

Audit and Governance Committee

16 January 2023

Climate and Ecology impact assessment tool

For Decision

Portfolio Holder: Cllr R Bryan, Highways, Travel and Environment

Local Councillor(s): County Wide

Executive Director: J Sellgren, Executive Director of Place

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Report Status: Public

Brief Summary:

The climate and ecological emergencies that we are now facing are well documented. The discussions at COP27¹ for climate in Egypt, alongside the more recent COP15² discussions on biodiversity in Montreal, highlighted the scale of the challenges. These twin emergencies require systemic responses that need to permeate decision-making across multiple areas; transport, energy, infrastructure, planning, housing and industry to name but a few. There isn't a single service, department or team that can deal with the scale of the challenges. The Dorset Council climate and ecological emergency strategy, adopted by full Council in July 2021, highlighted the need to ensure that its aims and objectives were fully embedded in decision-making processes. It also contained targets for Dorset Council to decarbonise its own operations by 2040, as well as show the leadership required to help Dorset become net zero by 2050. The refreshed strategy will also have more robust targets for biodiversity recovery by 2030 and there will be a greater focus on adaptation as well.

¹ [ClimateChange | United Nations](#)

² [UN Biodiversity Conference \(COP 15\) \(unep.org\)](#)

All services need to start thinking about the impact that their decisions will have on both the climate and the environment if we are going to make the necessary progress to meet our ambitions. This is especially important given that ‘protecting our natural environment, climate and ecology’ is one of the 5 key priorities for the council. The role of local government is crucial in accelerating the change required; local authorities can influence around 30% of emissions in their areas³, but only if they are clear on the impact of their own operations, how they commission and procure, and are also clear on their work with partners and how they work with central government.

One of the key elements of ensuring that services are starting to embed the principles of the climate and ecological strategy will be to better articulate and where possible mitigate the impact of decision-making. While the current committee paper template includes a section for authors to set out the environmental impacts of proposals, there is no further guidance for authors and this is not completed consistently or robustly. It also doesn’t go into any great depth, with responses often completed later in the process with little or no opportunity to interrogate the assertions.

With the above in mind, a tool has been developed to enable authors to rapidly identify and understand the implications of their proposals from a climate, ecological and adaptation perspective in line with the ambitions of the strategy. This tool, which would be visual and supplemented with a short commentary, would be inserted into the existing committee template in place of the existing ‘environmental implications’ section. It should allow for greater deliberation, more transparency of impact, and ensure that more informed decisions are made moving forward to ensure that the council is on track to meet its obligations in the climate and ecological strategy. This paper presents the climate and ecological impact assessment tool and proposals to integrate it as part of Dorset Council’s democratic decision-making process.

Recommendation:

To support the integration of the climate and ecology decision tool into the democratic decision-making processes.

Reason for Recommendation:

The climate and ecology decision tool provides a robust, transparent, accessible and in some instances measurable process to support the delivery of the climate and ecological strategy and council plan ambitions and will enable policy makers to understand the wider implications on climate, ecology and adaptation of decisions being taken.

³ [Councilor workbook: The local pathway to net zero | Local Government Association](#)

1. Report

- 1.1 The climate and ecological emergencies that we are now facing are well documented. The discussions at COP27 for climate in Egypt, alongside the more recent COP15 discussions on biodiversity in Montreal, highlighted the scale of the challenges. These twin emergencies require systemic responses that need to permeate decision-making across multiple areas; transport, energy, infrastructure, planning, housing and industry to name but a few. There isn't a single service, department or team that can deal with the scale of the challenges.
- 1.2 The Dorset Council climate and ecological emergency strategy, adopted by full Council in July 2021, highlighted the need to ensure that its aims and objectives were fully embedded in decision-making processes. It also contained targets for Dorset Council to decarbonise its own operations by 2040, as well as show the leadership required to help Dorset become net zero by 2050. The refreshed strategy will also have more robust targets for biodiversity recovery by 2030 and there will be a greater focus on adaptation as well.
- 1.3 The committee paper template currently includes a section is for environmental implications, but completion of this section is inconsistent, and the information provided is often insufficiently robust to support members to understand the wider climate, ecological and adaptation implications of the proposal and to effectively inform the decision-making process. This also extends to other decision-making processes such as those for capital programmes or procurement which seek a consideration of climate and ecological impacts but have no robust guidance against which to assess.
- 1.4 To address this situation a climate and ecological decision tool has been developed. This has two key roles;
 - i) to inform authors of the implications of their proposal, enabling improvements to be made during project and/or policy development and;
 - ii) to ensure decision makers are given a clear indication of climate and ecological implications to inform debate and decision-making.

