

Subject: Sussex Energy Update
Date of Meeting: 9 July 2025
Report of: Chair, Greater Brighton Economic Board
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Ward(s) affected: All

FOR GENERAL RELEASE

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT AND POLICY CONTEXT

- 1.1 On 16th July 2024 the Greater Brighton Economic Board (“the Board”) supported the launch of the Sussex Energy mission.
- 1.2 An update was provided in the subsequent Board meetings highlighting the progress made since the launch event.
- 1.3 This report gives a further Sussex Energy update setting out the work undertaken since the last Board meeting and the next steps in developing the mission.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 2.1 That the Board notes the progress on Sussex Energy.
- 2.2 That the Board supports the next steps needed to take Sussex Energy forward as set out in section 3.4.
- 2.3 That the Board agrees to receive a further update on Sussex Energy at the next Board meeting.

3. CONTEXT/ BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- 3.1 Sussex Energy aims to achieve net zero energy status by 2040 in the Sussex and Brighton region. This ambitious goal seeks to ensure that our community's energy use equals the amount of zero-carbon energy generated locally, thereby enhancing energy security, driving down energy bills and addressing urgent climate concerns, at the same time as driving economic growth.
- 3.2 This is a priority for the Greater Brighton Economic Board. Pace is needed to progress this in 2025/6 because climate change is cumulative, accelerating, and characterised by tipping points. This means delaying action makes solutions more challenging, costly, and potentially less effective.

3.3 This report is structured in line with the Sussex Energy 2025 Plan presented at the April 2025 Board meeting.

3.4 **UPDATE**

Network

The **Sussex Energy Partner Group's membership** has expanded to include the Sussex Chamber of Commerce, providing a business and skills perspective, along with representation from community energy organisations. This expansion enriches our monthly meetings and addresses the Board's feedback on incorporating a business viewpoint.

The first **Sussex Energy Forum** meeting is planned for Wednesday, 9 July. The Forum brings together individuals working on low-carbon energy solutions in Sussex to strengthen connections, accelerate their efforts, and co-create Sussex Energy. The inaugural, non-political meeting will focus on building relationships, exploring the challenges of scaling up low-carbon energy work, identifying where Sussex Energy can add the most value and spark momentum toward practical next steps and ongoing collaboration. The current proposal is to cultivate this community through three annual meetings (two virtual and one in-person) and a continuous online discussion. However, the 9 July meeting output might impact this proposed approach.

Work Plan

A **survey** has recently closed that sought to identify the challenges to low carbon energy work in Sussex. This survey was targeted at people working in energy in the region. Its results will inform the agenda for the Sussex Energy Forum on 9 July and help shape the Sussex Energy work plan.

Responding to the Board's aspiration for more rapid delivery, a working relationship has been established with the University of Sussex Sustainability Communications Manager and as a result a **communications plan** is being developed and a working group is forming to help build out the plan and to set up a communications workstream to provide ongoing support to Sussex Energy. It is clear there are some objectives of Sussex Energy that can be facilitated through communications (list below), so these are the starting point for the communications plan. These are all linked to either increasing the amount of zero carbon energy produced in Sussex, or reducing the amount of energy used (either via generating funding for the work or by helping residents / businesses / communities to make energy changes).

- Build reputation of low carbon energy work in Sussex to help attract funding. This would include messaging around why low carbon energy work is needed to combat climate change and the benefits of it.
- Encourage proactive investment by homeowners and businesses in energy efficiency and renewable installations to further the Sussex Energy mission.
- Promote Solar Together Sussex (aggregated buying of solar panels) to increase uptake.

- Highlight the proven track record and impact of community energy organisations to build public understanding and encourage participation in their projects.

Over time, as the challenges to low carbon energy work in the region are understood further and as more low carbon energy projects develop, other objectives that can be progressed with communications will become apparent. Therefore, having a communications workstream as a continual, supporting function will be useful.

