

Future Delivery of the Environment Strategy

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Ward Member(s)	N/A
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Purpose of the Report

1. This report is to update members on the progress of delivery against the objectives of the Environment Strategy. It includes a request for resources to support continued delivery of the action plan and ensure future resilience within the team to continue this work.

Forward Plan

2. This report appeared on the District Executive Forward Plan with an anticipated Committee date of 4th February 2021.

Public Interest

3. Significant progress has been made since the adoption of the Environment Strategy in October 2019. When adopted a total of £350K was made available to support this new work, which funded 3 fixed term new posts with operational budget.
4. As work continues it is clear there is a huge amount of future work required to meet our target of being carbon neutral by 2030 and to address the ecological impacts of climate change. This work will need to continue beyond the period of the current posts.
5. Further funding is therefore being requested to extend the posts and provide further operational budget in order to deliver the commitments within the Strategy.

Recommendations

6. That District Executive approve a total allocation of £262,400 from Medium Term Financial Plan Support Reserve to the Climate Change Reserve for:



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- a) the extension of the Environment Case Officer and Living Environment Case Officer posts until end of March 2023;
- b) the extension of the Environment Communications Case Officer (P/T) post to end of March 2023;
- c) a new Climate Change Support Case Officer for a fixed term 2 year post up until March 2023;
- d) an operational budget to support the work to deliver the Environment Strategy.

Background

7. The Council recognised a Climate and Ecological Emergency in May 2019. An Environment Strategy was developed and adopted in October 2019, which set out a delivery plan to achieve the ambitions of the Council.
8. A budget of £350K was allocated to deliver this Climate change and ecological impact work.
9. It was quickly recognised that additional staff (and expertise) would be required to complete the new work. By March 2020 a small team was appointed to the roles of Environment Case Officer and Living Environment Case Officer (both grade 5), along with a Communications Case Officer (grade 4). These were all fixed term posts.
10. Together with the Environment Community of Practice these new officers were able to dedicate invaluable time to moving new projects forward working alongside the expertise of existing staff across the organisation. Without these new officers a number of the projects within the action plan would not have been delivered and others would be behind schedule.
11. Whilst huge progress has made there is much more to do. This work is projected to continue over the next 9 years as we move towards the 2030 target date. In order to continue the progress that has been achieved and to capitalise on the momentum, the officers in these posts will be required beyond their existing contract end dates.

Report Detail

12. Reports have been presented to Full Council on a regular basis since October 2019 regarding the progress of the Strategy action plan. The key achievements over that time include:
 - Set up a calculator to monitor and track SSDC's own carbon footprint from year to year. Confirm a reduction in SSDC's own carbon footprint from the baseline year of 10% in year one.



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- Joined the DELETTI programme to deliver electric vehicle charging points across the district.
 - Liaison role between SWARCO and SSDC as part of the Highways England funded electric vehicle programme. Tasks include monitoring the usage reports, access back-office data and monitoring the income generation as part of the agreement.
 - Approval secured from Department for Transport as E-scooter trial location as part of national scheme. Zwings appointed as project partner and now seeing highest take up rate in the country for e-scooter use.
 - Commissioned an energy audit to identify energy improvements to our top ten energy use buildings. Further to this, submitted a bid to the Decarbonisation Fund for £4 million (pending outcome) to carry out energy improvement works across our estate.
 - Completion of Phase 2 Battery Energy Storage Site at Taunton, adding 5MW of energy storage.
 - 2 years delivery of the Great Parish Tree Giveaway and 2 successful bids to the Urban Tree Challenge Fund. Enabling 4660 community trees to be planted.
 - Significant tree planting across our own estate, totaling 4996 trees.
 - Establish networks with partners across the natural environment at a national and local level e.g. Somerset Wildlife Trust, Re-imagining the Levels and Plant life. Enabling landscape scale thinking to facilitate projects like Nature Recovery Networks.
 - Established a network of Environment Champions across the district to share best practice and to support and encourage communities to engage with a range of Environmental Improvements.
 - Set up new communications channels, including monthly Get Sussed newsletter, social media presence and a revised Environment website. Core content on the web pages will include a new South Somerset Green Directory.
13. There are many projects that are still in progress or need to be developed, and these need expert officer input and time. These include:
- Delivery of the energy improvements across our own estate and operations, along with continued reduction of the carbon footprint (10% required year on year, up to 2030).
 - Implementation of the electric vehicle charging infrastructure project.
 - Identification and improvements in energy efficiency to the existing private housing stock to reduce the carbon footprint of the district.



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- Complete, adopt and deliver against a new Open Spaces Strategy which includes new standards for access to green spaces and tree canopy cover.
 - Ongoing work to include Environment Strategy objectives within the Local Plan Review
 - Support the County Wide Climate Change Strategy work of the Local Nature Partnership to identify Nature Recovery Networks in South Somerset and enable our communities to implement them on the ground
 - Support the work of the County Climate Change Strategy across all the work streams.
14. Delivery of many of these projects is enhanced or supported through external grant funding. Monitoring of new grant opportunities is required along with the time and knowledge to develop and submit high quality bids. To date applications have been submitted to the Urban Tree Challenge, Woodland Trust and the Decarbonisation Fund.
15. In addition, resource is required to identify and grasp opportunities for new projects which will move us towards our targets, such as the E-scooter trial. It is likely that with sufficient resource, and working with the Income and Opportunities Development Manager, that the team will be able to develop projects to help generate and maximise income e.g. EV charging points and battery storage facilities.
16. Whilst there are officers across the organisation who are part of the Environment Community of Practice, and contribute to many of the actions within the strategy, none of these have the capacity or budget within their existing roles to deliver at pace and scale in this work. It is therefore essential, if we are to meet the commitments within South Somerset's Environment Strategy, that the resource made available to date is continued over the next few years.
17. This report is requesting extension of the existing posts for 12 months up to April 2023 to align with the expected date of transition to a Unitary authority. The past year has been a period dominated by gathering information, planning and funding submissions. The next few years are expected to be a period of enhanced delivery phase and additional project officer support will be required to meet this additional roll out and activity. As such this report includes a request for a further Climate Change Support Officer to work with the current team.
18. An operational budget of £350K was provided to begin delivery of the Environment Strategy work. The majority of this has been used to fund the posts discussed, but budget has also been required to support activities such as officer training, equipment costs, tree purchase, consultant's expertise, contributions to the development of the County Climate Change Strategy and networks where we are working in partnerships with others. We only have £50K of the funding remaining and anticipate the need for additional resource to support the above work.



