

Cabinet

Date of Meeting: 05 May 2020

Report Title: Environment Strategy

Portfolio Holder: Cllr Nick Mannion, Environment and Regeneration

Senior Officer: Frank Jordan, Executive Director Place

1. Report Summary

- 1.1. The Council has developed an Environment Strategy to respond to the global threat of climate change and protect and enhance the environment within our borough. Cabinet decided on 10 September 2019 to consult on the draft Environment Strategy.
- 1.2. This report provides a summary of the consultation responses that were received. It summarises the changes to the strategy as result of the consultation and to reflect progress since September.
- 1.3. The report also considers and responds to the notice of motion proposed by Cllr Abel at the Council meeting on 19th December 2019:

Cheshire East Council as part of our commitment to the environment and mitigation of climate change require development of whatever size to incorporate best practice (e.g. passive house) to reduce energy requirements and provide a non-carbon footprint for heating and cooking. Ideally ground source heat pump or equivalents and induction hobs.

Further, the Council to lobby Government to bring the legal requirement forward to the earliest possible date to achieve zero carbon for all new development and conversions.

- 1.4. Council resolved that the motion be referred to Cabinet.

2. Recommendations

2.1. That Cabinet:

- 2.1.1. Approves the draft Environment Strategy, following public consultation, as outlined at appendix One.
- 2.1.2. Authorises the Portfolio Holder for Environment and Regeneration to make any further revisions to the strategy.
- 2.1.3. Supports the spirit of the motion by Cllr Abel, encouraging and looking favourably upon development proposals that include measures to reduce carbon emissions and mitigate climate change, but acknowledge that in the context of current planning policy cannot require best practice; and
- 2.1.4. Agrees that the Council writes to the Secretary of State for the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government advocating that the changes to energy efficiency standards within the Building Regulations, as set out in the Future Homes Standard, requiring new build homes to meet world-leading levels of energy efficiency, be brought forward to the earliest possible date.

3. Reasons for Recommendations

- 3.1. The Council has developed its first Environment Strategy to set out its strategic goals and actions to respond to the global challenge of climate change. In addition, the strategy aims to protect and enhance our local environment.
- 3.2. The Council consulted on its draft Environment Strategy during October and November 2019. Following consideration of the consultation response, the Environment Strategy is recommended to Cabinet to approve and adopt.
- 3.3. In relation to the notice of motion proposed by Cllr Abel, whilst the Council can welcome, encourage, and look favourably upon development which incorporates best practice to reduce carbon emissions the current planning policy framework means that it cannot be required.
- 3.4. Building Regulations are the means by which minimum energy standards in new homes are regulated. Government has committed to introduce the Future Homes Standard in 2025 through Building Regulations which will require new build homes to be future-proofed with low carbon heating and world-leading levels of energy efficiency. Government has also consulted on proposals to improve the energy efficiency of new homes from 2020 as a meaningful and achievable stepping stone to the Future Homes Standard.

- 3.5. Some home-builders are already building to standards above the current regulations and some are already installing low carbon heating systems. However, the Government has acknowledged that not all home-builders are ready to build to higher environmental specifications yet. Furthermore, industry will need to develop the necessary supply chains, skills and construction practices for every home-builder to deliver low-carbon heat, and highly energy efficient new homes.
- 3.6. Current legislation allows local planning authorities to set and apply policies in their local plans which require compliance with energy efficiency standards for new homes that exceed the requirements of the Building Regulations. In 2015 the then government announced that it would introduce an amendment to the Planning and Energy Act that would restrict local authorities from setting higher energy standards for new homes, but this amendment has not yet been commenced. This has led to confusion and uncertainty for both local planning authorities and home builders.
- 3.7. The Cheshire East Local Plan Strategy was adopted in 2017 and in light of the afore-mentioned government announcement did not include policies requiring higher energy efficiency. It did, however, include a policy encouraging the implementation of renewable and low carbon energy (Policy SE 8), and a policy looking favourably upon development that follows the principles of the Energy Hierarchy, and seeks to achieve a high rating under schemes such as BREEAM, CEEQUAL and Building for Life (Policy SE 9).
- 3.8. The draft Site Allocations and Development Policies Document (Local Plan Part 2), includes further proposed policies on climate change mitigation. The Council is currently reviewing this document following the consultation undertaken during Autumn 2019.

4. Other Options Considered

- 4.1. The Council could do nothing, but that would mean that the Council will take no action to protect, sustain and improve the environment in support of local, national and global priorities.

5. Background

- 5.1. The Climate Change Act 2008 introduced a legally binding target for the UK to reduce greenhouse gases by 80% by 2050 against a 1990 baseline. In June 2019 the UK Prime Minister announced a revised target - the UK will cut emissions to net zero by 2050.
- 5.2. The Government published its 25-Year Environment Plan in 2018. Central to this plan is climate change and it sets out its goals for cleaner air and water, thriving plants and animals, and a cleaner, greener country for us all. The Government's Plan acknowledges that it will require work across

society - citizens, businesses, local councils, charities and other non-profit organisations - to make sure that responsible attitudes towards the environment become the norm to secure lasting change.

