

Achieving Net Zero

Report number:	CAB/WS/25/019
Report to and dates:	Cabinet 20 May 2025
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Decisions plan: The decision made as a result of this report will usually be published within 48 hours and cannot be actioned until five clear working days of the publication of the decision have elapsed. This item is included in the decisions plan.

Wards impacted: All wards

Recommendation: It is recommended that Cabinet:

1. notes that the council's internal net zero plan is only one part of its overall approach to tackling the Climate Change and Biodiversity Emergency in the wider West Suffolk community and economy; and in that context,
2. notes that the council's own carbon consumption currently stands at just below 5,000 tonnes of carbon each year and that, despite increases in the council's operational activities (for instance providing waste collection services to a growing number of domestic properties), this is 13 per cent lower in absolute terms than in 2019 when the council first declared a climate emergency
3. recognises that the council's activities to reduce the carbon consumed by third parties (off-site renewable energy investments, grant schemes, recycling rates, and so on) already prevent at least 7,000 tonnes of carbon a year from entering the atmosphere. Meaning the council already saves more carbon indirectly than it emits directly

- 4. notes that, as set out in paragraph 4 of Appendix A, the emissions the council reports on will increase if it widens its reporting scope to include the total emissions resulting from the energy it is responsible for procuring for partners in the Mildenhall Hub. This change will ensure a consistent reporting methodology across all sites based on the council's energy procurement responsibilities. The change will also help to make sure that the council is able to claim grant funding for energy efficiency improvements, while also being able to report on the positive impacts of such works,**
- 5. notes that the council has already secured and/or provided funding to remove a further one thousand tonnes of its own carbon emissions (20 per cent of the balance) before 2029, and plant 5,000 new trees,**
- 6. notes the increase in the market cost of technologies as set out in paragraph 2.19 and Appendix A of this report and approve additional funding in the sum of up to £250,000 for the installation of solar canopies at the Mildenhall Hub carpark from the council's existing Net Zero Fund, which will generate an estimated 553,050kWh and save around £152,000 and 125tCO₂ per annum as detailed in report CAB/WS/24/051**
- 7. notes that 1,540 tonnes of the council's remaining carbon emissions (30 per cent) is from grid electricity and that the government's Clean Power Action Plan aims to decarbonise Great Britain's electricity supply by 2030. Meaning it is likely that the council's emissions from electricity consumption will naturally reduce as the National Grid gets less carbon intensive**
- 8. recognises that the council's original stretch target to achieve net zero by 2030 has resulted in significant progress being made but, for reasons outside of the council's control and its available budgets, this is not likely to be achievable, and therefore**
- 9. approves the council's first costed route map, contained in Appendix A of this report, as a tool to inform future decision-making by this authority and any successor unitary council(s) on achieving net zero for the current carbon emissions of West Suffolk Council as quickly as possible,**

- 10. adopts this new route map, and a revised net zero target of 2039, as the basis for monitoring the council's future progress in carbon reduction, and**
- 11. develops a communications plan so that the council's updated route to net zero is communicated internally and externally on the basis explained in this report, and specifically highlights the council's other carbon-reduction and biodiversity contributions**

