

Report to the Cabinet

Meeting to be held on Thursday, 4 March 2021

Report of the Head of Service - Planning and Environment

Part I

Electoral Division affected:
None

A New Environment and Climate Programme for Lancashire County Council

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Executive Summary

This report sets out proposals for a new programme of environmental improvement and carbon reduction for the county council.

In December 2020, the county council adopted an ambitious carbon reduction and nature recovery resolution that seeks to 'transition the Lancashire economy away from carbon by 2030, and address the biodiversity crisis'. Emerging new duties for the county council in the Environment Bill complement the resolution. To help implement the new responsibilities, a cross-directorate programme of environmental improvement and carbon reduction activity across Lancashire is proposed, comprising of:

1. Carbon reduction from county council buildings and property.
2. Tree planting.
3. Peatland restoration and carbon capture.
4. Local air quality management.
5. Nature recovery.
6. Active travel.
7. Strategy and programme management.

To deliver the programme, eleven new posts are proposed costing £543,000, together with operational budgets of £430,000.

Recommendation

Cabinet is asked to approve the proposals set out in the report.

Background and Advice

This report sets out proposals for a new programme of environmental improvement and carbon reduction for the county council.

In December 2020, the county council resolved to transition the Lancashire economy away from carbon by 2030; and address the biodiversity crisis. In addition, the imminent Environment Bill would place significant new obligations on the county council to deliver air quality improvements and nature recovery in Lancashire.

The government has recently announced a number of new environment and climate policy initiatives, aligned to funding budgets that could support the county council's new programme. These include:

- Ten Point Plan for a Green Industrial Revolution (£4 billion);
- A Green Future: Our 25 Year Plan to Improve the Environment;
- The Environmental Land Management Scheme: Public Money for Public Goods - A National Pilot. (replacement for EU's Common Agricultural Policy);
- Energy White Paper: Powering Our Net Zero Future;
- Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme (£1 billion);
- Public Sector Low Carbon Skills Fund (£32 million);
- Green Recovery Challenge Fund (£40 million);
- Nature for Climate Fund (£640 million);
- Gear Change: A Bold Vision for Cycling and Walking (£2 billion).

The proposed programme will strengthen the capacity of the county council to respond to these challenges and funding opportunities.

In light of the above policy and legislative drivers, the following areas of activity should form part of a new environment and climate programme for the county council:

1. Carbon reduction from county council buildings and property.
2. Tree planting.
3. Peatland restoration and carbon capture.
4. Local air quality management.
5. Nature recovery.
6. Active travel.
7. Strategy and programme management.

Carbon reduction from county council buildings and property

The property portfolio consists of just under 2,000 assets which include a range of operational premises such as: libraries; family centres; day and residential care; depots; office accommodation; cultural and heritage assets.

There are 887 sites on county council bulk energy contracts. The running cost of the operational portfolio is in excess of £13.9 million per annum. Despite the reduction in building use resulting from the pandemic, there will be future opportunities to reduce energy use and costs, and to secure future grant funding such as the

£1billion Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme.

Tree Planting

Large scale planting in rural areas.

The Ribble Rivers Trust, alongside the Lune Rivers Trust and Wyre Rivers Trust, has an ambitious project to plant more than 500,000 trees over the next decade; and has approached the councils in Lancashire for support. The trees will be located alongside the rivers Ribble, Lune and Wyre, together with their network of tributaries. The county council could support the project with its own resources and know-how.

Urban tree planting.

Alongside large scale planting in rural areas, the county council should undertake a programme of urban tree planting on roadside verges, footways and in the small parcels of land adjacent to the highway, and next to dwellings and business premises owned by the county council in urban areas. The benefits to air quality, drainage, biodiversity and amenity in urban areas will be considerable.

Moreover, the county is expected to see a substantial loss of trees over the next few years resulting from Ash dieback, leaving a visible impact on townscape and landscape. Replacement and additional tree planting will help to mitigate the impact of the tree disease.

Planting on county council land.

