

North Kesteven's responsive climate action plan

North Kesteven District Council
Tuesday 31 January 2023

Summary

North Kesteven District Council has developed a reactive and evolving climate emergency action plan, with the commitment for it to be reviewed quarterly and refreshed every financial year. The aim is to better reflect new opportunities, technologies, and changes in circumstances. With this annual refresh, colleagues will be empowered to keep contributing to emissions reductions in ways that keep up with the pace of change.

North Kesteven District Council Leader, Councillor Richard Wright, says: "We are committed, as a council, to fulfilling our vision of 'a district of flourishing communities' and believe that without tackling the climate emergency no community will be able to thrive, let alone flourish.

"Uncoupling our climate emergency strategy and its action plan presents us with the opportunity to take a more dynamic, energetic approach to this vital work. Taking the issue of climate change as a true emergency, we believe it's essential to accelerate the rate of progress and a more frequent review process is key to doing that successfully.

"The strategy maintains a high-level commitment and clear statement of intent. But as a live document, the action plan will continually evolve and enable us to move swiftly to adopt new approaches, while holding each other accountable for progress.

"By setting up dedicated channels of review and reflection we're creating an environment where the status of our climate action is elevated."

The problem

North Kesteven District Council has a strategic aim to be Net Zero in its operations by 2030. But the global effort to move away from fossil fuel-powered energy is constantly evolving, bringing new opportunities, challenges, and delivery methods. There is a risk that these factors slow down our progress towards Net Zero if we are unable to respond and adapt.

In local government, it takes time to prepare and approve action plans or policies – and that's before the delivery process gets going. The long timescales involved in planning sometimes cannot keep up with the pace of change, often resulting in programmes or schemes that are not fit for purpose.

As a rural authority, we are aware that our district needs innovative solutions that respond to its particular character. In many cases, urban projects and studies are not replicable or relevant in rural settings. In responding to opportunities, we will need to ensure we take the proper steps to create better and stronger communities.

The solution

To help us face these challenges head-on, our climate emergency action plan – underpinned by our climate emergency strategy – has been developed to be a live document. It proactively leads local action but constantly evolves in response to the ever-changing world.

The central purpose of this work is to ensure that our action plan:

- reflects real delivery options both for the council and the wider district
- better equips the council to respond and adapt to unforeseen and changing circumstances

We have shortened the action plan's review cycle to an annual basis, bolstered by quarterly scrutiny reviews to ensure accountability. An annual refresh and improvement of actions will take place in consultation with elected members, directorates, and action holders who each lead on particular actions.

Within the review, we can reassess existing actions and adjust them to reflect any changes in the year such as delays or resourcing. We can also capture new funding streams and subsequent opportunities. Lastly, we can take lessons learnt and improve the way we approach or deliver an action.

This process will both enable actions and advance them towards the council meeting its 2030 target, with built-in adaptability to ensure they reflect situations and conditions within our district.

For example, an action in one year may involve a feasibility study, with the installation or delivery of technology in the following year. We want to evolve the actions to become more ambitious, show progress against the defined themes, and guide action holders on how to deliver so they can reach ideal outcomes.

Background

The approach for an annual review of our climate action plan came out of a March 2022 programmed refresh of our climate emergency strategy and action plan. This was previously a combined document.

During the consultation with colleagues and peers, we recognised that the strategy and the action plan would be more beneficial as separate documents. Separating them gave us the flexibility to develop an action plan that could be actively used to track and direct our progress against our Net Zero target.

Aims

The annual review of actions, led by the Climate Change Manager and Sustainability Officer, looks to:

- develop and evolve an ambitious set of SMART actions to ensure we meet our Net Zero targets
- set out an iterative process to help us meet our aspirations, building on successes and adapting to challenges
- identify lessons learned and how to take action on them
- find any changes deemed necessary
- exploit new opportunities as they arise, for example funding and partnerships
- expand on the information that informs our work programme
- highlight where we need government support or where we need to advocate for change

While we took some time to research external action plans, we anticipate that there will be ongoing developments or new and better ways to present or address our actions.

