

Cabinet

28 March 2023

Natural Environment, Climate and Ecology Decision Wheel

For Decision

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

Local Councillor(s): County Wide

Executive Director: A Dunn, Executive Director, Corporate Development

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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 into 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 Natural Environment, Climate and Ecology Strategy re-iterates the council's

¹ [ClimateChange | United Nations](#)

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

ambition and incorporates more robust targets for nature recovery by 2030 and a greater focus on adaptation and resilience to a changing climate.

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 for ensuring that services are starting to embed the principles of the Natural Environment, Climate and Ecology 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 will 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 be noted that this tool will not be used for the planning and licensing committee meetings due to it not being a material consideration). 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. It should be noted that this tool is not something that will stop decisions; it is simply aimed at making the impact more transparent to support decision-making.

This paper presents the Natural Environment, Climate & Ecological decision tool and proposals to integrate it as part of Dorset Council’s democratic decision-making process.

Recommendation:

That cabinet:

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

1. Supports the integration of the Natural Environment, Climate & Ecological decision tool into the democratic decision-making processes of Dorset Council, with inclusion of the model in the committee templates being a prerequisite for sign-off.
2. Supports the integration of the Natural Environment, Climate & Ecological decision tool into the Capital Strategy and Asset Management Group, and its associated sub-groups, and the longer-term aspiration to embed into the procurement and policy processes of Dorset Council.

Reason for Recommendation:

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

1. Report

- 1.1 The climate and ecological emergencies that we are now facing are well documented. The discussions at COP27⁴ for climate in Egypt, alongside the more recent COP15⁵ 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 Natural Environment, Climate & Ecological strategy will also have more robust targets for nature recovery by 2030 and there will be a greater focus on adaptation and resilience as a result of climate change as well.
- 1.3 The committee paper template currently includes a section for environmental implications, but completion of this section is inconsistent,

⁴ [ClimateChange | United Nations](#)

⁵ [UN Biodiversity Conference \(COP 15\) \(unep.org\)](#)

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 will the tool work** - an author completes a set of simple questions. Responses to the questions are analysed automatically and a graphic is generated which provides a red/amber/green rating to visually represent the key impact areas, both positive and negative, and their potential scale on the key objectives of the Natural Environment, Climate and Ecological strategy. To ensure a clear balance between the climate and ecological considerations and wider social and economic priorities of the council, the decision tool also provides the ability for authors to reference the other 4 key priorities of the council plan. These areas are represented in the inner circle of the wheel, providing a red/amber/green rating for how the proposal also benefits or impacts these areas.
- 1.7 The tool will quantify carbon emissions and land brought into positive management to indicate the proposal's impact on our publicly declared targets, as well as providing recommendations to reduce the proposal's impact on the Natural Environment, Climate and Ecological strategy aims and ambitions. An example of the decision wheel output is shown in Appendix A.

- 1.8 **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 “decision wheel” as part of the committee paper, under the “Environmental Implications” section of the committee paper template, 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. This will allow the author time to adapt the proposal to include recommendations, run the wheel again, and achieve better results to present to the committee.
- 1.9 **Next steps** - it is proposed to make it mandatory to complete a wheel as an integral part of the part of the committee paper process.
- 1.10 The tool’s introduction will be supported by:
- Training of our network of green champions and business partners, who can then assist report authors to complete the tool if required, with further support provided by the council’s sustainability team as necessary.
 - Guidance for authors.
 - Training for members and decision makers to assist with its interpretation.
 - Communications and promotion to inform those developing proposals of its availability and benefits of using it early in the development process.
 - Further work to improve accessibility.

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.

- 1.11 A link will be provided on the Microsoft form to allow feedback which will be collated and used to help improve and develop the tool over time.
- 1.12 Further work is underway to integrate this tool 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 and associated decision-making processes. It will provide members and decision-makers with a fuller 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

- 6.2 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.

