

NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

CABINET PANEL ON THE ENVIRONMENT

**MEETING HELD IN THE VIRTUAL VIA ZOOM
ON WEDNESDAY, 14TH JANUARY, 2026 AT 7.30 PM**

MINUTES

Present: *Councillors: Amy Allen (Chair), Emma Fernandes, Joe Graziano, Dominic Griffiths, Caroline McDonnell and Claire Strong.*

In Attendance: *Georgina Chapman (Policy & Strategy Team Leader), Robert Filby (Trainee Committee, Member and Scrutiny Officer), Daisy Harris (Business Admin Apprentice - Policy), Ellie Hollingsworth (Policy & Strategy Officer) and Amber Smith-Howell (National Graduate - Management Trainee).*

Also Present: *At the commencement of the meeting approximately 12 members of the public, including registered speakers.*

9 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Audio recording – 5 minutes 13 seconds

There were no apologies for absence.

Councillor Lisa Nash was absent.

10 MINUTES - 2 APRIL AND 17 SEPTEMBER 2025

Audio Recording – 5 minutes 17 seconds

Councillor Amy Allen, as Chair, proposed and Councillor Claire Strong seconded and, it was:

RESOLVED: That the Minutes of the meetings of the Committee held on 2 April and 17 September 2025 be approved as a true record of the proceedings and be signed by the Chair.

11 CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

Audio recording – 6 minutes 20 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) The Chair highlighted the final agenda item which was to consider suggestions of items for future meetings, and asked Members and members of the public to consider any items that they may wish to suggest ahead of this item.

12 NOTIFICATION OF OTHER BUSINESS

Audio recording – 7 minutes 17 seconds

There was no other business notified.

13 INFORMATION NOTE: COUNCIL ACTIVITY UPDATE AND ACTION TRACKER

Audio recording – 7 minutes 25 seconds

Officers from the Policy and Strategy Team presented the Information Note entitled 'Council Activity Update and Action Tracker' and advised that:

- A summary of Council activities relating to sustainability, including key progress made on Sustainability Strategy Actions had been provided within the Information Note.
- Progress had been made on the first phase of the Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme relating to leisure facilities, and preparations for the second phase relating to other Council assets had begun.
- The Sustainable Communities Grant had awarded over £62,000 to six local organisations across the district to support sustainability projects since its launch last year.
- Over 650 residents had registered interest for the third round of Solar Together and 113 offers for Solar PV had been accepted so far, which included one business for battery storage.
- An estimated 63,295KG of CO₂ would be saved per year from the 72 completed solar installations so far.
- The Climate Hive, which now had over 920 subscribers, continued to keep subscribers up to date on events, general Council activities and more relating to biodiversity and sustainability.
- The Local Recovery Nature Strategy would be launched at the Hertfordshire Nature Summit on 27 January.
- Actions for the Sustainability Strategy 2025-2030 were being monitored quarterly by the Climate and Sustainability Officer Group, in addition to the Political Liaison Board.
- Hydrogenated vegetable oil had been implemented for use in all refuse vehicles and hire vehicles until the arrival of electric refuse vehicles.
- New EV charge points had gone live in car parks across the district, and further connections to the grid would be made either this month or next.
- The Warm Homes Local Grant continued its progression, and the scheme had been publicised in the Winter Outlook magazine to reach more eligible residents.
- Further areas were in consideration for reduced mowing regimes to improve biodiversity.
- A mandatory sustainability e-learning module for Council staff had been launched in December to address one of the Sustainability Strategy Actions. The training had been tailored to Officers at the Council to educate them on how climate change would affect the district and its biodiversity, and the adaptations that would be needed.
- Good feedback had already been received on the e-learning module.
- A free Council app had been launched in November which provided guidance on multiple subjects, with a focus on waste and recycling as part of a wider effort to improve recycling rates. The app also provided bin day notification reminders to residents and had 14,500 downloads so far.
- A project to monitor the impacts of extreme weather events on Council services had been launched with key teams across the Council to ensure resilience to climate change and improve the ability to mitigate future impacts to services.

