

NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL
CABINET PANEL ON THE ENVIRONMENT
MEETING HELD IN THE REMOTE MEETING
ON WEDNESDAY, 20TH MARCH, 2024 AT 7.30 PM

MINUTES

Present: *Councillors: Amy Allen (Chair), Steve Jarvis, Dominic Griffiths, Chris Hinchliff and Juan Cowell.*

In Attendance: *Georgina Chapman (Policy & Strategy Team Leader), Ellie Hollingsworth (Policy & Strategy Trainee), Caroline Jenkins (Committee, Member and Scrutiny Officer), James Lees (Climate Change and Sustainability Project Manager), Jeanette Lowden (Contracts Manager - Waste), Andrew Mills (Service Manager - Green Space) and Louise Overington (Service Development and Support Manager).*

Also Present: *There was 1 member of the public present for the duration of the meeting.*

89 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Audio recording – 2 minutes 7 seconds

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors David Levett, Gerald Morris and Louise Peace.

Having given due notice, Councillor Juan Cowell substituted for Councillor Morris.

Councillors Cathy Brownjohn and Michael Muir were absent.

90 MINUTES - 6 DECEMBER 2023

Audio Recording – 2 minutes 27 seconds

Councillor Amy Allen, as Chair, proposed and Councillor Steve Jarvis seconded and, following a vote, it was:

RESOLVED: That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Committee held on 6 December 2023 be approved as a true record of the proceedings and be signed by the Chair.

91 CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

Audio recording – 2 minutes 58 seconds

- (1) The Chair advised that, in accordance with Council Policy, the meeting would be audio recorded.
- (2) The Chair drew attention to the item on the agenda front pages regarding Declarations of Interest and reminded Members that, in line with the Code of Conduct, any Declarations of Interest needed to be declared immediately prior to the item in question.

- (3) The Chair reminded Members that the Council had declared both a Climate Emergency and an Ecological Emergency. These are serious decisions, and mean that, as this was an emergency, all of us, Officers and Members had that in mind as we carried out our various roles and tasks for the benefit of our District.

92 NOTIFICATION OF OTHER BUSINESS

Audio recording – 3 minutes 35 seconds

There was no other business notified.

93 WORK PROGRAMME AND ACTION TRACKER REVIEW

Audio recording: 3 minutes 39 seconds

The Policy and Strategy Team Leader presented the Information Note entitled 'Work Programme and Action Tracker Review', and advised that:

- The Action tracker highlighted the work programme for the year 2023/24 and the progress over that year.
- Any completed items on the tracker had now been removed and archived.
- Details had been added about the North Hertfordshire Local cycling and walking infrastructure plan.
- The Council was looking at opportunities to reduce engine idling in the district. There were pieces of legislation that were being explored to enable this enforcement. So far, no neighbouring authorities had commented that they currently were able to enforce this, due to resourcing issues and demonstrating the poor air quality in those areas affected. It was noted that Hertfordshire County Council had banned Idling at all their sites, including care homes and household waste recycling centres.
- Feedback had been provided by stakeholders at the Hertfordshire Climate Change Sustainability Partnership (HCCSP) event in November and officers had now completed working through the feedback received on the biodiversity plan, for which North Herts was lead. Key items had been noted and incorporated into the revised action plan, which would be ready when the Local Nature Strategy for Hertfordshire was completed.
- The Adaptation subgroup was compiling a draft climate risk log to look at risk to council services and the district from changing climate. This was now being reviewed by the internal officer group, with a view to creating an action plan on adaption.
- The second round of Solar Together had now closed with 185 homes accepting their solar PV recommendations. The average price saving achieved was 34% cheaper than the market price for an equivalent system.
- Installations had now begun with 289 installations completed over Hertfordshire and 50 of those in North Hertfordshire.
- The home upgrade grant scheme remained open. This provided free home improvements to enable energy efficiency and reduce risk of fuel poverty. This was only available to off gas homes with a D, E, F or G rating. The income threshold had been increased from £31,000 to £36,000 enabling more eligible residents.
- An application had been placed by the Council with the public sector decarbonization scheme which had been successful. The Council had secured around £7M in funding for the decarbonisation of leisure centres, which would include the installation of air source heat pumps, solar PV and other energy efficiency measures.
- Studies were required to be undertaken and a project board set up before work could commence. The project needed to be completed by March 2026 and was estimated to save 1176 tonnes of carbon annually.
- The Community Investment Fund was open for community groups to apply for funding for capacity building activities.

- Funding had been used in Baldock to develop a piece of land into 30 extra allotment half plots.

The Policy and Strategy Trainee advised that:

- The Climate Hive had been running for a year and was proving successful in engaging with residents and updating them on climate and sustainability topics.
- In March 2023 there had been 100 subscribers, which had now risen to around 350 subscribers.
- Information had been provided on energy efficiency schemes, sustainability tips and products, green skills information, adaptation and district wide surveys.
- In January 2024 a successful question and answer platform on sustainability was held. Residents sent in their questions on topics such as solar PV, wildlife, biodiversity, active travel and transport, retrofitting and waste.
- The Council continued to update residents on actions regarding climate and sustainability, and information on how to help towards sustainability targets.

The Climate Change and Sustainability Project Manager presented an update on 'Solar for Business' and advised that:

- This project was recently reviewed at Cabinet and would be funded by an allocation from the UK Shared Prosperity Fund from the Government, together with investment from the Council to enable pilot of the scheme.
- The Scheme would involve the Council installing Solar Panels onto commercial units to generate renewable electricity to be used by the business in the unit. This would enable a much discounted cost of electricity compared with units from the national grid.
- The multiple benefits included generating renewable electricity with low carbon emissions, contributing towards the aim to reach net zero by 2040.
- This would save the businesses money on their electricity bills and would provide a revenue for the Council, thereby providing a long-term sustainability.
- A similar scheme had been run by West Suffolk Council for a number of years, who had installed over 80 solar panels for businesses in their area.
- The scheme would be aimed at businesses that were high users of electricity, for example commercial units on industrial estates rather than High Street shops.
- The next steps would be to identify those businesses with an outreach plan.