Sussex Energy Funding

From the July 2024 Sussex Energy report, a total of £100,000 was agreed to be set aside from the Greater Brighton Economic Board Operational Budget to support Sussex Energy - £50,000 from 2024/25 and £50,000 from 2025/26. The Sussex Energy Partner Group has held several discussions, culminating in a workshop on 29 May to recommend how best to allocate this Board funding for the Sussex Energy mission.

During that session, we evaluated fourteen distinct options and identified four top priorities: (1) appointing a programme manager to attract funding and drive Sussex Energy projects forward; (2) cultivating a network of community energy champions; (3) expanding and aggregating large scale solar installations across Sussex to leverage economies of scale (referred to as “Solar Across Sussex” in this paper); and (4) conducting a strategic analysis of existing low-carbon energy initiatives—identifying gaps, anticipating changes under devolution, and advancing pipeline development.

The Sussex Energy Partner Group’s recommendation is to engage dedicated finance and technical expertise to serve as the linchpin for advancing regional energy initiatives. The responsibilities will encompass funding generation and investor engagement; spearheading the Solar Across Sussex initiative and working work with the Greater Brighton Economic Board Business Manager on regional resource and network coordination; and programme management and project delivery.

Their objective would be to identify, research and pursue national, regional, and private funding and financing opportunities (grants, capital investment, public & private) to a) increase the flow of investment into Sussex low-carbon energy projects and b) provide a case for financial backing for the role’s ongoing work. This would be critical to avoid the risk of losing momentum on the work. The UK Spending Review increases energy security and net zero investment spending (excluding Sizewell C) by 2.6%, with £8.3b to be invested in ‘homegrown clean power’ over the spending review period, while the government’s investment strategy identifies clean energy industries as a priority growth sector—highlighting strong policy and financial support for renewable energy infrastructure and long-term projects.

Under the Solar Across Sussex initiative, the objective is to work with the Greater South East Net Zero Hub to identify viable large solar generation sites; engage local authorities and land owners; advise on community engagement; develop aggregation models; navigate planning processes; and structure financing arrangements so that multiple solar projects can be progressed to become investment ready, with the potential of packaging them together into several, larger procurement opportunities to realise the benefits of economies of scale.

Concentrating resources on seasoned, renewable-energy expertise has the potential to accelerate momentum, unlock capacity through centralised coordination with partners, drive tangible progress against the Sussex Energy mission, and deliver a strong return on investment by attracting additional funding and reducing project costs through economies of scale.

Research is currently underway to determine the cost and optimal engagement model—whether via a consultancy contract, direct recruitment by a local authority or partner organisation, freelance arrangement, or secondment from an existing partner—with an emphasis on securing the right blend of experience and skills while ensuring rapid onboarding.

The estimated ballpark cost of the expertise (for a 12-month term) is £75,000, depending on the chosen engagement model. In addition, we recommend setting aside £25,000 to cover ancillary support, including commissioning targeted studies, communications and branding services, design and marketing collateral, and specialist consultancy to improve grant application success rates. These allocations will allow some resources necessary to deliver against the Sussex Energy mission effectively while maximising the impact of the Board's £100,000 investment.

Why Solar Across Sussex?

- Solar is a tried and tested renewable technology.
- Sussex enjoys one of the highest levels of annual sunshine in the UK.
- Through a network of experienced Community Energy Organisations, Sussex possesses deep expertise in community financial models that fund projects in ways that benefit local communities and secure buy-in.
- Sussex has technical know-how in solar installations.
- Localised electricity generation helps to enable other decarbonisation work. For example, technologies that transition from burning fossil fuels as their energy source to electricity, such as heat pumps, put a greater demand on the electricity grid. By having generation sources nearby, it can help to relieve local pinch points on the grid.
- The technology's value can be further enhanced by pairing installations with battery storage to enable load balancing, access flexibility services and increase self-consumption.
- By expanding large scale solar installations across Sussex, there will be jobs generated (e.g. electrical servicing, cleaning, grounds people), demand for skills and opportunities for start-ups.
- There is a potential to build procurement power by aggregating projects and where possible, principles could be built in to use this power to benefit the region e.g. by giving a weighting to local suppliers in procurement.