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19. If we can secure grant funding this will off-set the need for capital bid requests to deliver the ambitions of the strategy. For example, to achieve carbon neutrality of our own buildings will incur costs in excess of £5 million. We have been able to submit a grant application for £4 million of this. Without this grant, improvement costs would have to be met from SSDC own capital.
20. The Environment Team and Community of Practice recognises the substantial role that environmental improvements, enhancements and learning can play in “building back better” in the Recovery phase of the Covid pandemic. Some advance planning had been completed in 2019 and confirmed environment resource would mean that SSDC could play an active part.

Financial Implications

21. The existing Environment and Living Environment Case Officers are currently paid a grade 5 and are on a 2 year fixed term contract due to finish in March 2022.
22. The existing Communication Case Officer is a part time scale 4 post due to finish in January 2022.
23. To extend these three contracts until the end of March 2023 will incur costs of £101,800.
24. Funding is also requested for a new Climate Change Support Officer to be appointed at grade 4 for a fixed term of 2 years to 2023, at a cost of £60,600.
25. To support these roles and the delivery of the Strategy an additional operational budget of £100k is requested.
26. Members will be aware that we had not expected to receive a New Homes Bonus Grant for 2021/22. Through the Provisional Settlement we have been advised that we will receive £1.171m. This is therefore a windfall for 2021/22 which can be used to mitigate this new pressure of £262,500, whilst still enabling us to transfer the residual amount to the MTFP Reserve.

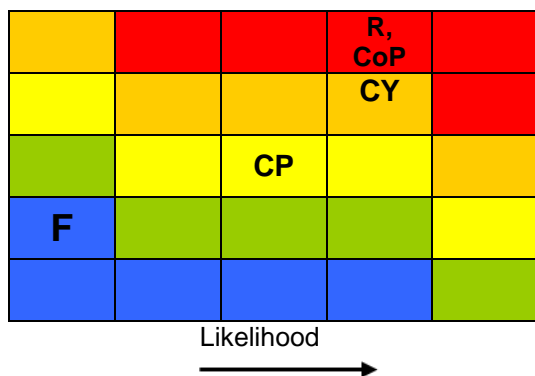
Legal implications (if any) and details of Statutory Powers

27. No implications known.

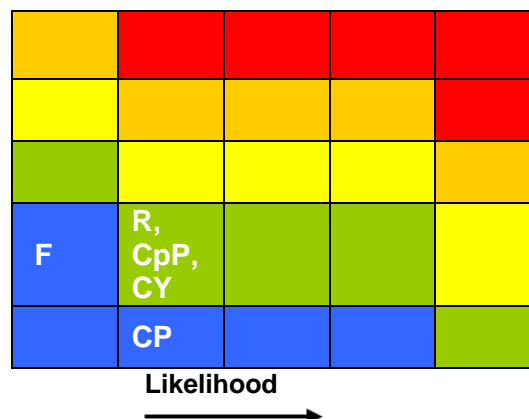
Risk Matrix

The risk matrix shows risk relating to the Council Plan headings.

Risk Profile before officer recommendations



Risk Profile after officer recommendations



Key

Categories	Colours (for further detail please refer to Risk management strategy)
R - Reputation	High impact and high probability
CpP - Corporate Plan Priorities	Major impact and major probability
CP - Community Priorities	Moderate impact and moderate probability
CY - Capacity	Minor impact and minor probability
F - Financial	Insignificant impact and insignificant probability

Council Plan Implications

28. Delivery of the Environment Strategy is a primary area of focus within the Environment Theme of the Council Plan. Delivery of this strategy is also central to priority project 8 'To accelerate action to adapt to and mitigate the effects of climate change and extreme weather'

Carbon Emissions and Climate Change Implications

29. The work of the Environment team has wide ranging and significant implications for range of environmental targets and improvements. The team's work is directed by the adopted Environment Strategy and under pinning action plan. The aims include reaching carbon neutrality by 2030 across our own operations and working with partners and communities to mitigate for the ecological emergency.

Equality and Diversity Implications



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30. Before adoption of the Environment Strategy an Impact Relevance Check was completed that confirmed a full Impact Assessment was not required. As this report is principally around future funding support towards the work of the strategy then there are no obvious Equality and Diversity implications.

31. If the report and funding request is supported there are likely positive E&D impacts of projects and activities, yet to be delivered, such as tackling fuel poverty.

Privacy Impact Assessment

32. To manage the Environment Champion network some limited contact data is held by the Environment Officers in a secure file. This data will not be shared with any other parties.

Background Papers

- SSDC Environment Strategy
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