

<b>Report title</b>	<b>Climate Change Communications Plan 2025/26</b>
<b>Report author</b>	Dan Callaghan, Senior Climate Change & Sustainability Officer
<b>Department</b>	Planning, Economy, & Built Environment

**Purpose of report:**

- **To resolve**

**Synopsis of report:**

**This report details the proposed topic for the Climate Change Communications Plan 2025-26. The Plan outlines how Runnymede Borough Council will engage with communities to encourage positive behavioural changes and improve their adaptive capacity and resilience in response to climate change while leading the way on environmental action. The Plan identifies the creation of the Runnymede Environment Champions Network approach as the proposed focus for the 2025-26 financial year, which has been discussed with elected members at the Climate Change Working Party and with other relevant officers across the Council. The objective for 2025-26 will be the creation of two networks: one internal staff network and one external local community network.**

**This report seeks Committee approval of the proposed theme for the Climate Change Communications Plan 2025-26 for Runnymede Borough Council. On approval, the climate change team will work with the communications team to develop a detailed communications plan to achieve the objectives stated in this report.**

**Recommendation(s):**

- 1. APPROVE the proposed Climate Change Communications Plan approach for the 2025-26 financial year.**

**1. Context and background of report**

- 1.1 The Corporate Business Plan 2022-2026 sets out how the Council will play a key role in creating a greener environment and ensuring an effective response to climate change, which is further detailed by the Council's Climate Change Strategy 2022-2030. Runnymede Borough Council declared a climate emergency in December 2023, which commits the Council to using its reasonable endeavours to continue its work to meet the Council's target of net zero operational emissions by 2030, and to use its sphere of influence to support the Borough and its communities to achieve the 2050 national net zero target for the UK.
- 1.2 To support the achievement of these net zero targets, a Climate Change Action Plan has been produced which was approved for adoption at Full Council on 29 February 2024. Action ID 8.2 states that the Council will "Work with our partners and

communities to encourage positive behavioural changes, supported by annual communications plans, which co-ordinate priorities and campaigns”.

- 1.3 This report outlines the proposal for the 2025/26 Climate Change Communications Plan. The proposed theme for the 2025/26 plan focusses on the recruitment of Environment Champions and development of two Environment Champion Networks. This aligns to Action ID 7.1.4 of the Council’s Climate Change Action Plan which states that the Council will “Explore benefits of appointing Climate Change & Nature Champions across the Council (Councillors and employees) to help drive delivery of climate change actions throughout members’ communities”.
- 1.4 The two networks to be recruited and initiated during the 2025/26 financial year are a staff/member network, ensuring the Council is leading the way on action across the organisation, and a community network, ensuring that the Council is supporting its communities in working towards the national 2050 net zero target and improving the resilience and adaptive capacity of communities in response to climate change.

## **2. Report and, where applicable, options considered and recommended**

- 2.1 Over the last 18 months, the Climate Change & Sustainability team has greatly expanded engagement on sustainability-related topics with various audiences. These include but are not limited to businesses (through the climate change summer of engagement and introduction of a sustainability category at the business awards), young people (through Runnymede Junior Citizen and the 2024/25 communications plan), local groups and faith groups (through the Great Big Green Week and attendance at local events), and Council staff (through carbon literacy and green travel survey).
- 2.2 However, much of this engagement has been focussed around specific campaigns or times of year e.g. the Great Big Green Week. In addition, during engagement with communities, despite a wide diversity of passionate environmental groups and advocates within the borough, awareness of one another and connections between groups is not frequently evident. Consequently, opportunities for shared learning, knowledge development, and a consistent approach to advance environmental action may be lacking.
- 2.3 Therefore, there is the potential to gain significant benefits for the Council and local communities from establishing structured and regular discussions between the Council and passionate individuals within specific stakeholder groups. This is a natural progression from the current position and fits well with the role of the Council as a facilitator to bring together groups and create shared learning and networking opportunities. This approach also links well with the formulation of a borough-wide Climate Change Adaptation and Resilience Strategy, planned for the 2025/26 Financial Year.
- 2.4 Within the context described in section 1 of this report, the concept of developing Runnymede Environment Champions and an Environment Champions Network has already been established. Whereas this approach could alternatively be termed ‘Climate Champions’, ‘Nature Champions’, ‘Sustainability Champions’ or several other alternatives, officers feel that each of these has a narrower remit than the broader title of Environment Champions which captures not only climate action, but also sustainability, biodiversity, recycling and more. This provides opportunities to engage in environmental topics beyond climate change and engage all service areas across the Council as part of this initiative.