- 1.5 The tool has been developed from a review of national best practice and engagement with services from across directorates, as well as both corporate & senior leadership teams. This has helped to refine the tool and ensure it is simple, quick, easy to use and fit for purpose.
- 1.6 **How the tool works** - it consists of a set of simple questions which will guide authors to quickly assess the implications for their proposal and seek some quantification of impacts where available. Responses to the questions are analysed automatically and a graphical representation of the impacts against the key objectives of the council's climate and ecological emergency strategy is produced. This is in the form of a wheel, which provides a red/amber/green rating to visually represent the key impact areas, both positive and negative and their potential scale.
- 1.7 To ensure a clear balance between the climate and ecological considerations and wider social and economic priorities of the council, the decision tool will also provide the ability for authors to reference the other 4 key priorities of the council plan. These areas are also represented in the inner circle of the wheel indicating a red/amber/green rating for how the proposal also benefits or impact these areas.
- 1.8 In addition, the tool will provide a broad quantification of implications where these are known and will offer some broad recommendations for further consideration. An example of the decision wheel output is shown in Appendix A.
- 1.9 **How will it be used** - it is proposed that the tool will initially be integrated into democratic report writing processes and report authors will be required to undertake the assessment and include the tool as part of the committee paper. This will be a requirement prior to paper sign off and publication. Officers will be encouraged to use the tool at the earliest stages to inform the development of proposals.
- 1.10 **Next steps** - Following feedback from Audit and Governance committee the tool will be finalised for presentation to cabinet in March 2023, with the aim of introducing its use thereafter in liaison with democratic services. Its introduction will be supported by some training assets and a network of staff to assist authors to complete the tool as required, with further support offered from the council's sustainability team as required in the initial stages. It will be mandatory to complete this process as part of the committee paper.

1.11 Over time it is envisaged that the tool will be integrated into other decision-making processes to include capital bids, policy and strategy development, transformation projects, major purchases & contracts, options appraisal, and business cases.

1.12 The tool will evolve and develop over time and further work is underway to ensure its integration with other tools being developed to support the decision-making processes, such as equalities impact assessment and risk assessments.

2. **Financial Implications**

2.1 There are no financial impacts of using this tool, however the overall aim is to assist the council in making decisions that are informed by a consideration of the climate and ecological implications. In turn this should help to align resources with one of the council's key objectives.

3. **Environmental Implications**

3.1 This paper aims to introduce a robust process to enable environmental, climate and adaptation considerations to be consistently identified and understood as an integral part of report writing. It will provide members with a full appreciation of the environmental implication of proposals to inform decision making. While there are other models in existence, it is felt that this decision-tool will in many ways be ground-breaking in the way that it integrates climate, environment, adaptation and other council priorities.

4. **Well-being and Health Implications**

There are no specific health and well-being implications of this tool

5. **Other Implications**

None

6. **Risk Assessment**

6.1 Having considered the risks associated with this decision; the level of risk has been identified as:

Current Risk: high

Residual Risk: medium

The risk is identified as high, as there is currently insufficient and inconsistent information being provided to decision makers on the environmental and climate implications of proposals. A robust process will reduce the risk to medium, embedding the council-wide approach required to accelerate change.

7. **Equalities Impact Assessment**

A full assessment has not yet been undertaken, however initial feedback has identified that further work is required to ensure that the visual output of the tool is accessible. Further work will be undertaken prior to cabinet after further consultation.

8. **Appendices**

Appendix A – example output from climate and ecological decision tool

9. **Background Papers**

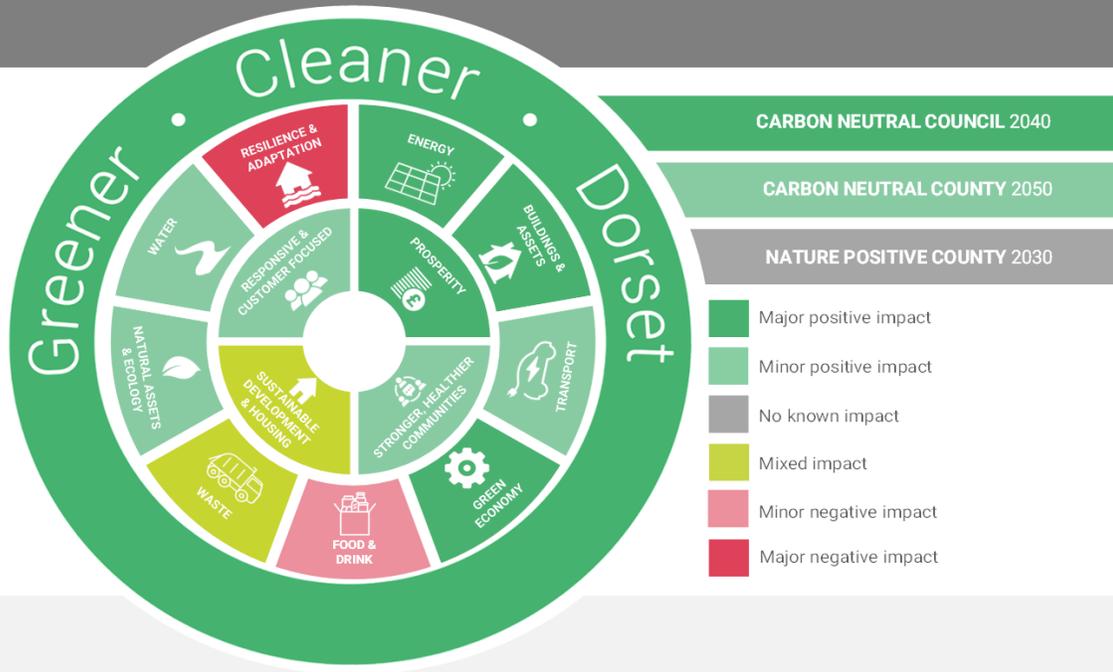
Appendix A – Example output from Climate and Ecological decision wheel

DECISION WHEEL

Climate & Ecological Impact



Dorset Council



CARBON NEUTRAL COUNCIL 2040

CARBON NEUTRAL COUNTY 2050

NATURE POSITIVE COUNTY 2030

- Major positive impact
- Minor positive impact
- No known impact
- Mixed impact
- Minor negative impact
- Major negative impact

Project Title

Commentary

Quantitative Impact on CEE targets (if known)

Recommendations