The county council owns a significant area of land, but much of this is already in operational use. A substantial number of trees (149,000) were planted on land owned by the county council between 2010 and 2015.

However, some areas of open land might remain where further tree planting could take place after a feasibility assessment has been carried out.

Peatland restoration and carbon capture

The carbon stored in UK peatlands is the equivalent to that of all the forests of UK, France and Germany combined. And the loss of carbon from peat is twice that emitted from aviation.

In Lancashire, some 13.5 per cent of the county's land area is moorland, with vast tracts of peat in blanket bog in the Forest of Bowland, West Pennine Moors, South Pennines and Leck Fell. Lowland peat moss also exists in some isolated pockets in western Lancashire. Lancashire has significant tracts of peatland in which carbon is currently stored and which can continue to capture carbon. Peatland restoration also helps to reduce downstream flood risk, moorland fire risk, and enhances biodiversity. A significant opportunity exists for the county council in this area, particularly through emerging regional scale peat partnerships.

Local air quality management

Short-term exposure to elevated levels of air pollution can cause a range of health effects and is a particular threat to vulnerable groups, including the elderly, very young, and those with existing health issues. Lancashire has 27 statutory Air Quality Management Areas, designated because of poor air quality caused by vehicle emissions.

The Environment Bill will require greater local action on air pollution by ensuring responsibility for tackling air pollution is shared across local government tiers. The additional resource proposed in this programme will strengthen the capacity of the county council to tackle poor air quality.

Nature Recovery

The forthcoming Environment Bill requires all areas in England to establish Local Nature Recovery Strategies. The aim is to link up habitats, restore nature and provide green space for communities.

In the 1990s, Lancashire pioneered an approach to protecting non-statutory wildlife sites by designating over 1,100 Biological Heritage Sites in the county. Re-energising this approach can underpin the county council's new nature recovery duties.

Active Travel

In July 2020 the government published an ambitious plan to boost cycling and walking, supported by a £2 billion budget. The county council has successfully bid for active travel funding on a number of occasions, and will continue to prepare funding bids supported by the preparation of seven Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plans.

Using existing staff resources, the county council will continue to seek external funding, strengthening the delivery of active travel schemes in the Lancashire.

Strategy and Programme Management

Setting the correct strategic objectives and steering the programme for the county council will be important from the outset. Beyond the county council's activity, the work of Lancashire's fifteen councils on the Greater Lancashire Plan will underpin the development of a climate and decarbonisation strategy for the county. It will be important for the county council to play an active role in the preparation and delivery of the strategy, consistent with its resolution of December 2020.

There is also a need to prepare and oversee the implementation of a strategy for the reduction of carbon from the county council's own operations.

Governance

It will be necessary to establish an inter-directorate officer steering group to oversee and manage the programme. An annual report to Cabinet will set out progress against the objectives of the December 2020 resolution. A forward plan of activity will

also be agreed. Reports may also be made to the county councils' internal and external scrutiny committees.

Consultations

N/A

Implications:

This item has the following implications, as indicated:

Financial

The funding required to deliver this programme will cover a combination of operational and staffing costs with an additional 11 full time equivalent posts to be established to deliver the programme of work.

The full year costs of the additional posts and operational budgets is £973,000, with an initial £496,000 required in 2021/22 (as this programme will commence part way through 2021/22) and the full amount of funding required in 2022/23. This has been included within the budget for 2021/22 and the medium term financial strategy for 2022/23 onwards.

Risk management

The proposal is considered necessary to implement the council's new climate and biodiversity resolution, together with the council's emerging new legal duties in the Environment Bill. Not implementing the proposal risks reputational and legislative impacts, together with a possible challenge that the new duties are not being implemented.

The proposal is not targeted to any areas or locations, and so the impacts should not disproportionately affect any specific places, individuals or groups. There might be a modest positive impact on several groups of people if they live in disadvantaged areas that are also designated as Local Air Quality Management Areas because of poor air quality; though this is hard to estimate.

List of Background Papers

Paper	Date	Contact/Tel
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None

Reason for inclusion in Part II, if appropriate

N/A