

NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

CABINET PANEL ON THE ENVIRONMENT

MEETING HELD IN THE REMOTE MEETING
ON WEDNESDAY, 22ND JANUARY, 2025 AT 7.30 PM

MINUTES

Present: *Councillors: Amy Allen (Chair), Mick Debenham (Vice-Chair), Tina Bhartwas, Joe Graziano, Dominic Griffiths, Bryony May, Claire Strong and Caroline McDonnell.*

In Attendance: *Georgina Chapman (Policy & Strategy Team Leader), Robert Filby (Trainee Committee, Member and Scrutiny Officer), Ellie Hollingsworth (Policy & Strategy Officer) and James Lovegrove (Committee, Member and Scrutiny Manager).*

Also Present: *At the commencement of the meeting approximately 8 members of the public, including registered speakers.*

Councillor Ian Albert was also present.

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Audio recording – 3 minutes 37 seconds

Apologies were received from Councillor Lisa Nash.

Having given due notice, Councillor Caroline McDonnell substituted for Councillor Nash.

2 MINUTES - 9 OCTOBER 2024

Audio Recording – 4 minutes 11 seconds

Councillor Amy Allen, as Chair, proposed and Councillor Mick Debenham seconded, and it was:

RESOLVED: That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Committee held on 9 October 2024 were approved as a true record of the proceedings and be signed by the Chair.

3 CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

Audio recording – 4 minutes 53 seconds

(1) The Chair advised that, in accordance with Council Policy, the meeting would be 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.

4 NOTIFICATION OF OTHER BUSINESS

Audio recording – 5 minutes 41 seconds

There was no other business notified.

N.B. Councillor Joe Graziano joined the Zoom call at 19:37.

5 INFORMATION NOTE: WORK PROGRAMME 2024/25

Audio recording – 5 minutes 56 seconds

The Policy and Strategy Team Leader presented the Information Note entitled 'Work Programme and New Proposed Action Tracker Template for 2024/25' and advised that:

- The second round of Solar Together had closed with a third round agreed for.
- As of December 2024, 1,665 Solar PV Installations on households across Hertfordshire had been completed.
- After contacting iChoosr in response to a question at the previous meeting, customers of the Solar Together Scheme could contact their installer and ask to have an emergency power supply fitted to allow for use of stored power during blackouts no matter the type of inverter as long as a battery system was used.
- The first draft of the Local Nature Recovery Strategy was ready and being shared with District Councils to get feedback.
- The first draft of the web platform was also finished, and user testing would begin on that soon.
- The Council had launched their ECO (Energy Company Obligation) Flex Scheme in January to make lower income and vulnerable households more energy efficient. The criteria for eligibility were listed on the Council's website and attendees were urged to promote this scheme.
- The Council had applied for the fourth round of the Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme to decarbonise the District Council Offices, Hitchin Town Hall and North Herts Museum.
- The Climate Hive engagement hub was available for all to use to keep updated on climate change and sustainability. In November, a Q&A session on recycling was provided by Councillor Amy Allen as Executive Member for Recycling and Waste Management.

The following Members and members of the public asked questions:

- Councillor Amy Allen
- Deolinda Eltringham

In response to questions, the Policy and Strategy Team Leader advised that they would contact iChoosr again to investigate the issue of the solar panel inverter only facilitating power for 1 electrical outlet.

6 PRESENTATIONS

Audio recording – 20 minutes 15 seconds

The Chair invited Sian Hoare, the Operations Manager of Flood Risk and Adaptation at Hertfordshire County Council (HCC) to give a presentation on Flooding and Adaptation Work. Sian Hoare advised that:

- Flooding was experienced in Hitchin from 22 September with a flood warning issued on 27 September and removed on 5 October.

