ambitions.

## Other Options Considered

Option	Impact	Risk
Not enter into a new Mersey Forest Partnership agreement	This option would remove the council's access to grant funding and technical expertise to support natural inset schemes and remove the Council's influence within the Mersey Forest Partnership area. The cost of being a partner would be eliminated.	Without the support of grant funding and technical expertise through the Mersey Forest Partnership, there is a significant risk that the Council's inseting target would not be attained, which would negatively impact on the council's carbon neutral target.



## **Implications and Comments**

### *Monitoring Officer/Legal*

- 28 As the Report notes, the recommended actions contained within follow on from the decision of Full Council in 2019 to commit to being a carbon neutral Council by 2025 and to influence carbon reductions across the borough. This report updates on progress being made on carbon reduction. With reference to continued membership of The Mersey Forest Partnership; Legal will review the renewal documentation to ensure that there are no material changes from the existing terms; or highlight any points needing to be brought to decision makers' attention.

### *Section 151 Officer/Finance*

- 29 The fees for membership of The Mersey Forest Partnership are budgeted for within Rural and Countryside Management, F810400 and are currently £18,645. From April 2025 they will rise to £20,000 per annum. The additional cost will be met from the Carbon budget, E555010.
- 30 The partnership documentation will need to be reviewed to ensure that there are no additional commitments or potential liabilities not yet identified.
- 31 With regard to the other activities being undertaken under the umbrella of the Carbon Action Plan the service is aware of the Council's financial position and is seeking efficiencies and savings both within Capital and Revenue expenditure. There is a need to balance the need to reduce carbon with financial sustainability. Consequently, some expenditure has been paused or pushed back whilst next steps are considered, and future spend is subject to the council's usual business planning and budgetary processes.
- 32 With regard to tree planting, it is noted that approximately £1.4m of grant funding has been secured. Consideration will need to be given as to how this is accounted for (both from a capital/revenue and a timing perspective) and how it is claimed and spent. It is noted that the grants may take over 10 years to be fully claimed, and that the Council's obligations may only be satisfied after 15 years. As only one grant has been validated as providing funding for 15 years there is a need to properly understand the likely scenarios with tree loss and the need for replacement and ongoing maintenance of the trees and wider sites. It is noted that recent years have seen very wet planting seasons thereby creating difficult ground conditions for planting. We need to understand if these years are outliers or if they are becoming the norm, and what the impact is on tree establishment and maintenance costs. Although several of the areas to be planted are not accessible by the public in the medium

term there is a need to understand the impact upon the Council's insurance premiums.

- 33 Finance will review the Trees for Climate, £570K grant offer relating to the Batherton Estate in more detail when the delegated decision is being taken. However, it is noted that this grant offer will provide funding for the full 15 years of obligation. It will be the responsibility of the service to manage this in such a way that the risk of the Council needing to supplement the grant is minimised. However, with two grants now offering funding for 15 years there is an opportunity for the service to develop internal tree management services.

### *Policy*

- 34 The recommendations within this report are reflective of the priorities within the council's Corporate Plan 2021-25 and the vision for an open, fairer, greener Cheshire East.

<b>An open and enabling organisation</b>	<b>A thriving and sustainable place</b>  <b>A great place for people to live, work and visit</b>  <b>Reduce impact on the environment</b>
--	---

### *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion*

- 35 Individual carbon projects have equality impact assessments completed where relevant.

### *Human Resources*

- 36 No impact is anticipated

### *Risk Management*

- 37 A programme level risk register will be held and owned by the Head of Environmental Services to ensure a wide view of risks is maintained.

### *Rural Communities*

- 38 It is recognised that rural communities have particular needs relating to land use. Rural landowners have been engaged in the Mersey Forest Plan consultation process and the National Farmers Union of England

and Wales (NFU) have been included as a key stakeholder in the Plan development.

- 39 It is recognised that rural communities have different needs with regards to issues such as transport and domestic heating solutions and may require particular focus.
- 40 A need to develop regenerative agricultural practices will particularly impact the rural community.

*Children and Young People including Cared for Children, care leavers and Children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)*

- 41 No specific impact is anticipated.

#### *Public Health*

- 42 It is expected that reductions in carbon emissions and associated pollutants will have a positive impact on public health.

#### *Climate Change*

- 43 The matters within this report are concerned with reducing the council's carbon footprint.

<b>Access to Information</b>	
Contact Officer:	Carole Hyde, Head of Rural and Cultural Economy <a href="mailto:Carole.hyde@cheshireeast.gov.uk">Carole.hyde@cheshireeast.gov.uk</a> Emma Williams, Carbon Manager <a href="mailto:Emma.williams2@cheshireeast.gov.uk">Emma.williams2@cheshireeast.gov.uk</a>
Appendices:	Appendix 1 – Wider Borough Carbon Action Plan 2025-2030  Appendix 2 - Summary of engagement and consultation on The Mersey Forest Plan refresh 2025  Appendix 3 – Summary Grant offer
Background Papers:	<a href="#">Carbon Action Plan Consultation</a>