



Progress on the Environment Strategy (2020)



## Rother District Council

<b>Report to:</b>	Overview and Scrutiny Committee
<b>Date:</b>	15 March 2021
<b>Title:</b>	Progress on the Environment Strategy (2020)
<b>Report of:</b>	Environment and Policy Manager
<b>Ward(s):</b>	All
<b>Purpose of Report:</b>	To update Members on progress of the implementation of the above strategy

### Officer

**Recommendation(s):** It be **RESOLVED**: That:

- 1) the progress made against the Environment Strategy (2020) included in the Appendices A and B be noted;
  - 2) future progress reports on the Environment Strategy will include reporting from Services of the Council, as the Strategy is embedded throughout the organisation; and
  - 3) a review of the Environment Strategy is undertaken annually; the review completion to coincide with the Strategy's adoption date in September 2020.
- 

### Introduction

1. On 16 September 2019, full Council passed a motion declaring a 'Climate Emergency' and made a carbon neutrality commitment for Rother District Council (RDC) with a target date of 2030. The Climate Change Steering Group (CCSG) has been established by Cabinet to develop, plan, and initiate the steps that the Council will need to take to meet this highly ambitious target. The Environment Strategy (The Strategy) was developed in 2019 and subsequently adopted on 21 September 2020. The Strategy and its action plan is delivered across all the Council's service areas.
2. This report is intended to update Members on progress made since the Environment and Policy Manager updated the CCSG during the group's 25 November meeting on the activities she had undertaken in a three month period since her appointment in August 2020, as detailed in item CCSG20/8. Overall, this report covers a six month period since August 2020.

### The Strategy

3. The Strategy's vision is:

*"The air will be cleaner as the need to travel will be reduced and those of us that do travel will travel by bike, public transport, electric vehicle, or on foot. The natural and built environment will be enhanced and protected for current and future communities. The Council will be a carbon neutral organisation; the*

*district will be tackling and adapting to climate change. More energy will come from renewable or low-carbon sources, such as solar. Fewer people will live in fuel poverty. Waste will be reduced. The district will be resilient to the impacts of climate change including heatwaves, droughts, and flooding. We will each use less water. Everyone will play their role in reducing their impact on the environment”*

4. The CCSG20/8 report established that, from the perspective of different levels of control and influence, the following priorities are within the scope of The Strategy:
  - Air quality, active/ sustainable transport
  - Sustainable waste management
  - Sustainable energy
  - Protecting and enhancing biodiversity
  - Construction and existing buildings
  - Environmentally friendly council
5. Active / sustainable transport is the responsibility of East Sussex County Council as the transport authority. However, this is a very pertinent issue in a primarily rural district such as Rother. Therefore, it is considered that it is appropriate for it to be included in the priorities for this Council.
6. Key performance indicators (KPI) for The Strategy are:
  - Building environmental evidence / driving environmental improvements
  - Partnership working
7. The Strategy has a dual focus: i.e. it is both internally and externally facing.
8. **Internal focus:** The CCSG20/8 report explored linkages between The Strategy’s priorities with existing RDC activities, in recognition that existing RDC staff and functions are already delivering on aspects within the identified priority areas. Notably, Neighbourhood Services whose remit covers the priority areas of waste management, biodiversity and coastal management. Major Projects team leading on new housing developments on behalf of RDC; Environmental Health, Licensing and Community Services responsible for environmental health and who sit on the Sussex Air Partnership; and at a strategic level Planning Policy, with its policies for new developments that encompass a wide range of topics from renewable energy, built environment, biodiversity, air quality, to transport and green spaces.
9. **Internal resource gaps:** The exploration of linkages between The Strategy’s priorities with existing RDC activities has identified several resource gaps within the current Rother District Council staffing structure. The gaps represent risks for the organisation in terms of delivery of The Strategy and are included in the Risk Issues Log of the CCSG20/8 report. Three of the gaps have been reported in the CCSG20/8 report and all are shown in Appendix C against the organisation’s structure and The Strategy’s priorities:
  - Active/ sustainable transport lead
  - Strategic lead for green and blue infrastructure
  - Energy efficiency/ carbon reduction specialist
  - GIS/ environmental data mapping lead

- Internal and external communications leads
10. The Environment and Policy Manager works across the whole Council. Quoting from the CCSG20/8 report: “The Environment and Policy Manager is not necessarily the primary delivery lead, but their role is to engage in discussions with other functions on how their own approaches and objectives will align with the new Strategy, with an agreement on any reporting mechanisms.”
  11. **External focus:** The Strategy has a strong commitment to working with partners in order to meet its goals. It recognises that collaborative working is critical to the successful delivery of the new Rother Environment Strategy. The core stakeholders include local environmental groups, local volunteer environmental officers, Rother parish and town councils and Rother Association of Local Councils (RALC). It represents a core group of circa 250 stakeholders.

