

Cllr Kira Gabbert
Executive Support Assistant to the Portfolio Holder for Resources,
Commissioning and Contract Management -

Having been appointed by Cllr Graham Arthur in May 2019, this is my first year in the position of the Executive Assistant with this Portfolio. I shall briefly set out my involvement with the Portfolio to date.

- Solar Farms: identifying potential sites and financial viability

The project is multifaceted and spans several Portfolios, however my initial focus was on a possibility of income generation. Subject to return on investment being acceptable, this project could prove extremely versatile. Solar farm(s) could generate additional income for the Council and at the same time help the Council achieve its' commitment to become carbon-neutral by 2029.

I initially looked at West Suffolk Council's owned Toggan Farm, at their financial model and expected rate of return on investment.

I have also examined the financial model for one of the West Sussex Council solar farms, and both the projected rate of return over 20 years and a payback time were found to be favourable.

Broadly, returns could be expected to be in the range of 6-9% per year. Investment required is in the region of £700K-1M per 1MW unit (excluding cost of land, on an assumption that units would be built on Council owned land). An initial meeting was held with a firm that facilitate investments into solar farms, and following the meeting a decision was made to research the possibilities further.

Having briefly looked at several sites within the Borough that had been previously considered and found unacceptable and which still didn't appear viable for various reasons, I have asked the Council's Carbon Programme Manager to compile a comprehensive list of all potentially suitable sites.

The list is now being compiled employing three sources (Cushman & Wakefield, GIS software and the Council's Asset Register). Once suitable sites are identified, cross-checked and shortlisted, a detailed technical site(s) assessment will be progressed.

Quotations for detailed assessments are being sought.

In terms of funding, a meeting was held with a firm that administers the Mayor of London Energy Efficiency Fund. Low interest loans can be obtained for solar farms' purposes but certain conditions, including technical, should be met. This is something that can be evaluated once the sites and potential achievable energy output is better understood.

There are of course important planning considerations and hurdles to overcome including the issue of Green Belt. However, with the carbon management agenda gaining traction, it should be possible to make a strong case demonstrating benefits to solar farm projects. Ultimately, land can easily be returned to Green Belt following dismantling of units once solar farms' lifespan comes to an end (~ 25 years).

I know that officers in the Environment department and members of the Environment PDS Committee are taking a close interest in this project from the perspective of achieving the Council's carbon neutral target, and updates will be provided in due course to all relevant PDS committees.

- **HR and procedures**

I have initiated discussions with HR department on a subject of disclosure obligations applicable to those Council employees working with children, families and vulnerable adults, but which employees are not necessarily qualified social care professionals. This is being carefully considered in the context of Statement of Employment Particulars, Contract of Employment, prescribed regulatory bodies' requirements and the implied duty of mutual trust.

- **Customer services, Liberata and digital self-service drive**

Earlier this month, I spent a day at the Reception and the Call Centre, both run by Liberata. The experience was thought-provoking and positive. I have to compliment Liberata on their smooth and professional running of the service. I witnessed the staff going an extra mile to help our most vulnerable residents, for example those struggling with housing issues, even on a day when no scheduled housing appointments are normally held.

On the operations side, I was impressed by the drive to steer residents towards digital self-service. The focus is on educating residents how to perform simple IT tasks, for example scanning and attaching documents to claim forms using PCs and iPads (which are available in the Reception area for free use by the residents) and their phones. But there is more to be done. With the operations manager, we examined the current landscape of digital self-service and talked about how Liberata are hoping to progress the initiatives further. We discussed barriers potentially preventing the widening of services transformation. Migration away from legacy systems, as well as changing residents' behaviors would often be considered as main barriers. What I observed on the day was that, as long as residents felt they had help and support available they were very much willing to try self-service.

The configuration of the Reception area would be something to look at, as part of a wider review, to see if this space could be made more suitable and conducive to self-service.

There are big savings to be achieved through digital transformation program, and I shall be looking at our overall digital self-service strategy and particularly at barriers to implementation in this area and within other departments.

I also spent some time with the Registrars, observing their work on an ordinary day. The service the team members are providing is simply outstanding, with a particular focus on customer satisfaction. At the same time the department is delivering the highly ambitious income targets.

I have joined meetings with the Portfolio Holder and the officers as and when required as well as regularly attending Executive, Resources and Contracts PDS Committee meetings.