- There is potential to explore how the Solar Across Sussex initiative can support social benefits; for example by exploring the opportunity to provide cheap, clean energy to community shared facilities or charities/CICs delivering community benefits; by looking at policy around, profits from sites, or funds collected via section 106 or the community infrastructure levy being re-invested in the local community; or by increasing awareness of the Community Energy Organisation financial offer to allow communities to financially benefit from solar installations.

Devolution – Environment & Climate Change

In the Devolution White Paper, Environment and Climate Change was highlighted as an area of competence for Strategic Authorities. Officers from West Sussex County Council, East Sussex County Council, Brighton & Hove City Council, and Adur & Worthing Councils—each a member of the Sussex Energy Partner Group—have begun collaborating on a document to clarify the challenges and opportunities for Environment and Climate Change within a devolved Sussex and Brighton to use as a brief for senior officers involved in shaping devolution. Having this clarity, along with visibility of a project pipeline and of existing pockets of expertise could enable the newly formed Sussex & Brighton MCCA (Mayoral Combined County Authority) to deliver more effectively in the first years.

To inform this work, officers met with the Director for Environment at the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA). Key learnings included:

- **Established Collaboration:** GMCA's ten constituent authorities already had a mature, collaborative working relationship, long before devolution.
- **Political Commitment:** The GMCA mayor's manifesto featured carbon neutrality as a cornerstone policy, demonstrating high-level political buy-in which is a strong foundation to build on.
- **Funding Model:** A small number of Environment roles in the GMCA are funded through modest contributions from the local authorities. The remainder are funded through government/European programmes and small income streams.
- **Environment Combined Authority / Local Authority Relationship:** The GMCA Environment team supports local authorities to deliver their priorities by running collaborative, regional initiatives, such as grant funding opportunities. Local authorities remain independent and have a choice about whether they want to collaborate with the GMCA's initiatives.
- **Local Authority Energy Plans:** Local Authority Energy Plans (LAEPs) are useful as a basis for investment discussions. More useful to be online and dynamic rather than a single point of time report.
- **Governance Structures:** Task and finish groups have large memberships, only a small number actively contribute, which can risk the Combined Authority becoming a blocker rather than an enabler. To avoid this, more regularly refresh the groups.
- **Environmental Management System:** Implementing an environmental management system (or similar framework) from the outset ensures that climate and environmental considerations are embedded in all decision-making across the Combined Authority.

- **Cross-Functional Integration:** Embedding climate and environment staff within other teams reduces siloed working, even if positions remain funded by the climate budget.

Further meetings are being pursued with other Mayoral Combined Authorities—such as West Midlands, West Yorkshire, South Yorkshire, York and North Yorkshire, and West of England—to gather additional insights.

Sussex Energy Next Steps:

- *Network: Deliver the Sussex Energy Forum on 9th July capturing the outputs, processing them to inform the Sussex Energy work plan and harness the power of the forum to drive the work forward.*
- *Work plan: Analyse survey results to understand challenges to low carbon energy work in Sussex that can be improved through the Sussex Energy regional collaboration. Use this insight to guide the direction of the Sussex Energy work plan.*
- *Work plan: Prepare for a meeting with Sussex comms professionals from partner group organisations to discuss the idea of setting up a comms working group to progress a comms plan.*
- *Work plan: Further define the scope for the finance and technical expertise and investigate the cost and optimal engagement model to fulfil this function.*
- *Work plan: Brief Greater South East Net Zero Hub to start research on potential large scale solar generation sites in Sussex and Brighton.*
- *Devolution E&CC: Progress the development of the Environment and Climate Change brief.*
- *Devolution E&CC: Organise discussions with other combined authorities to learn from their journeys.*

4. ANALYSIS & CONSIDERATION OF ANY ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

- 4.1 The Board is unlikely to have sufficient funding directly for projects, but even if it could, the impact would be far less than incubating collaborative working to attract funding into the region for energy solutions, culminating in the implementation of scaled solutions which could make a large impact to the UK net zero goals. The Government has highlighted decarbonisation of energy as a priority with aims to transition to a zero-carbon electricity system by 2030, create 650,000 new jobs by 2030 through investment in clean energy and infrastructure and install thousands of clean power projects which local people directly benefit from.
- 4.2 The Government's energy ambition confirms the right approach is an ambitious goal that the Sussex Energy mission aligns strongly with.
- 4.3 Alternative individuals or consultants could lead on shaping the Environment and Climate Change approach in the submissions for the proposed Sussex and Brighton Mayoral Combined County Authority. However:
 - Sussex Energy is working on the same geography as a future proposed Sussex and Brighton Mayoral Combined County Authority.