### **Past and current activities**

As per the activities outlined in the CCSG20/8 report:

#### **Partnership working**

12. The Strategy sets out partnership working as a key approach to its delivery, stating: “Some of these partnerships are in place already and others will emerge.”
13. Ten partnership projects have been initiated within the first six months of The Strategy’s delivery. The projects meet The Strategy’s KPIs set out in Section 6 of 1) Building environmental evidence / driving environmental improvements; and 2) Partnership working.
14. The projects engage external partners who are operating in the environmental sphere within the Rother District, as well as colleagues internally across different functions. This is in recognition that environmental issues impact all functions across the organisation. The partnership working approach fosters collaboration and enables sharing of knowledge and new knowledge creation. The approach is critical for enabling future collaborative activities both internally and externally.
15. The projects delivered in partnership include four short 30-day placements that are part of MSc courses at University of Brighton, benefiting from RDC’s membership with the Clean Growth Hub. Two are large scale projects of up to 12 months duration: Bexhill i-tree study and tree planting strategy, and the Electric Vehicle (EV) charging project for RDC-owned car parks.
16. An overview of the past and existing projects and activities that have been initiated as part of The Strategy’s delivery are included in Appendix A.

#### **Monitoring and Evaluation Framework**

17. The development of this framework is linked to the matter of governance. It will be informed externally by partnership working arrangements developed over time with external partners (work in progress) and internally through further understanding of the organisation’s culture, structure, and its priorities. This activity is related to the annual review and update of The Strategy document

that is planned to take place yearly each August/September.

## **Communication and Engagement Plan**

18. To aid the delivery of The Strategy, a clearly defined communication and engagement plan is required. Well-planned communication around The Strategy is key to effectively promoting the work and activities of core stakeholders and driving the environmental agenda. Obvious aims include:
  - Raise awareness of the natural beauty, natural environment, and green spaces in the Rother district.
  - Inspire, share knowledge, and raise awareness of innovative environmental initiatives and technology introduced across the Rother district.
  - Connect people by raising awareness of environmental groups and their activities across the Rother district.
19. An external communications specialist has been appointed to create a framework and a plan for communication and engagement, working closely with our Communications Team at East Sussex County Council. A progress overview is enclosed in Appendix B.

## **Corporate Plan 2021–2027**

20. The new draft corporate plan is currently out for consultation: <https://www.rother.gov.uk/consultations/corporate-plan-2020-2027/>. A response will be formulated from the perspective of the Environment Strategy.

## **Local Plan Review**

21. Some of the environmental evidence that underpins the Environment Strategy sits within RDC Planning Policy and *vice versa*. The tentative timetable for Local Plan production in 2021 relates to evidence gathering and informal targeted engagement up to and including Autumn 2021, after which a public consultation will take place. The draft timetable for the new Local Plan sees adoption towards the end of 2023. A dialogue with Planning Policy colleagues is already underway aiming to develop robust linkages between The Environment Strategy and the environmental evidence underpinning the new Local Plan. Discussions will continue going forward about how these links can be developed and strengthened and opportunities for joint working on evidence to support future planning policies in the New Local Plan. Two of the projects which have already been initiated under The Strategy will inform the new Local Plan, notably the Bexhill i-tree study and the MSc placement on onshore and offshore wind mapping.

## **Council reports / Environmental and sustainability implications**

22. RDC report's template, used to draft reports for Councillors' meetings, which this document is using, has a section called Implications. Two of these are called Environmental and Sustainability Implications. A discussion with Democratic Services and the Corporate Management Team has been initiated to modify the template. A clear guidance for staff with respect to these sections of the report template will be developed; to ensure that all proposals being put forward are robust and align with the RDC's climate emergency commitments

and the visions and aims articulated within The Strategy and any other relevant strategic and policy documents.