- 5.3. At the Council meeting on 22 May 2019 the Elected Members of Cheshire East Council approved a Notice of Motion relating to climate change, requesting that a Cheshire East Environmental Strategy is developed and that the Council commits to being carbon neutral by 2025. The Notice of Motion also proposed that the Council worked to encourage all businesses, residents and organisations in Cheshire East to reduce their carbon footprint.
- 5.4. The Council consulted on its draft Environment Strategy during October and November 2019. The consultation received a high number of responses from a wide range of stakeholders, including 384 survey responses, 32 formal written responses, and 54 social media comments. Respondents seemed particularly passionate on the topic.
- 5.5. On the whole, the draft Environment Strategy was well received with very large proportions of respondents agreeing the Strategic Goals were relevant (89%) – this suggests the strategy focuses on the right areas. However, respondents felt more detail and greater urgency is needed for the delivery of a successful Environment Strategy
- 5.6. Respondents called for the council to be clearer in the strategy about what its role would be in tackling the climate emergency, with some calling for the council to lead on this issue throughout the borough. Some suggested a sub-regional Carbon Strategy.
- 5.7. Throughout the consultation respondents highlighted some of the key challenges the council will need to meet to face the climate emergency:
 - 5.7.1. **Economic growth** – respondents felt that economic growth has in many ways only been possible at the expense of the environment, with a “throw-away” economy, increasing populations and constant development. They questioned how the council will balance economic growth with environmental sustainability.
 - 5.7.2. In response to this, the Council has developed a revised Economic Strategy that promotes a ‘sustainable approach’ to growth. In addition delivering sustainable infrastructure and sustainable business environments in the Borough is seen as a way for Cheshire East to exploit the economic opportunities relating environmental and sustainability in the Borough.

- 5.7.3. **Development** - Respondents were concerned at current and planned levels of new housing and development within the borough. They questioned how the council will balance demands for new housing, and new roads, with environmental sustainability.
- 5.7.4. The Environment Strategy explains that the Local Plan, the Council's plan to manage growth and development over future years, seeks to meet the objectively assessed needs for development. This includes accommodating a realistic element of economic growth-derived development need. A strong economy offering sustainable growth is essential in maintaining the borough's prosperity, but the objective is not economic growth at any price; rather it is the sustainable development of Cheshire East.
- 5.7.5. **Reliance on cars** – Respondents are aware of their reliance on cars, even for short journeys, but feel that there is currently no practical, viable alternative. They felt that current development is not supportive of this aim – it is “out of town” and therefore car dependent, little green infrastructure is being built, and cuts to bus service subsidies lessen the sustainable transport options available. Electric cars are presented as a solution, but there is doubt that these are environmentally friendly enough to provide a long-term viable alternative.
- 5.7.6. The Environment Strategy acknowledges the reliance on cars within the borough, reporting that Cheshire East has one of the lowest levels of per capita bus use in England. It commits to develop a new Cheshire East Bus Strategy and an Electric Vehicle Infrastructure Strategy.
- 5.7.7. **Reducing waste** – Reduction of the amount of waste produced by residents was seen as a high priority – achieving this with an affluent population will be a challenge, particularly in a consumer economy, as will reducing use of packaging and single use plastic by manufacturers and retailers.
- 5.7.8. Not producing waste in the first place is by far the best environmental and economic solution to tackling waste, then reusing it followed by recycling and composting. Through a range of waste education and awareness initiatives, the Council is encouraging residents to make waste prevention, reduction and reuse a priority over recycling and disposal.
- 5.8. The consultation also asked whether the delivery of the Environment Strategy should be subsidised from local taxation or cost neutral to the council, i.e. by relying on government grants and other external funding. Respondents favoured delivery of the strategy being cost neutral to the council – though opinion was fairly split on this. 47% felt delivery of the strategy should be cost neutral to the council, 34% felt it should be

subsidised from local taxation, while the remaining 19% were unsure. The adoption of the Environment Strategy will help ensure the financial decisions the Council makes in future are increasingly influenced by carbon accounting principles and the impact on climate change.