- In response to a request from Decarbonise Letchworth, Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation were scheduled to give a presentation on retrofitting at the last Panel meeting in September, however this meeting was cancelled, and they had given this presentation to Letchworth Community Forum instead which Members of Decarbonise Letchworth were present for.
- A new District Design Code created by the Planning Team would be launched in phases, with the first phase due to be discussed at Cabinet in February before going out to consultation.
- The theme of the next Cabinet Panel meeting on 11 February would be 'Sustainability in Schools' with speakers from local schools scheduled to present on eco-initiatives, student involvement and green construction.

The Chair highlighted that there had been a huge increase in downloads of the Council app since Christmas, as downloads were below 9,000 before then.

The following Members and members of the public asked questions:

- Julia Sonander
- Christine Watson
- Councillor Amy Allen

In response to questions, Officers from the Policy & Strategy Team advised that:

- The upcoming District Design Code document was expected to provide guidance on design issues, including solar. The first phase would look at new developments, and further phases would focus on householder applications.
- Much of the information within the sustainability e-learning module was publicly available, such as within the Sustainability Strategy, which was available on the Council website. Sections on local biodiversity and adaption within the e-module could also be found on the Climate Hive.

14 PRESENTATIONS

Audio recording – 25 minutes 1 second

The Chair invited Kris Karslake from Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation to give a verbal presentation on 'Environmental Updates'. They thanked the Chair for the opportunity to present and advised that:

- The work of the Heritage Foundation was guided by the aims within Strategy 2028.
- One of these aims was financial resilience and to address this aim, they had successfully obtained funding through the Great British Energy Fund to conduct a feasibility study on their rural estate to assess the potential for renewable energy generation.
- A contractor called Seen had been commissioned to carry out the study, and two sample locations with the highest suitability had been selected.
- They were waiting to hear back from UK Power Networks on the infrastructure cost for those locations.
- They were unsure what size solar array would be deemed feasible, however, it was revealed that a five-megawatt peak solar array would be enough to power 1,375 homes and require less than 1% of their rural estate.
- Income generation from the project would be maximised to benefit residents through their charitable activities and grants programme.
- It was still unknown who would design, construct, operate and maintain the solar array, or if a community share option would offer the best value.

- Development of this kind on Green Belt land would also conflict with the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), unless the Heritage Foundation could clearly demonstrate that the benefits of a 'Solar Meadow' would outweigh the harms.
- Any proposal would also be affected by their charitable objective of preserving the environment and the Garden City ethos of local food production and guarding the countryside surrounding Letchworth.
- A board paper would be presented to the Board of Trustees if one of the selected locations was deemed to be feasible.
- Solar arrays were preferable on rural land rather than buildings as they could be reversible developments and support biodiversity improvements during their operation, whereas not all of their buildings were technically or economically suitable for solar panels.
- They would progress to pre-application advice with the Council if UK Power Networks judged one of the sites to be financially sustainable.

In response to a question from Fiona Hughes, Kris Karslake advised that they were hoping to know by summer whether solar arrays would be feasible at the selected locations.

The Chair thanked Kris Karslake for their presentation and invited Fiona Hughes from Green Heat Coop to give a presentation on 'Community Energy'. They thanked the Chair for the opportunity to present and advised that:

- Green Heat Coop were a non-profit community energy business.
- Community energy was about keeping the benefits of energy use in local communities, rather than losing them to large companies or hostile nations.
- Not-for-profit companies or cooperatives that used democratic business models were used to invest in community energy in the form of renewable energy generation.
- They could also provide advice and services to residents related to home energy, and surplus funds from these schemes could be reinvested into other social impact work.
- The Government planned to increase community energy production in the UK to 8 gigawatts as part of the 2030 Clean Power Action Plan, which was 20 times the current capacity.
- Great British Energy were overseeing the clean power transition and funding for community energy schemes.
- Community energy could be a source of local pride for residents as they could provide project input and directly benefit from the outcomes.
- Several 'Solar Schools' with solar arrays already existed across North Herts and East Herts such as Hitchin Boys School and Kingshott School.
- Grand Union Community Energy, Hertford Energy Now and Zero Carbon Ashwell were examples of community energy projects already within Hertfordshire.
- Green Heat Coop provided advice on home energy renovations to residents, including a heat pump advisory service which provided an independent, unbiased review of their energy needs before purchasing a heat pump. The cost of this had been reduced as much as possible to increase its affordability.
- Their community outreach work included attendance at community events, holding local talks, and opening homes to showcase installations.
- Funding had been received from the Council towards their Royston Homes Energy Improvement Guide (RHEIG) in which they ran a householder questionnaire in Royston to find out more on issues with homes and whether there was interest in receiving home surveys. A good response had been received, and surveys had already been completed on numerous homes, with energy modelling in progress to retrofit them.
- Two Warm Home Evenings on 11 and 24 February would also be held to receive feedback on the RHEIG, and to provide tips on draft proofing.
- A drop-in session relating to the RHEIG would also be held on 14 February at Royston Repair Café.

- Residents could check whether they were on the cheapest energy tariff by checking their energy bill as energy providers were obligated to display this.
- Regular meter readings were encouraged so that residents only paid for what they used, however, smart meters were also worth considering.
- Heating controls and switching devices off when not in use were also recommended.
- The Priority Services Register allowed vulnerable residents to access extra services from their energy provider free of charge.
- They had flexible volunteering roles which varied from being a community energy champion focused on community outreach to administrative roles in governance.

The Chair encouraged those who were eligible to apply to be on the Priority Services Register.

The following members of the public asked questions:

- Roger Lovegrove
- Sue Lines
- Julia Sonander

In response to questions, Fiona Hughes advised that:

- It would be ideal for new homes to be built with renewable energy installations and energy efficiency measures rather than just the potential for them.
- Green Heat Coop were involved with the Hertfordshire Local Retrofit Strategy which would facilitate conversations on renewable energy in planning.
- There would be a push for more solar schools through the Great British Energy Fund, but it would be up to authorities like Hertfordshire County Council (HCC) to decide whether solar PV installations on schools were financially viable.
- Many groups were working with HCC already on this.

In response to questions, the Chair advised that:

- Updates to the NPPF in December would compel developers and local authorities to consider how roof orientation would facilitate low carbon generation.
- Not all school buildings were suitable for solar panel installations.

15 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Audio recording – 1 hour 9 minutes 15 seconds

The Chair advised that there was no specific participation from members of the public at this meeting, but that public participants had been included as part of discussions on Agenda Items 5 and 6.

16 SUGGESTED ITEMS FOR FUTURE MEETINGS

Audio recording – 1 hour 9 minutes 29 seconds

The Chair led a discussion to consider items for future meetings of the Cabinet Panel.

The following Members and members of the public took part in the discussion:

- Gilly Chegwyn
- Roger Lovegrove
- Sue Lines
- Councillor Claire Strong

The following points were raised as part of the discussion:

- The Council should liaise with the County Council and Government on a blue light response to a food crisis as reserve food provisions were very low in the UK.
- There was no strategy to address the poor commuter parking in Letchworth and the increased pressures that development on the outskirts of the town would put on this.
- The effects of the National Planning Policy Framework refresh on the environment and planning policy should be discussed at a future meeting.

In response to points raised in the discussion, the Chair advised that:

- Modern houses generally had less storage and garden space to store or produce additional food supplies compared to older houses.
- The summary of the report by Tim Lang entitled 'Just In Case' that had been provided would be considered by Officers after the meeting.
- Lack of parking demand after 7pm in the Garden Square Multi-Storey Car Park in Letchworth meant that it was not financially feasible to keep it open after this time.
- Local Government Reorganisation in an environmental context could be discussed at a future meeting, however, members of the public could also contact the Executive Member for Local Government Reorganisation/Devolution in the meantime on this.

In response to points raised in the discussion, Councillor Claire Strong advised that the Garden Square Multi-Storey Car Park closed at 7pm due to past instances of anti-social behaviour.

The Chair advised that suggested items would be considered, alongside Officers, for inclusion at future meetings of the Cabinet Panel.

The meeting closed at 8.55 pm

Chair