- 2.5 This concept, and similar concepts, have been successfully implemented by several other Councils to connect effectively with communities on environmental action:
- Northumberland County Council set up a community climate champions network consisting of 27 different community groups providing a space for sharing resources and ideas, providing a direct communication route for the Council to access community groups, and providing training support to community groups in key areas.
  - Hammersmith & Fulham Council created Climate Champions by training local community leaders to take climate action, open to residents and project leads with early-stage ideas to encourage and inspire climate action.
  - The London Borough of Hounslow Environmental Champions Program aims to connect environmental groups and individuals in their borough with the goal of creating a cleaner, greener, and more sustainable community by bringing together like-minded champions of the environment. They offer monthly workshops and activities, an e-newsletter, project support, and networking.
- 2.6 Considering the potential benefits of this approach and the successes reaped by other Councils, the aim of the Environment Champions proposal is to promote more environmentally conscious communities, expand and improve knowledge transfer within networks, and support the resilience and adaptive capacity of communities. In addition, this network will enable the Council to improve engagement with communities on environmental action and contributions to the development of Council strategies, extend the reach of Council initiatives, and provide additional environmental ambassadors, internally and within the borough.
- 2.7 It is critical that the definition and role of an environment champion aligns with the intended objectives of the network for the Council while also providing pride and meaningful responsibility for individuals taking part in the initiative. As such, officers define an 'Environment Champion' as "A passionate change maker with the ability to drive local environmental action, inspire others as a positive environmental ambassador, and connect with peers to create a healthy and sustainable local environment".
- 2.8 While the remit and function of the individual environment champions is still to be finalised, and to some extent will remain fluid in response to the wider context within which they are formed, to provide meaningful responsibility for those within the network and to ensure that champions are able to help drive delivery of climate change and environmental actions throughout their communities (in line with action 7.1.4 of the Climate Change Action Plan, key responsibilities of Environment Champions will include:
- Inspire local environmental action
  - Act as a positive ambassador for environmental action and change
  - Extend the reach of Council initiatives and contribute to the improvement of Council strategies/priorities
  - Share best practice experience and case studies across the champions network and beyond
  - Engage in regular forums with the environmental champions network, and help to define the aims of the network

- 2.9 The proposed high-level objective for the 2025/26 financial year is the development of two Environment Champion networks, one for Council staff and one for local communities. These stakeholder groups are proposed based on the need for the Council to lead the way on development of environmental initiatives, and existing contacts built by officers which can be tapped into for network creation.
- 2.10 For Council staff, officers will seek to recruit at least 10 Environment Champions to form the network, ideally with at least one champion within each Council Service Area. For the local community, officers will seek to recruit at least 15 Environment Champions to form the network, ideally with at least one champion in each of the borough's wards. By aiming to have champions present in all Council Service Areas and all borough wards, the network is intended to be well dispersed throughout the borough, ensuring that the network reach is maximised internally and externally.
- 2.11 From April to September, officers will focus principally on the development of a detailed communications plan with the communications team to raise awareness of the upcoming network and recruit champions to be involved, while formalising their role, establishing terms of reference for the networks, and working across the Council to ensure all relevant service areas can benefit from the approach. While the detailed communications plan is to be developed, this outreach would likely include social media, newsletters, attendance at local events, direct outreach to community groups, and printed articles.
- 2.12 By the end of the 2025/26 financial year, the objective will be to have recruited the target number of Environment Champions in both networks and to have run one forum with each network to introduce members of the network to one another, agree the terms of reference, share ongoing Council initiatives of interest, and hear the champions views on the role of the network moving forward.
- 2.13 Following the 2025/26 financial year, the vision for the Environment Champions Network is to create further networks in defined stakeholder groups, such as businesses, schools, youth, and resident groups, where knowledge sharing can offer the most value for those in attendance, with groups brought together on an annual basis to celebrate success. These further networks will build on the successes and learnings of those developed in the 2025/26 financial year.
- 2.14 While development of the Environment Champions Network will form the basis for the climate change communications plan 25/26, it is important to note that there are several other initiatives that the Climate Change and Sustainability team will be promoting across the 25/26 financial year. These are likely to include Great Big Green Week, home energy efficiency grants, emissions reporting outcomes, provision of electrical vehicle charging infrastructure, and Green Travel Strategy outcomes.