### **Green Spaces Management Review**

23. Improved green spaces are specified as outcomes under the draft corporate plan to maximise carbon reduction effectiveness. The importance of quality green spaces to people's health and wellbeing, as well as their proximity and accessibility to communities, has been brought to the fore by the COVID-19 pandemic. The true value and the benefits that RDC's green spaces and assets provide must be fully recognised – again, in alignment with RDC's 'Climate Emergency' commitment and the new Strategy and its key priorities.
24. The CCSG20/8 report contains this recommendation: "Given that the RDC grounds maintenance 10-year contract is nearing its end, the CCSG is urged to make a recommendation to Cabinet: to set-up a Steering Group or Task and Finish Group to use this opportunity to holistically review management of green spaces within Rother. Membership of this new review group/panel will include representatives of environmental organisations operating across Rother who have the relevant environmental expertise that is required to successfully guide such a comprehensive review and make robust recommendations for the benefit of the Rother's natural environment and its communities."
25. The Environment and Policy Manager has given advice to Neighbourhood Services on the grounds maintenance contract review and attended a meeting with the external contractor on 28 January 2021.
26. The role of RDC within this process will need to be reviewed following the establishment of the Bexhill-on-Sea Town Council and discussions on devolvement of services.

### **Risk issues log**

27. The Risk Issues Log in the CCSG20/8 report contains several issues that impact on The Strategy's delivery.
28. The matter of managing expectations of both external and internal stakeholders concurrently, giving the timing of the launch and the dual focus of The Strategy has been raised. Subsequently, in the first six months in the role, the Environment and Policy Manager has spent most time to date on externally-facing activities.

### **Funding**

29. The Strategy's budget for 2020/2021 has been spent on the following activities:
  - Solar Together Sussex
  - Bexhill i-tree study
  - External communications specialist support
30. Criteria will be developed on how The Strategy funding is spent in subsequent years e.g. on specific innovative projects that benefit activities of multiple departments and are delivered in partnership with local environmental

organisations, as well as who has a say in how this funding is spent. The CCSG and local environmental organisations will advise Cabinet on what initiatives The Strategy budget will support.

## Conclusion

31. The progress made in the first six months, outlined in this report, is a testament to the commitment to the climate emergency agenda within the Rother District. It shows that partnership working is possible and that it is the right approach for The Strategy's delivery.
32. The achievement of The Strategy's vision and its delivery are dependent on everyone playing their part, staff internally and external partner organisations.
33. The Strategy is now in the sixth month since adoption, and already a noteworthy amount of progress has been achieved to date. To support the continued progress around meaningful change, all functions and departments across the organisation must come together and embrace the climate emergency agenda set out within The Strategy and align their policies and practices accordingly. The Environment and Policy Manager will continue to aid colleagues internally with these changes. Adequate support is then required for the growing portfolio of environmental projects delivered in form of partnerships.

## Environmental implications

34. This report is about delivery progress against a key strategic document Rother's Environment Strategy 2020.

## Risk Management

35. The issues listed in the section Risk issues log represent a risk to the delivery of the Rother's Environment Strategy 2020.

Other Implications	Applies?	Other Implications	Applies?
Human Rights	No	Equalities and Diversity	No
Crime and Disorder	No	External Consultation	No
Environmental	Yes	Access to Information	No
Risk Management	Yes	Exempt from publication	No

Chief Executive:	Malcolm Johnston
Report Contact Officer:	Dr Kristina Sodomkova – Environment and Policy Manager
e-mail address:	<a href="mailto:kristina.sodomkova@rother.gov.uk">kristina.sodomkova@rother.gov.uk</a>
Appendices:	A – Environment Strategy projects and activities 2020-2021 B – Environment Strategy communications and engagement overview C – Stakeholder mapping: internal
Relevant previous Minutes:	CCSG20/8
Background Papers:	<u>Climate Change Steering Group - Wednesday 25th November 2020</u> 10.00 am

---

Reference  
Documents:

Rother Environment Strategy 2020  
<https://www.rother.gov.uk/strategies-policies-and-plans/environment-strategy/>

---



## Environment Strategy projects and activities 2020-2021

This list is not exhaustive; does not contain other activities already listed in the report and in the earlier document CCSG20/8.