1. Context to this report

- 1.1 In 2019 West Suffolk Council declared a climate and biodiversity emergency and subsequently agreed a Climate Change Action Plan which included around fifty initiatives to improve the environment in West Suffolk. Progress against this plan is reviewed annually by the Environmental and Sustainability Reference Group (ESRG) and the Performance and Audit Scrutiny Committee and reported to Cabinet. The council's action plan also complements the work of the Suffolk Climate Change Partnership, as much of this activity is being delivered collectively across the County through a joint climate emergency plan ([Sustainable Suffolk - Suffolk Climate Emergency Plan](#)).
- 1.2 The council's own carbon footprint is small in relation to overall emissions in West Suffolk. This means that the council's work to assist decarbonisation in the wider community will have a greater impact on tackling climate change in the short and long-term.
- 1.3 However, a key part of the Climate Change Action Plan was setting an ambition for the council itself to be net zero by 2030 in relation to its own direct emissions. As this report explains, good progress has already been made, and significant further investment is planned in the next few years. Specifically:
 - a. despite significant increases in the council's operational activities, the council's own carbon consumption (just under 5,000 thousand tonnes) is 13 per cent lower in absolute terms than in 2019 when the council first declared a climate emergency
 - b. the council's activities to reduce the carbon emitted by third parties (off-site renewable energy investments, grant schemes, recycling rates, and so on) already prevent at least 7,000 tonnes of carbon a year from entering the atmosphere. **Meaning the council already saves more carbon indirectly than it emits directly**
 - c. the council has already secured and/or provided funding to remove a further 1,000 tonnes of its own carbon emissions (20 per cent of the balance) before 2029, and plant 5,000 new trees, and
 - d. 1,540 tonnes of the council's remaining carbon emissions (30 per cent) is from grid electricity meaning that the council's emissions from electricity consumption will naturally reduce as the National Grid gets less carbon intensive as part of national plans.
- 1.4 As can be seen, the council's original 'stretch target' to achieve net zero by 2030 has raised the council's ambition and commitment to tackle climate change, and resulted in significant progress being made which might not have otherwise been the case. However, for reasons outside of the council's control and, importantly, its available budgets, it has become apparent that this specific ambition is unlikely to be achieved within this time.
- 1.5 This report therefore outlines the rationale for reviewing and revising West Suffolk Council's net zero target and the associated action points to ensure alignment with resource availability, the increased financial cost of early adoption, operational needs and emerging strategic priorities. Being open and

transparent about progress and future plans is also an important element in maintaining trust and confidence in the Council's response to the emergency.

- 1.6 The review which informs this report was overseen by the ESRG, and the portfolio holder's recommendations in this report therefore reflect the conclusions of the ESRG after deliberation at its January and May 2025 meetings.

2. Rationale for and proposals within this report

West Suffolk's wider contribution to tackling climate change

- 2.1 While the council is dedicated to reducing its own emissions, targeted work is also being completed to reduce district-wide emissions to ensure a just transition to net zero throughout West Suffolk, and to contribute to local and national carbon reduction targets. These interventions are not accounted for in the council's direct emissions reporting because they are accounted for elsewhere. However, the achievements are vital context to understanding the recommendations in this report. They can be highlighted and quantified as follows:
- 2.2 **Toggam Solar Farm:** The solar farm produces 12,000MWh of renewable energy each year. This electricity is sold into the national grid and contributes to the government's target of producing 95 per cent of electricity from renewable sources by 2030.
- 2.3 **Solar for Business:** This scheme allows businesses to benefit from a cheap renewable electricity supply, whereby the council designs, funds, and installs a solar PV system on the business' roofs. The council then sells the generated electricity to the business at a cheaper rate than their grid electricity supply. The council has completed over 100 of these installations so far, totalling over 8 megawatts of solar capacity. Together, these installations prevent over 2,000 tonnes of carbon emissions from entering the atmosphere each year.
- 2.4 **Solar Together:** Through this scheme the council has facilitated 158 domestic solar installations in West Suffolk, equating to an annual carbon saving of 140 tonnes CO₂e. A further 130 installations are currently lined up to be completed as part of the 2024 Solar Together phase.
- 2.5 **Warm Homes Suffolk:** West Suffolk Council was the consortium lead for DESNZ-funded local authority delivery (LAD) schemes 1a, 1b, 3, Home Upgrade Grant (HUG) 1, Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund (SHDF) 1, and participated in LAD 2, which, combined, funded £14 million worth of retrofit energy efficiency and renewable upgrades to 1,368 domestic properties across Suffolk, generating an estimated annual carbon saving of 1,760 tonnes. Measures included air source heat pumps, external wall insulation, solar PV, and loft insulation. West Suffolk Council continues to participate in DESNZ-funded retrofit schemes under the Warm Homes Suffolk brand.
- 2.6 **Decarbonisation Initiatives Fund:** The first wave of this funding successfully facilitated town and parish councils to convert their streetlights to LED, saving approximately 85 tonnes of carbon dioxide per annum. The second wave of funding invited community groups in West Suffolk to apply for part-funding towards the decarbonising their assets. It is estimated that these