- Rainfall was long and intense which caused the small water courses that led to the river to become overwhelmed, creating significant fluvial and surface water flooding.
- Homes, businesses and infrastructure were affected with 20 properties flooded internally and a further 27 flooded externally.
- Local MPs and Councillors had supported the process to date.
- In response to the flooding, a drop-in session for residents was set up so that residents could report on what happened as well as express their feelings about flood risk.
- An assessment of assets along the River Purwell and clearance work were completed in partnership with the Council, the Environment Agency and the Internal Drainage Board to clear any obstructions along the river.
- The County Council had commissioned the National Flood Forum to work with the community in Hitchin to create a flood group that would eventually create a flood plan by working with the relevant partner organisations to draw up flood mitigations.
- A debrief event of the flooding took place in which officers from North Herts Council, the County Council and the Fire Service attended, and improvements to the response process were highlighted should the event occur again.
- Anglian Water assessed all their assets and looked at non-return valves in their manholes to reduce flood risk and carried out a clean-up of affected gardens.
- Monthly multi-agency meetings were taking place in which Anglian Water, the County Council and North Herts Council were meeting to discuss flooding, with updates published to the County Council website.
- A statutory Section 19 investigation was being undertaken to understand what happened and make recommendations to prevent future floods.
- Anglian Water had carried out several CCTV surveys of their network and identified areas of concern to be actioned.
- A review of national legislation would take place over the next year to address the strengths and failings of the Flood Risk Management Cycle and where changes needed to be made at a policy level.
- In terms of flooding adaptation, the County Council were working on this with partners at District Councils and water companies through the Hertfordshire Climate Change and Sustainability Partnership (HCCSP), which included developing a climate change risk assessment.
- The County Council as a pilot authority for climate change had been involved in the adaptation reporting power in which they reported on adaptation and how the County Council had been mitigating against the risks and impacts of climate change. This was a resource intensive process, but it had helped them to understand what to report on when it was actioned again in the future.

Sian Hoare then invited Lynne Ceeney, the Director of Sustainability at Hertfordshire County Council to present on Flooding and Adaptation Work. Lynne Ceeney advised that:

- The County Council were investigating the rules and regulations for the risk management authorities and trying to bridge the communication gaps between them to identify who was responsible as there was currently no community liaison in place when a flood occurred.
- All partners including the County, District and Borough Councils, the Environment Agency and water companies were working to agree on a standard operating procedure for flooding in Hertfordshire while they waited for national legislation to be devised.

The following Members took part in the discussion and asked questions:

- Councillor Joe Graziano
- Councillor Claire Strong
- Councillor Ian Albert
- Councillor Tina Bhartwas
- Councillor Bryony May
- Councillor Caroline McDonnell

- Councillor Mick Debenham

The following points were raised as part of the discussion:

- A question-and-answer document on flooding for members of the public to refer to.
- There was slow progress when dealing with multiple authorities and where to report flooding on the County Council website.
- Recurring problems with flooding in rural areas were slow to be addressed.

In response to questions and discussion points, Sian Hoare advised that:

- There was no hard deadline to apply for the Flooding Resilience Scheme in partnership with the Environment Agency, however it was recommended to apply for this as soon as possible as funding for this would be reviewed by the end of March.
- They were continually providing resources and education on the roles and responsibilities of local authorities and water companies, and they encouraged Members to send through questions that they had received from the public on flooding to help curate a frequently answered questions document.
- Based on varying reports from residents, the last flood in Hitchin was in 1980 but it was worth noting that the Environment Agency have never issued a flood warning in Hitchin before.
- The age of the properties flooded was not available at the meeting, but this information could be made available to attendees afterwards.
- River flooding could happen within an hour without warning, whereas ground water flooding was slower moving and could take place weeks after a rainfall event but was difficult to predict unless the ground water levels were monitored. However, they were working closely with North Herts Council and Parish Councils to monitor areas through photographs and conducting site visits to assess ground water flood risk on a weekly basis.

In response to questions and discussion points, Lynne Ceeney advised that:

- The County Council were actively investigating the issue of road run off and chalk stream contamination, however, due to outdated technology and road infrastructure, combatting this was a challenge.
- District and Borough Councils were being encouraged to help residents to form flood groups in areas they knew were susceptible to better prepare them for future flooding.
- Resources were prioritised where there was the most regular damage to key areas such as a single point of access or residents' properties, however it was encouraged to still report all flooding via the reporting tool on the County Council website. All reported issues would be investigated but not necessarily actioned.
- If persistent problems such as a faulty drain were not fixed immediately, it could be because the solution was complex such as a whole drainage run needing replacing which required time and organisation.
- Reporting flooding issues through County Councillors might help to get them actioned more quickly.

The Chair invited the Policy & Strategy Team at North Herts Council to give a presentation on Climate Adaptation Corporate Risk. They advised that:

- The idea that adaptation to climate change would remain an ongoing and consistent consideration as the climate continued to change had been added to the Corporate Risk management system at North Herts Council as a Service Risk.
- The management system enabled the Council to record, monitor and report corporate performance indicators, improvement actions, and risks.