### **3. Policy framework implications**

- 3.1 The Paris Agreement which is a legally binding international treaty on climate change was adopted by 196 Parties, including the UK at COP 21 in Paris on 12 December 2015 and came into force on 4 November 2016. Its goal is to limit global warming to well below 2 degrees Celsius, preferably 1.5 degrees Celsius, compared to preindustrial levels.
- 3.2 In June 2019, Parliament passed The Climate Change Act 2008 (2050 Target Amendment) Order 2019, which requires the Government to reduce the UK's net emissions of greenhouse gases by 100 per cent relative to 1990 levels by 2050.

- 3.3 In October 2022, the Council adopted its Climate Change Strategy which reconfirms the Council's commitment to acting on climate change. This strategy acknowledges the relevance of the national 2050 net zero target for the wider Borough of Runnymede and includes in the Strategic objectives that the Council will "positively engage with residents, businesses, community groups, national and local government and universities to share information and encourage positive behavioural change to adapt to or mitigate climate change".
- 3.4 In December 2023, the Council resolved to declare a climate emergency, recognising that the consequences of global temperatures rising above 1.5 degree Celsius are so severe that preventing this from happening must be humanity's priority. As such, the Council committed to using its reasonable endeavours to continue its work to meet the Council's target of net zero operational emissions by 2030, and to use its sphere of influence to support the Borough and its communities to achieve the 2050 national net zero target for the UK.
- 3.5 The Council's Climate Change Action Plan was adopted in 2024. This contains a series of recommended actions to deliver the Council's Climate Change Strategy. A first review of the Action Plan is currently taking place and will be considered by Corporate Management Committee in April.

#### **4. Resource implications/Value for Money**

- 4.1 Creation and implementation of the proposed Climate Change Communications Plan 2025/26 will occur in-house, as will the development of any associated graphics or promotional materials in relation to creation of the Environment Champions Network. Implementing the Plan will require combined resources from the Climate Change and Communications teams working closely with other relevant officers across the Council and with local communities and community groups to raise awareness. There will be a further resource need placed on those employees that become part of the internal Environment Champions Network, although the Climate Change and Sustainability Team will work with the relevant colleagues/managers to ensure that this does not have an adverse impact on their day-to-day working and that any time commitments associated with participation in the network are internally agreed before the network is established. Discussion with SLT on the resource required will be undertaken to ensure those released to join the network can be effective without adverse impact on their main role.
- 4.2 Within the climate change budget, there are monies available which can support implementation of the communications plan and development of the Environment Champions Network. While only a modest budget is envisaged to be required to support this initiative, officers will consider which engagement methods deliver the most cost-effective solutions to raise awareness of the network and initiate the scheme. Officers will consider learnings from previous communications plans and ongoing work by other service areas to identify which methods are best suited to achieve the campaign objectives. While it is difficult at this stage to state the expected cost associated with the Communications Plan, officers are confident any spending will not exceed those monies already available in the climate change budget.

#### **5. Legal implications**

- 5.1 The UK's Climate Change Act 2008 sets a legally binding UK-wide carbon budget and commits the UK to 'net zero emissions' by 2050. The UK has also signed and

ratified the United Nations Paris Agreement – a legally binding international treaty - which commits signatories to keep the increase in global average temperature to well below 2 degrees centigrade above pre-industrial levels, and to pursue efforts to limit the temperature increase to 1.5 degrees centigrade.

## **6. Equality implications**

- 6.1 The Council has a Public Sector Duty under the Equalities Act 2020 to have due regard to the nine 'protected characteristics' stated within the Act.
- 6.2 An Equalities Impact Assessment screening may be required depending on the details included in the Climate Change Communications Plan 2025/26 which will be developed following approval to progress with the Environment Champions approach. This will be assessed once the detailed Communications Plan document has been produced and discussed with the Disability Staff Network and Equalities groups for their input in creating an inclusive communications plan for this strategic priority.