decarbonisation projects, ranging from solar and battery storage to air source heat pumps, will save a further 100 tonnes of carbon dioxide per annum.

- 2.7 **Greener Business Grant:** This funding pot is accessible to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) within the district and provides funding of up to £1,000 towards capital works to reduce business energy use and save money. So far, the funding has been used by over 150 SMEs for a variety of projects such as LED lighting, electric vehicle (EV) charging infrastructure, low carbon heating, and insulation. These measures combined equate to an annual carbon saving of almost 600 tonnes, while the businesses benefit from an average bill saving of £1,375 per year.
- 2.8 **Tree planting:** Aside from sequestering carbon, planting trees brings several other benefits to the people of West Suffolk. Trees can improve air quality, increase biodiversity, provide natural flood management, reduce erosion, and create areas for recreation to improve community wellbeing. The council is currently assessing the viability of planting an additional 5,000 trees with the intention of offsetting any residual council carbon emissions. Trees cannot be used to offset carbon emissions until they are mature, so need to be planted as soon as possible.
- 2.9 **Simpler Recycling:** The Government has set a new maximum default requirement for waste collection authorities to collect food waste, paper and card, dry recyclables, and residual waste from households and workplaces. It is anticipated that implementing these required changes to recycling in Suffolk will divert over 58 per cent of the current refuse bin to other recycling and organic waste collections. This work is supplemented by other important recycling initiatives such as the reverse vending project instigated by the ESRG.
- 2.10 **Championing net zero:** As seen in the council's [Environment Policy Statement 2024](#), the council works closely with our partners in delivering local services and is committed to leading by example and will encourage key partners and other strategic suppliers to demonstrate comparable environmental commitments.
- 2.11 It is therefore proposed that any new action plan and timeline for the council's own net zero journey recognises that carbon emissions would be far higher in West Suffolk if West Suffolk Council's wider environmental activities did not exist. In fact, as set out in Appendix A, **the council already saves more carbon indirectly than it emits directly**; based on the 2023-24 reporting methodology and emissions calculated in the 2023-24 environmental statement. A full breakdown of emissions reporting scopes can be found on page 23 of the [West Suffolk Council Environmental Statement 2023-2024](#).

Council's own direct emissions and journey to net zero

- 2.12 As section one of this report shows, West Suffolk Council remains committed to achieving net zero in its own emissions and leading on sustainability. However, changing circumstances, resource constraints, and new opportunities necessitate a reassessment of the timeline and strategy for achieving this goal.
- 2.13 The original net zero target needs to be amended due to numerous factors, including expanded operations of the council. For example, providing waste collection services to a growing number of domestic properties. Emissions have

been reported for several years with a 2010-11 baseline and, as of 2023-24, emissions are just below 5,000 tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent (tCO₂e). While 13 per cent lower than in 2019 when the climate emergency was declared, the emissions are 1,254 tonnes (or 25 per cent) above target for achieving net zero by 2030. Based on the years since the COVID-19 pandemic we are moving further away from the target each year, so the challenge is growing annually.