- Although short-term failure to adapt to climate change would have a low impact on the Council, long-term failure would potentially bring bigger impacts that would need actioning.
- The current assessment of the risk was Medium, which meant that the likelihood was Medium, and the impact was also Medium on the risk management framework.
- Opportunities arising from the new risk included identifying the operations and services that were resilient to climate change, the added value of planned adaptations compared to the potential cost of inaction or immediate emergency responses, and being a leading example to local businesses and organisations to better prepare the whole district against climate change.
- In terms of consequences, the risk could increase the likelihood of business premises being out of action, failure to deliver services and projects, breached statutory duties, unbudgeted spend on emergency actions to respond to increased disruptive incidents around service delivery, and unmanageable demands on services and employees.
- In response to the risk, a Climate Officer Group had been established in addition to a Climate Risk Log which would identify possible service consequences and controls.
- Ongoing work in response to the risk included the consideration to build climate change impacts into corporate resilience arrangements and templates, the consideration of the resources required to respond to more potential emergency events and the impact of the involving numerous services and staff across the Council in these, the environmental implications considered for each committee report or key decision, and recognising the development of a new Sustainability Strategy to establish agreed objectives and actions.

7 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Audio recording – 1 hour 3 minutes 50 seconds

The Chair invited Julia Sonander of Decarbonise Letchworth to give a presentation on 'Updating the Letchworth Design Principles'. Julia Sonander advised that:

- Decarbonise Letchworth had launched a project where interested homeowners in Letchworth could provide in-depth feedback on the changes they would like to see made to the current Design Principles for Letchworth. They were in the process of compiling a draft for this feedback.
- They would like to see the Panel use its influence to help to upgrade the Design Principles which would help homeowners to achieve improved energy efficiency and carbon reduction.
- The updates they sought respected heritage but also recognised that housing stock had to evolve for changing weather, fuel poverty, resource depletion, energy security and the health of homes.
- In 2000, North Herts Council adopted the Design Principles into their Supplementary Planning Guidance (SPG) for Letchworth. However, the Heritage Foundation updated their Design Principles in 2009 and again in 2015 to incorporate character areas and Homes of Special Interest, creating a policy mismatch between the Council and the Heritage Foundation.
- The 25-year-old SPG and the 10-year-old Design Principles made it difficult for residents to install new technology in their homes such as heat pumps, car chargers, air conditioning, storage batteries and security installations. This also applied to external installations such as solar panels and external insulation which prevented improved energy efficiency and carbon reduction.
- Decarbonise Letchworth would like the Environmental Team to champion the suggested Design Principle changes that would improve the energy efficiency, energy security and health of housing stock in the town.
- They would also recommend that the Council updated their planning guidance to enable well-designed energy efficiency retrofits and the adoption of new low carbon technologies in conservation areas.

- They would further like the Council to consider the Draft Design Principles as the basis for an updated Letchworth SPG.

The following Members, officers and members of the public asked questions and took part in the discussion:

- Councillor Joe Graziano
- Deolinda Eltringham
- Councillor Amy Allen
- Georgina Chapman
- Councillor Claire Strong

The following points were raised as part of the discussion:

- It was queried whether there was a necessity to insulate a home with a large solar panel array, given the cheap energy that could be generated from solar.
- However, the importance of home insulation was highlighted as solar panels were intermittent in their production of power and there was usually a deficit in their production in winter regardless of the roof area of a home. It was further mentioned that future electricity demands would increase massively with the surge in demand for electric vehicles.
- The Council were in contact with the Sustainability Officer at the Heritage Foundation and they could consider adding to the action tracker subject to wording.
- The social housing standards to meet energy ratings meant that many houses had been knocked down and rebuilt in the past.
- Council officers were starting to update the design code to direct developers on their design of homes within strategic planning sites.

In response to questions and discussion points, Julia Sonander advised that:

- Solar panels alone would not harness enough energy to produce all the electricity demands of a home, and other benefits that external insulation provided to the health of homes would not be realised.
- Letchworth was approximately 30% social housing and the residents living in those houses would not have the means to take advantage of schemes and grants to make their homes more energy efficient or secure, therefore the Council should work with the Heritage Foundation to find solutions for this.

In response to questions and discussion points, Chris Jones advised that:

- The energy grid in general was becoming more volatile as more renewable energy sources were added to it, therefore practices that improved energy efficiency such as Fabric First were key to mitigating the consequences of this.
- The country had a carbon budget as part of its net zero targets which would affect the amount of construction that would take place in the future. Consequently, it was imperative to make progress to reduce carbon emissions and energy demands immediately.

The meeting closed at 9.05 pm