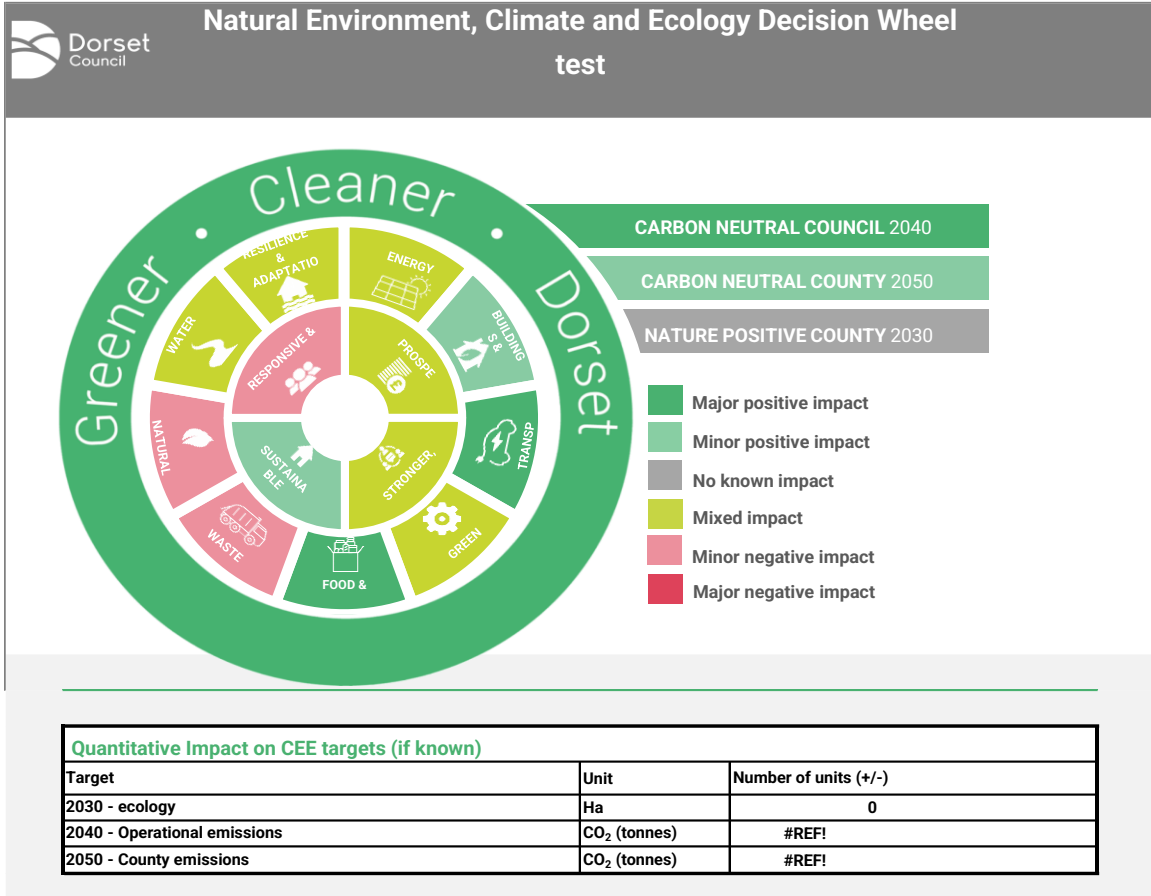
7. **Equalities Impact Assessment**

- 7.1 A full assessment has not yet been undertaken, however initial discussions have highlighted the need to address colour blindness and ensure availability of text to support the graphical wheel. It is envisaged that an accessible version of the wheel will be made available in an appendix alongside the recommendations for improvement. The Appendices provide example outputs from climate and ecological decision tool.

8. **Background Papers**

[Audit and Governance Committee, 16 January 2023 – Council Decision Making – Building in Climate and Ecological Considerations.](#)

Appendix A – Example output from Climate and Ecological decision wheel



Appendix B : Recommendations to improve or mitigate project impact on Sustainability

Recommendations	Responses – how will this be incorporated into your proposal? If not, please explain rationale.
Energy	
Ensure all electrical equipment is the most energy efficient	
Buildings & Assets	
Ensure the building will be resilient to climate change i.e. protected from flooding, coastal erosion, high winds or extreme heat	
Transport	
No recommendations found for this category	
Green Economy	
Provide advice and/or signpost business to sources of information on how they can become more resource efficient	
Food & Drink	
No recommendations found for this category	
Waste	
Look at ways to reduce the amount of waste produced	
Natural Assets & Ecology	
Use the opportunity to bring land into positive management	
Use the opportunity to create a new or protect existing marine habitats	
Water	
No recommendations found for this category	
Resilience & Adaptation	
No recommendations found for this category	