- 2.14 In addition, and as was highlighted in earlier reports to councillors, the announcement of the Government's Simpler Recycling initiative came after the original net zero commitment and therefore needs to be embedded into the revised net zero strategy to increase recycling rates and reduce waste-related emissions. Several actions are envisaged to ensure the benefits are realised. For example, public awareness campaigns will be launched to highlight environmental benefits and encourage community participation. It is worth noting that improved recycling rates will not contribute to the council's own net zero target but will assist in reducing the community's carbon footprint. Demonstrating the trade-off the council sometimes needs to make in weighing its own operational decisions against wider community benefits.
- 2.15 After a review of the alternatives, diesel vehicles have been procured to address immediate operational needs for Simpler Recycling, while future planning for a transition to more sustainable alternatives. It is estimated the new diesel vehicles will increase operational CO₂ emissions by 349 tonnes per annum. Phased transition of the fleet has already begun, with more to be changed in the upcoming months and years. A wider look at heavy goods vehicles could be the next step for transition.
- 2.16 A comprehensive review of the council's progress towards net zero has therefore been conducted, identifying areas for improvement and prioritising high-impact actions. Modelling of the revised scenario is attached at Appendix A to illustrate a potential new reduction profile.
- 2.17 The required review entailed an analysis of all council emissions, and the measures required to reduce these along with the associated costs. This review concluded that a revised target date of 2039 would be achievable yet still ambitious. The tables in appendix A highlight the key interventions, carbon emissions and costs of the revised 2039 trajectory. The new timeline reflects the current resource levels, anticipated decarbonisation costs, and realistic progress.
- 2.18 As with the original net zero plan and target date, it must be stressed that approving a new route map is simply the means to show how the council could realistically achieve net zero, and when, given the constraints it faces. The next stage for the council and any successor authority, is to put in place the means to do that. This will require multiple and separate political decisions weighing up the cost of the interventions against available resources and other political priorities at that time. In practical terms, this means that councillors will need to consider later reports as part of future budget-setting exercises, backed by business cases where needed. It is also the reason why it is essential progress towards net zero must be kept under annual review.
- 2.19 The route map itself will also evolve. The market cost of technologies and the council's operations may change, for instance. To illustrate, as set out in the recommendations in this report and Appendix A, the cost of installing solar

canopies at Mildenhall Hub has increased since the original estimate to Cabinet following tendering and detailed site investigations (but still returns a return on investment above the council's target of 2 per cent after borrowing for its Net Zero Fund).

- 2.20 It is also important to reflect financially the fact that, in some cases, the council will be required to replace plant and vehicles in any event. In that situation, the cost of the decarbonisation project will need to be offset with the cost of replacing the asset with like-for-like carbon-emitting technologies. As some future projects are yet to be fully appraised on this basis, the estimated marginal cost of achieving net zero may reduce from what is currently shown in Appendix A
- 2.21 The council currently communicates its environmental performance in an annual statement. See: [West Suffolk Council Environmental Statement 2023-2024](#). Communication of any change in net zero trajectory is important. An easy-to-follow infographic will therefore be developed and distributed to inform the public about the council's environmental priorities and progress.
- 2.22 This update is also linked to recommendations from the Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) and the external climate change scorecard.
- 2.23 The council's 2024 Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) made the following recommendation: "Build on significant work towards environmental resilience by agreeing what the intended outcomes are and developing an accessible route map with key milestones and costings."
- 2.24 There will also be several smaller changes as per the latest external scorecard feedback received in early 2025. This will give a chance to improve a wider suite of document changes relating to environmental performance. These updates link to the recommendations for West Suffolk's environmental priorities to be more accessible to residents.
- 2.25 If the new target is agreed, achievements to date will be recorded and communicated, demonstrating leadership in addressing complex environmental challenges. Improved metrics and regular reporting mechanisms will be introduced to track progress against the revised plan. Throughout the year, we will maintain open communication with residents and stakeholders to ensure transparency and accountability, using infographics and other accessible formats to share updates and celebrate progress.
- 2.26 In summary, the proposed adjustment to the net zero target and associated strategies will ensure that West Suffolk Council maintains its leadership in sustainability while addressing practical challenges. By prioritising transparency, community engagement, and resource efficiency, the council can deliver a robust and credible plan for a sustainable future.
- 2.27 In any public communications it will also be explained that the council's net zero plan relates, quite correctly, to its own direct emissions. However, this is only part of the story, and the council makes additional contributions to carbon reduction through its aforementioned investments in renewable energy and the local environment, such as the Solar for Business scheme.
- 2.28 Finally, in November 2025, a mid-year evaluation of implemented actions will be carried out through the ESG. This will allow updates to the next annual

environmental report, highlighting achievements, ongoing challenges, and next steps. Cabinet will then be able to incorporate any new actions in 2026-27 budget-setting.