## **7. Environmental/Sustainability/Biodiversity implications**

- 7.1 The Climate Change Communications Plan 2025/26 is expected to have a significant positive impact on environmental/sustainability/biodiversity implications within the Council and across the wider borough.
- 7.2 Internally, the appointment of Environment Champions across the organisation provides the climate change and sustainability team with a further reach and voice across the Council which is not consistently possible with two officers. Through providing training to recruited champions on climate change, sustainability, and biodiversity, and a regular forum to discuss these topics, it is intended that champions will spread the positive message of actions being taken across the Council to their own teams and that this acts as a catalyst to encourage further action and consideration of the environment in all decision-making processes, creating a culture of positive environmental action.
- 7.3 Through the local community network, the reach of the Council's information and promotions on a diversity of environmentally focussed topics can be expanded, engaging new audiences that may not have previously been accessible. Further, by bringing together passionate local environmental advocates and change makers, there are significant opportunities for shared learning and knowledge transfer, contributing to the further expansion of existing activities and introduction of new activities related to environmental action that may not previously have been known or possible to those within the network. Officers will seek to conduct regular evaluation with Environment Champions to ensure that these networks are being effectively created and leading to positive impacts, and where this is not seen to be the case, working with the network to identify suitable approaches which change this.

## **8. Risk Implications**

- 8.1 The main risk associated with the Climate Change Communications Plan 2025/26 is the failure to recruit the required number of Environment Champions to make the network a success. This will undermine the impact and potential reach of the initiative within the Council and the borough. This is considered a medium risk. Officers in the climate change & sustainability team will work closely with those in the communications team to ensure that the promotional activities internally and

externally are reaching the required audiences to promote the networks and ensure that the network is recruiting the right quantity and quality of champions.

- 8.2 There is a potential risk associated with a lack of sufficient resources, principally budgetary resources, to support the Environment Champions networks to undertake initiatives. This could limit the opportunity for the networks to create positive change and make disincentivise the group is their role. This is considered a medium risk. Paragraph 4.2 outlines that there is budget within the climate change team to support implementation of the Environment Champions Network, and officers will work closely with both networks to identify initiatives that they are keen to implement and support in seeking funding for these if not possible through the climate change budget. Both networks will be encouraged to consider a range of initiatives that could be worked towards, and therefore it is expected that some of these will have lower resource requirements, and could therefore be progressed more quickly, than others.
- 8.3 A further risk is differing opinions of those within the networks on their role and priorities moving forward. This is considered a low risk. While such differences of opinion are inherent within networks of this nature, officers will work to ensure that clear boundaries for the role and remit of champions and the network are established before the first meeting, and that a considered and open approach is taken to hearing feedback from all champions during the early stages. Where differences of opinion arise, these will be considered by officers who will aim to find a suitable compromise between parties that achieves multiple aims without compromising the intention with which the network was created.

## **9. Other implications**

- 9.1 The Environment Champions Network approach also aligns closely with other Corporate Strategies of the Council. The approach can advance the priorities of the 'Empowering our Communities' Strategy to 'Listen to our residents', 'Enable communities to help themselves', and 'Advocacy: standing up and pressing Government and other organisations to meet Runnymede residents' priorities'. It is also expected to contribute to the 'Organisational Development' Strategy by supporting creation of a Green Organisation, and the 'Health and Wellbeing' Strategy by creating a healthy environment for people to lead a healthy life.

## **10. Timetable for Implementation**

- 10.1 The Climate Change Communications Plan 2025/26 is to be created and implemented within the 2025/26 financial year. The detailed Communications Plan and early stages of implementation will begin in Q1 2025/26, with the full programme of champion recruitment expected in the first half of the financial year. The second half of the year will see the champion recruitment finalised, champions notified of their success, and the first forums for both networks expected in Q4 2025/26.

## **11. Conclusions**

- 11.1 Runnymede Borough Council has a crucial role to play in conserving and enhancing the environmental by leading the way, engaging with communities to encourage positive behavioural changes, and seeking opportunities to improve the adaptive capacity and resilience in response to climate change. This report and the proposed Environment Champions Network approach align strongly with this need and are a natural progression from the event focussed engagement officers have performed internally and externally over the last 18 months. The network has a significant opportunity to improve knowledge transfer, reach of initiatives, quality of strategies,

and genuine community engagement in shaping action, utilising passionate and inspiring individuals to further environmental action.

**12. Background papers**

- 12.1 Members attention is drawn to the Corporate Management Committee report of 29 February 2024 approving the Council's Climate Change Action Plan, which includes reference to development of an annual Communications Plan in Action ID 8.2 and exploring benefits of appointing Climate Change & Nature Champions across the Council in Action ID 7.1.4. This report is available here: [Meeting of Full Council on Thursday, 18th July, 2019 – Runnymede Borough Council](#)

**13. Appendices**

None