Carbon literacy training

We also need to ensure residents can make the adjustments needed to reduce or remove carbon emissions, enhance community wellbeing, and support a sustainable and flourishing future.

So as a complementary measure to the evolving action plan, we need to implement better carbon literacy training for our elected members. They can then impart this knowledge through their engagement with the district's parish councils and local community groups. We have started discussing how best to implement this training, but we are

unlikely to roll out anything until after the elections in May 2023.

Timeline

March 2022: Programmed refresh of our climate emergency and action plan, where the idea to separate it into 2 documents emerged.

April 2022 – start of 2022 to 2023 financial year: We started the development of the now standalone action plan in consultation with elected members and officers. The officers in the consultation included all assistant directors, who are theme champions, directorate managers, and action holders.

July 2022: Draft action plan discussed at an executive board away day.

September 2022: Draft action plan submitted for comment at Flourishing Communities Scrutiny Panel.

1 November 2022: The executive board approved the action plan.

December 2022: We started preparing the first review of the action plan for 2023 to 2024.

January to March 2023: Consultation of actions and development of the revised action plan. We plan to have a final draft for comment in early March.

April 2023: Action plan 2023 to 2024 prepared for publication.

The timescales in the 2022 to 2023 financial year were selected so we could ensure the action plan fed into service development plans and employee development documents. It also ensured that the refresh takes place before the start of the 2023 to 2024 delivery year.

Stakeholders

North Kesteven District Council's climate emergency action plan is a collaboration between all colleagues and elected members within the council. This is to ensure that climate action is integrated within the governance structure and management systems – a green thread throughout our actions and decisions.

We need to ensure the action plan complements existing systems and structures and integrates within directorate work programmes. Achieving that meant we had to carry out a thorough consultation – and continue to do so as the plan evolves – with open communication to capture SMART targets. Action holders have a better understanding of their service, including the challenges and opportunities. This open communication is therefore essential if we're to understand whether actions are achievable or not. For example, they can tell us if timescales are realistic or if actions are manageable.

We are actively engaging with directorate management teams and action holders in preparation for our 2023 to 2024 action plan update. Action holders have the option to discuss their actions with their team in meetings or, where actions need little change, via a separate meeting or email. Key has been keeping an open-door policy and encouraging feedback to ensure action holders understand that they are able to influence actions linked to them.

The communications and design team has provided valuable feedback on making the action plan an accessible document and aligning its design with the strategy.

Impact

We are confident that the benefits of this approach will grow and spread as we continually re-engage stakeholders to evolve the action plan. As action holders are actively engaged in the creation and delivery of the actions, decision-makers within the local authority are able to reference the action plan with confidence.

Spring 2023 will see the launch of new initiatives including the gradual introduction of elements such as carbon savings and co-benefits. As we look to review and reissue the action plan every year, colleagues will be empowered to continually contribute to reducing our carbon emissions as a collective.

The action plan has enabled a focus on the key issues and has supported investigations and opportunities such as steps to:

- decarbonise our leisure facilities
- install solar panels on our offices
- invest in a retrofit programme for our housing stock
- develop biodiversity guides for diverse audiences
- carry out carbon literacy training for a range of stakeholders
- deliver Net Zero-focused business events

Since climate has a lot of media coverage, our colleagues are naturally considering not only what they do at home but at work too. We hope the review process will open doors or link workstreams as we work with colleagues through all the themes in our strategy.

Lessons learned

We've recognised the importance of ensuring we have the necessary tools to support decision-making and have taken the opportunity during the action plan review to capture additional data that is deemed beneficial during our decision-making process. For example, recognising co-benefits or partners and costing and calculating CO2 emissions where viable.

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The ongoing development of the action plan uses staff time and resources. We predict the annual refresh to take about 2 to 3 months as we consult with action holders. Within that time, it'll be about 2 to 3 days a week of meetings and preparing, recording, and amending information.

Next steps

We will look to publish and make available our annual updates, with information on how we are progressing or with an explanation as to why actions may have been adjusted or closed.

Links, contacts, and credits

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