The Service Development and Support Manager and the Contracts Manager presented the update on 'Flex Collect' and advised that:

- The Council were currently trialling soft plastic recycling in certain areas of North Herts to help with increasing recycling rates.
- The Environmental Act 2021 included details of what can and cannot be recycled.
- Local authorities had a duty to clear the waste stream of their area. This included paper, card, food waste and metal waste.
- From 2027, North Herts Council would be required by legislation to include soft plastics, such as wrapping paper, plastic bags, crisp packets and wrappers in recycling collections, which were not currently collected. However, a renewal of this contract in 2025 would enable this.
- In 2023 there was an opportunity to join a trial with the Flexible Plastics Fund for the collection of soft plastics from smaller properties. The trial was fully funded and only 7 local authorities were selected to take part.
- It enabled councils to gain an insight into the different types of soft plastics presented, views of resident participation and any operational issues with collection and processing.
- The current waste contractor and material recycling processor were approached, and it was mutually agreed to use the dry material-based survival bags.

- Facilities in St Albans were initially chosen over facilities in Buntingford due to the proximity of the recycling facility and the risk of distance to be travelled by the crews.
- In November 2023, 2000 properties in Knebworth trialled the scheme. There was an initial leaflet drop with details of materials to be included and the collection bags were hand delivered through letterboxes.
- Residents were asked to fill the bags and tie them at the top. Collection staff checked for ripped or untied bags as they would then contaminate the paper collection.
- Since the start there had been 6500 blue bags collected, weighing 2.5 tonnes, and 36% of residents taking part. Feedback received from residents had been positive.
- Issues were with bag delivery, possible breakdown of vehicles, time and resource of delivery, budgets, space and capacity at the depot.
- There were no concerns with collection or contamination. The trial was received well by residents who were keen to see expansion of the trial area.
- Phase 2 of the trial saw the blue bags being mixed with the dry mixed recycling, such as glass and cans, to see whether the bags would be damaged during the collection. Overall, this was a success with a few bags split or untied during the process.
- Phase 2.1 saw the collection being transferred to the facilities in Buntingford. There were no issues with the capacity at the site, haulage or processing and was again an overall success. The trial would now continue to use the facilities in Buntingford, which would make this easier for the crews who are based in Letchworth.
- Phase 3 would be from July 2024, aiming to further expand the trial to around 10,000 properties across North and East Hertfordshire.

The following Members asked questions:

- Councillor Dominic Griffiths
- Councillor Steve Jarvis

In response to questions, the Service Development and Support Manager and the Contracts Manager advised that:

- The only queries received from residents were comments about whether their areas would be included in the trial soon.
- The items available for recycling in this trial were tried and tested first in other areas. Residents were then given details of what was acceptable or not via two separate leaflets. There was also a supporting website, and the bags had information printed on them.
- For the purpose of the trial, it was vital to contain the soft plastics from the other forms of recycling, to avoid contamination. In future, with a higher capacity to sort the recycling, it was thought that the bags would be unnecessary, therefore avoiding additional plastic bags.

The Service Manager – Greenspace presented the update on 'Wilding and Bee Corridors', and advised that:

- A trial of rewilding in Royston started during lockdown in 2020.
- A larger wilding audit was undertaken by Countryside Management Services to consider the available open spaces and any opportunity to improve Biodiversity in the parks and verges.
- A location on Letchworth Gate with large grass verges was trialled and officers were encouraged by the initial enthusiastic reception.
- The rich habitats in the area were places such as Oughtonhead Common, Norton Common and Weston Hills.

- The focus would be placed on the Town Centres. Flower habitats for bees would be introduced around Letchworth Gate and the Avenue Park traffic lights, with the wildflower seed mixes containing annuals and cornflower. These would be managed and cultivated areas with seed sown yearly, and therefore not true wilding.
- Expectations are to be managed, as a wildflower meadow is not expected. These take many years to develop and establish.
- From the original trial in Royston, many residents had become proactive and worked together with Royston Town Council to identify new sites.
- Introductions of insect and bug hotels improve the biodiversity.
- An idea to start bee corridors was being implemented. This was designed for the community to use their own space to provide corridors for insects and wildlife to link together wildlife areas that had already been established.
- Promotion leaflets were circulated to residents and extra planting had been undertaken to attract pollinators to the area.
- Bulbs had been planted, together with bee bombs to be used in a collective way. This would provide insects and wildlife a pathway through our towns, with a food source throughout.
- As from 1 April 2024, a budget had been secured to expand the bee corridors over Royston, Baldock and Hitchin.

In response to questions from Councillor Steve Jarvis, the Service Manager – Greenspace advised that:

- The ground conditions in the district were variable, with some places being chalky soil and others more favourable to planting. It was noted that the same seed mix had been used in all locations with different results. True wilding prefers poorer soil conditions.
- Chalk soils were noted to be more alkaline based and therefore more difficult for species of planting to be successful.
- Changes in grass cutting regimes were being trialled, along with changes to the usual seasonal bedding planting, which avoided plants being cultivated in peat, heated in greenhouses and transport costs. This was carried out twice yearly and plants were thrown away at the end. Wilding allowed a more natural growth to the planting and more consideration to the area.

94 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Audio recording – 1 hour, 10 minutes, 27 seconds

There was no public participation during this meeting.

The meeting closed at 8.47 pm

Chair