Date(s)	Type	Title	The Strategy priorities	N. of Internal partners	N. of External partners	Comments
Aug 2020 Ongoing	Project	Solar Together Sussex	✓ Sustainable energy	0	10	
Sept 2020	Application	LGA Net Zero Innovation-programme	✓ Sustainable waste management	1 Neighbourhood Services/ Waste	0	Not successful
Sept 2020	Application	DEFRA Green Recovery Challenge Fund application	✓ Sustainable waste management	1 Neighbourhood Services/ Waste	3	Not successful/ no eligible partner
Sept 2020 Nov 2020	Activity CCSG20/9	Rother District Council Grants Schemes - an Environmental Review	✓ Environmentally friendly council	0	0	Recommendations made for change
Sept 2020 Dec 2020	Application	Public Low Carbon Skills Fund Application	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Sustainable energy</li> <li>✓ Construction and existing buildings</li> <li>✓ Environmentally friendly council</li> <li>✓ Carbon reduction</li> </ul>	4 Property Investment and Regeneration Corporate Core Estates Maintenance Neighbourhood Services	0	Awaiting confirmation/ Assumed not successful
Nov 2020	Activity CCSG20/10	East Sussex County Council Consultation: Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan	✓ Active/sustainable transport	1 RDC	0	
Nov 2020 Ongoing	Activity CCSG20/11	Paperless Pledge Staff Feb 2021 Members May 2021	✓ Environmentally friendly council	1 Democratic Services	0	
Scoping phase Nov 2020 End date TBC	Project	EV charging in RDC car parks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Sustainable energy</li> <li>✓ Active/ sustainable transport</li> <li>✓ Air Quality</li> </ul>	1 Neighbourhood Services	15+	
Nov 2020 Ongoing	Activity	Managing roadside verges for biodiversity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Biodiversity</li> <li>✓ Carbon capture/ storage</li> </ul>	1 Neighbourhood Services/ Parks	6	
Nov 2020 Ongoing	Project	Rother tree champions; building a community caring for the Rother treescape	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Biodiversity</li> <li>✓ Carbon capture/ storage</li> </ul>	1 Neighbourhood Services/ Parks	5	
Dec 2020	Project	MSc placement scoping Staff travel plan	✓ Environmentally friendly council	2 Active Rother HR	2	Student chose not to pursue the placement
Dec 2020	Project	MSc placement scoping Ecology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Biodiversity</li> <li>✓ Carbon capture/ storage</li> </ul>	1 Neighbourhood Services/ Parks	3	Student chose not to pursue the placement
Dec 2020 Jan 2021	Application	Rother District Grant Scheme application submitted by a partner  Partial funding sought for Bexhill i-tree study and tree planting strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Biodiversity</li> <li>✓ Air Quality</li> <li>✓ Carbon capture/ storage</li> </ul>	3 Environmental Health Planning / Planning Policy Neighbourhood Services/ Parks	4	Not successful

Jan 2021	Activity	Carbon literacy members training	✓ Environmentally friendly council	1 Democratic Services	1	Not pursued due to IT environment incompatibility
Jan 2021 May 2021	Project	MSc placement: Mapping bicycle parking infrastructure in Rother district	✓ Active/sustainable transport ✓ Carbon Reduction	3 Planning/ Public Realm Digital Services Neighbourhood Services	5+	
Jan 2021 May 2021	Project	MSc placement: Wind maps – Rother District offshore and onshore	✓ Sustainable energy	1 Planning/ Planning Policy	2	
Jan 2021	Application	Fund4Trees Bursary application for an MSc placement	✓ Biodiversity ✓ Carbon capture/ storage	0	0	Application successful
Scoping December 2020 Start Feb 2021 Dec 2021	Project	Bexhill i-tree study and tree planting strategy	✓ Biodiversity ✓ Air Quality ✓ Carbon capture/ storage	3 Environmental Health Planning / Planning Policy Neighbourhood Services/ Parks	Up to 10	
Feb 2021 May 2021	Project	MSc placement: Bio-beads in Rother	✓ Sustainable waste management ✓ Biodiversity	2 Environmental Health Neighbourhood Services / Coastal	1	
Mar 2021 May 2021	Project	MSc placement: A re-inventory of recently planted trees in Rother District Council's green spaces and parks	✓ Biodiversity ✓ Carbon capture/ storage	1 Neighbourhood Services / Parks	2	

## Communication and Engagement Plan

### Overview

An external communications specialist was appointed on 15<sup>th</sup> January 2021, working under the title Environment Strategy Communications Lead (ESCL). The ESCL is working on a part time basis, consisting of two days per week for an intended period of six months. At the time of writing, the ESCL has undertaken 8.5 days of work for RDC. The purpose of the appointment is to create a communications framework and strategy that fulfils the brief outlined in section 19 of this report, the ESCL is carrying out detailed research and analysis across several key areas:

- **Stakeholders/partners**  
Meeting and engaging with stakeholders and partners to understand their roles, activities, and barriers. This has been greatly aided by documents such as the stakeholder map in Appendix C created by the Environment and Policy Manager.
- **Nature and scope of issues**  
Understanding the global, national, and local environmental problems – their scope and severity, and the desired behavioural outcomes for internal and external stakeholders/members of the public.
- **Audience**  
Demographics/characteristics, points of contact, barriers, facilitators for change.
- **Existing communications environment**  
Communications channels (inc. availability and use), partner/competitor analysis, sentiment analysis – channel specific and broader context. Content review and strategy benchmarking.
- **Available resources**  
Financial resources, human capital, time restraints, internal and external resistance, general limitations and barriers.
- **Areas for improvement or greater focus**  
Review of previous activities (from a County and District perspective), key overall barriers, action plan to ensure successful implementation/delivery of the communications framework and strategy.

Once this research and analysis is complete, a strategy theory will be finalised. This involves selecting one or more of the most relevant social and behavioural science theories to act as a roadmap for studying the overall issues threatening the delivery of The Strategy, designing interventions to influence behavioural changes, and to evaluate the overall success of the project.

Once selected, key audience demographics (those identified with requiring the most behavioural change, those experiencing the greatest needs, or those with the widest influence on other audience areas) will be selected and ordered by priority. This will be used to develop the audience profiles which will underpin the framework and strategy.

Once these foundations have been created detailed communications objectives can be finalised, alongside the strategic approaches required to fulfil them. Together, these will create the core messages which will drive the communications strategy and supporting plan of activities. To complete the framework development, there will be a final review of any budgetary requirements and a plan for effectively monitoring and

evaluating The Strategy will be established.

## Progress

So far, introductions have been made to and information gained from a number of key partners and stakeholders (internal and external) across 19 Teams meetings, with regular update meetings being arranged with key groups such as the ESCC comms team.

Whilst in the early stages of the research and analysis process, certain projects require immediate content/publicity support and there is still an expectation of rapid content delivery from various stakeholders. Whilst this slows overall progress, the ESCL intends to allow early content development to support key projects using a preliminary working model based around a combination of the Health Belief Model (HBM) behavioural theory (designed to focus on (largely preventative) health-related behaviour at the level of the individual decision maker) and Bandura's Theory of Self Efficacy (TSE) (often included in both health and environmental behavioural approaches as it includes an individual's perception of their own capability/influence). This has been identified as the starting approach for several reasons:

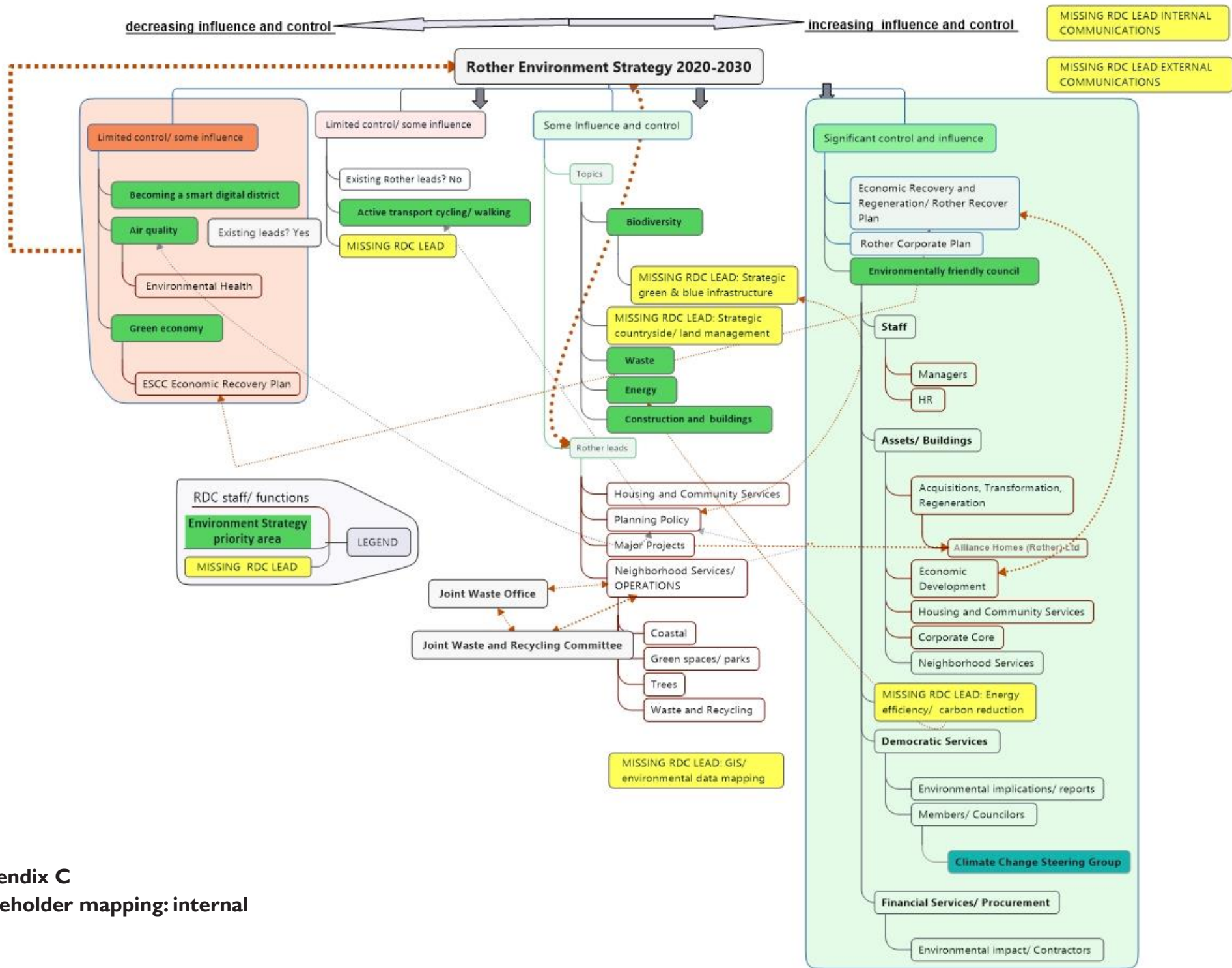
- Semantic and perceptive similarities between personal and environmental health
- Focus on long-term preventative action/lifestyle changes
- Similarity in educational barriers (confusion over personal impact/how to make changes/what effect those changes have)
- COVID-19 as an example of public response to systemic behavioural change (both require a 'new normal')
- Threat perception as a key behavioural driver
- Similarity in public disinformation campaigns – climate change deniers vs COVID-19 deniers/anti-vax movement.

When the ESCL was appointed, there were no supporting communications documents available (analysis, strategy, or guidelines). Draft brand guidelines have now been developed, and temporary access to RDC's social analytics has been granted to allow a full review. The ESCC team has been very receptive to and helpful in creating reports to support the ESCL's work.

Whilst environment-specific content hasn't previously been shared in any meaningful way, the assessment will also use COVID-19 related social media activity to gauge public sentiment and to shape a considered approach (i.e. avoiding shaming/didacticism and focusing on empathy, education, and support). Discussions have already been had with the ESCC comms team regarding negative public responses and the ongoing analysis will be of use to both parties.

Another key issue is the budget and resource available. With the ESCL working on a part time basis, supplementary tools for data collection and analysis would assist greatly in both the formulation and implementation/delivery of the framework and strategy. There has been previous work done within ESCC exploring tools such as sentiment analysis/social listening, but no formal record has been made and budgets were considered too limited to proceed. The ESCL is currently compiling this information for use in the overall analysis.



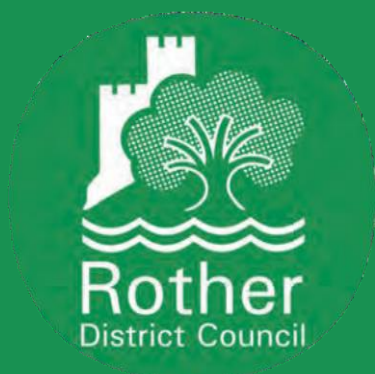


**Appendix C**  
**Stakeholder mapping: internal**



Report by Dr Kristina Sodomkova  
Environment and Policy Manager  
Kristina.Sodomkova@rother.gov.uk

Cover image "Rye Harbour Nature Reserve"  
by Neilhooting is licensed under CC BY 2.0



[www.rother.gov.uk](http://www.rother.gov.uk)

Rother District Council | Town Hall | Bexhill-on-Sea | East Sussex | TN39 3JX