- A wide network of contacts has been built (from Sussex local authorities and other organisations) that have the necessary expertise to inform an Environment and Climate Change approach for the proposed Sussex and Brighton Mayoral Combined County Authority in a way that can gather input from many stakeholders, so increasing buy in to the approach.
 - A Steering Group, including representation from the 3 Sussex upper tier authorities, has been established and is working together successfully.
 - Conversations about ways to leverage strategic level coordination to drive growth and add value have started in the Sussex Energy Steering Group.
- 4.4 The Greater South East Net Zero Hub work with public sector organisations and their stakeholders to support the development and financing of local net zero projects to increase the number, scale and quality of projects. They will be part of the Sussex Energy Core Network and will support to progress Sussex Energy e.g. with their expertise and sector knowledge. Whilst they will be an active partner, they are not in a position to deliver the range and scale of activity with the geographical focus envisaged for Sussex Energy.

5. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT & CONSULTATION

- 5.1 Community engagement is an important principle to Sussex Energy. As mentioned in 3.4 under 'Network' the first Sussex Energy Forum meeting is planned for Wednesday, 9 July. The Forum brings together individuals working on low-carbon energy solutions in Sussex to strengthen connections, accelerate their efforts, and co-create Sussex Energy. The current proposal is to cultivate this community through three annual meetings (two virtual and one in-person) and a continuous online discussion. However, the 9 July meeting output might impact this proposed approach.
- 5.2 As mentioned in 3.4 under the 'Sussex Energy Funding' section, as part of the Solar Across Sussex initiative, advice on community engagement would be provided, along with awareness promotion of community financial models that fund projects in ways that benefit local communities and secure buy-in.
- 5.3 The ongoing approach will vary depending on the proposed energy solution, from consulting the community, offering community ownership options to enabling communities to implement their own solutions. Community engagement options will be different for each working group / project but will be considered and prioritised.

6. CONCLUSION

- 6.1 The Board is asked to agree the recommendations 2.1-2.3, which will mean the work to operationalise Sussex Energy will continue.

7. FINANCIAL & OTHER IMPLICATIONS:

Financial Implications:

- 7.1 In July 2024, the board agreed to earmark a total of £100,000 from the Greater Brighton Economic Board Operational Budget to support the Sussex Energy mission. An initial £50,000 was allocated from the 2024/25 Operational Budget (agreed by the board to be carried forward to 2025/26 in April 2025), and a further £50,000 was allocated from the 2025/26 Operational Budget.
- 7.2 Section 3.4 of this report outlines the proposals for utilising this funding to advance regional energy initiatives, including work to attract further funding opportunities. All activity described within Section 3.4 is expected to be delivered within the £100,000 allocation.

Finance Officer Consulted: Haley Woollard, BHCC Head of Corporate Finance & Deputy Chief Finance Officer

Date: 26/06/25

Legal Implications:

- 7.2 There are no legal implications arising directly from this report.

Lawyer Consulted: BHCC Head of Legal (Commercial), Siobhan Fry

Date: 26/06/25

Equalities Implications:

- 7.3 Sussex Energy is aiming to ensure that the benefits of the transition to net zero energy will be shared across the City Region, whilst addressing fuel poverty.

Sustainability Implications

- 7.4 The driving force behind Sussex Energy is to reduce carbon emissions and accelerate the journey to net zero, which will help protect the environment, enhance natural capital, limit the effects of climate change, and build resilience in key infrastructure and the supply of energy. This is the foundation of all work under the Sussex Energy umbrella.

SUPPORTING DOCUMENTATION

Appendices:

None