- 5.9. The Strategy is designed to provide the policy framework for the Council to evaluate strategies, policies, plans, projects, service delivery and partnerships to consider the environmental and climate change impact. It will ensure that the Council provides strong environmental leadership and stewardship, leading local action in support of the Government's 25-Year Environment Plan to make sure that responsible attitudes towards the environment become the norm to secure lasting change.
- 5.10. There have been wide-ranging changes to the Environment Strategy to acknowledge and respond to the consultation feedback and in particular the key challenges highlighted by respondents. The Strategic Goals have remained the same, albeit re-worded to reflect the sense of urgency:
- Cheshire East Council will be carbon neutral by 2025
 - Reduce waste
 - Improve air quality
 - Ensure new development is sustainable
 - Increase sustainable transport and travel
 - Protect and enhance our natural environment
- 5.11. The strategy has also been updated to reflect the progress made against the priority actions identified in the draft strategy. For example, the Carbon Action Plan, Local Transport Plan, Municipal Waste Strategy and Green Infrastructure Plan have all been completed and provide the more detailed action plans that respondents to the consultation were seeking.
- 5.12. The strategy identifies that there are further key strategies that will be brought forward to support the achievement of our goals, in particular:
- Site Allocations and Development Policies Document (Local Plan part 2)
 - Minerals & Waste Development Plan Document (Local Plan part 3)
 - Cheshire East Bus Strategy
 - Town Delivery Plans
 - Electric Vehicle Infrastructure Strategy
- 5.13. The Council is already engaging with sub-regional partners through the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) to consider our common goals and how our stronger, collective voice can have a better impact, in particular in influencing government and business.

6. Implications of the Recommendations

6.1. Legal Implications

6.1.1. There is no legal obligation to publish an Environment Strategy, but doing so resonates with the approach taken by government in respect of its 25 Year Plan and the draft Environment (Principles and Governance) Bill 2018. It ensures the Council is well positioned in respect of the direction of travel at national and international level.

6.1.2. There are no implications from the Environment Strategy, as its purpose is to guide the formulation of other strategies and plans with a focus on environmental matters. There may well be legal implications that arise from the formulation or implementation of those other strategies and plans, but those will be addressed on a case by case basis.

6.2. Finance Implications

6.2.1. To support the delivery of this strategy, the Council has included investment totalling £12.7m (revenue and capital) within the 2020/24 Medium Term Financial Strategy supporting the development of a range of measures including:

- Improving energy efficiency across the Council's buildings estate
- Improving active and sustainable travel options
- Exploring and developing local schemes for sustainable energy production
- Investing in locally focused carbon offset schemes including large-scale tree planting, hedgerow replacement and peat moss regeneration
- Establishing crowd funding applications and policies to allow local communities to contribute to carbon offset through community tree planting.

6.2.2. In light of the additional financial pressures on the Council arising from Covid-19, the timing and availability of this investment will need review.

6.3. Policy Implications

6.3.1. The Environment Strategy sets out priorities and actions that will contribute to priorities at a borough, national and global level. The strategy contributes to two of the Council's strategic outcomes: that Cheshire East is a green and sustainable place and that People live well and for longer.

6.3.2. The Government published its 25 Year Environment Plan in 2018 calling for action across society – citizens, businesses, local authorities,

charities and other non-profit organisations – to secure lasting change for our country and for our planet. The strategy sets out how the Council will contribute to the national policy.

6.4. Equality Implications

6.4.1. An Equality Impact Assessment has been conducted and concluded that there are no direct equality implications.

6.5. Human Resources Implications

6.5.1. There are no implications for human resources from the strategy.

6.6. Risk Management Implications

6.6.1. The Environment Strategy has been developed to help mitigate the risk of further harm to our environment.

6.6.2. The key risk to the delivery of the strategy will be competing priorities within the council.

6.7. Rural Communities Implications

6.7.1. The Environment Strategy will help to protect and enhance the character of our rural areas and support rural communities.

6.8. Implications for Children & Young People/Cared for Children

6.8.1. Improving our environment benefits all people, but taking action on climate change will help to leave the environment in a better state for the next generation. Young people in many parts of the world have been actively protesting that their environment is being destroyed and calling on governments to take urgent action on climate change. This has led to the UK Government to announcing that a group of young people will advise the government on priorities for environmental action.

6.9. Public Health Implications

6.9.1. Spending time in the natural environment improves mental health and feelings of wellbeing. The Environment Strategy seeks to protect, develop and enhance our green spaces and in so doing help people of all ages access and benefit from their use.

6.9.2. The strategy also recognises the impact air quality can have on public health and reinforces our commitment to improve the air quality environment in Cheshire East.

6.10. Climate Change Implications

6.10.1. The key purpose of the Environment Strategy is to set out the strategic goals and priority actions the Council will take to respond to the global challenge of climate change. It includes the commitment that Cheshire East Council will be carbon neutral by 2025.

7. Ward Members Affected

7.1. All wards.

8. Consultation & Engagement

8.1. The Council consulted on its draft Environment Strategy during October and November 2019. Three reports have been produced to report on the consultation: a summary report, which is included as appendix 2 to this report; a full report, and a report containing all formal responses. All reports will be published on the council's website.

9. Access to Information

9.1. The Council's Environment Strategy is provided as appendix 1 to this report.

9.2. The Environment Strategy Consultation – Summary Report is provided as appendix 2.

10. Contact Information

10.1. Any questions relating to this report should be directed to the following officer:

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