3. Alternative options that have been considered

- 3.1 The council has already agreed to declare a climate emergency and pursue net zero in its own activities. The alternative to not updating the net zero target and delivery plan would be to continue to monitor progress against the original 2030 timeline in the knowledge this could not be met due to changes outside of the council's control since 2019. This, it is felt, would undermine confidence in the council's approach to climate change. It would also mean that the council handed over to any successor authority, following local government reorganisation, an out-of-date plan, and risks losing momentum on this key agenda.
- 3.2 As is explained elsewhere, adopting the plan is not a commitment to any proposed interventions which are currently unfunded. At the time any new decisions are required on proceeding or not with those interventions, business cases will be developed and options appraised. Decisions will then be taken under the relevant governance arrangements. This may change the cost estimates and timescales in the new route map.

4. Consultation and engagement undertaken

- 4.1 This review of the net zero target and new route map has been overseen by the councillor Environmental and Sustainability Reference Group (ESRG), which has recommended adoption of this new approach to Cabinet. The ESRG is supported by an environmental management group of council staff, formed from across all services. The advice of colleagues in the Suffolk Climate Change Partnership was also sought.
- 4.2 In respect of specific new interventions proposed, these will be subject to engagement and consultation as required at the time they come forward.
- 4.3 As explained in section 2 above, the council's new approach will be communicated to the public to ensure they remain engaged in the process.

5. Risks associated with the proposals

- 5.1 Project-specific risks for interventions to achieve net zero are identified and addressed as part of normal project management processes.
- 5.2 In terms of the proposals in this report, the main risk is that the council or its successors are unable, due to reduced resources, to continue with the journey to net zero because they cannot afford to replace carbon-emitting technologies. It is for this reason that adopting the new target does not commit the council to implementing specific further interventions because it cannot do so at this time. These will require future decisions.
- 5.3 There is the risk of reputational damage to the council in changing its target for net zero. However, as explained, this is being done for reasons outside of the council's control and, in any event, the council's wider impact on

decarbonisation has led to significant improvements not recorded in its own net zero trajectory. Reviewing and updating the plan is also felt to be the most transparent approach.

6. Implications arising from the proposals

- 6.1 **Financial:** See sections 2, 3 and 5 above, and Appendix A
- 6.2 **Equalities** (including impacts on families and communities): The council is committed to a just transition to net zero which is why it has invested heavily in a wider suite of approaches to climate change, including a focus on energy saving measures which assist with the cost-of-living for households (see section 2 above).
- 6.3 **Environment or sustainability:** Addressed in the entirety of the report.
- 6.4 **Changes to existing policies:** Adopting the new target does not change the underlying policy commitments of the council to tackling climate change, only the means of implementation.
- 6.5 **External organisations (such as businesses, community groups):** See section 2 above.

7. Appendices referenced in this report

- 7.1 Appendix A: 2039 Net Zero Trajectory Modelling

8. Background documents associated with this report

- 8.1 Report CAB/WS/20/045: [West Suffolk Environment and Climate Change Taskforce – Final Report](#)
- 8.2 West Suffolk Council's approach to [tackling climate change](#) (including annual environmental statements)
- 8.3 Report CAB/WS/24/051: [West Suffolk solar canopies project](#)
- 8.4 [Sustainable Suffolk - Suffolk Climate Emergency Plan](#)