

NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

CABINET PANEL ON THE ENVIRONMENT

**MEETING HELD VIRTUALLY VIA ZOOM
ON WEDNESDAY, 11TH FEBRUARY, 2026 AT 7.30 PM**

MINUTES

Present: *Councillors: Amy Allen (Chair), Emma Fernandes, Joe Graziano, 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), James Lovegrove (Committee, Member and Scrutiny Manager) and Amber Smith-Howell (National Graduate - Management Trainee).*

Also Present: *At the commencement of the meeting, approximately 10 members of the public, including registered speakers.*

17 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Audio recording – 3 minutes 46 seconds

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Dominic Griffiths and Lisa Nash.

18 MINUTES - 14 JANUARY 2026

Audio Recording – 4 minutes 3 seconds

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

RESOLVED: That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Committee held on 14 January 2026 be approved as a true record of the proceedings and be signed by the Chair.

19 CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

Audio recording – 4 minutes 29 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 informed those present that the theme for this Panel meeting was 'Sustainability in Schools', and that speakers from schools around Hertfordshire were in attendance to present on this topic at Agenda Item 6.

- (5) 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.

20 NOTIFICATION OF OTHER BUSINESS

Audio recording – 5 minutes 32 seconds

There was no other business notified.

21 INFORMATION NOTE: COUNCIL ACTIVITY UPDATE AND ACTION TRACKER

Audio recording – 7 minutes 2 seconds

Officers from the Policy and Strategy Team provided a verbal update on the Information Note entitled 'Council Activity Update and Action Tracker' and advised that:

- The third round of Solar Together had closed, but more installations continued to be completed with 73 done so far, totalling over 700 panels.
- Hertfordshire County Council were expanding their Flood Kit Pilot Scheme by inviting more communities that had experienced flooding or were susceptible to register their interest.
- Flood kits comprised equipment tailored to meet the risk profiles of each community, and they were designed to be kept in an accessible, central storage unit on public land.
- All actions on the Action Tracker had been completed but any actions arising from this meeting would be added to the tracker in consultation with the Chair.
- The Council were working with Hertfordshire County Council to deliver the priorities and actions within the Local Nature Recovery Strategy which had been published and launched in January at a nature summit event.
- The project to decarbonise leisure centres was progressing, and design work for the decarbonisation of other Council facilities such as North Herts Museum had also progressed as part of phase two of the Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme.
- The Council engagement hub for climate change and sustainability, known as the Climate Hive, now had 985 subscribers and continued to keep subscribers updated on the latest consultations, eco events, Council activities and more.
- Over £63,000 had been awarded from the Sustainable Communities Grant to six local organisations to carry out sustainability projects last year.
- Updates on those projects would be provided soon, except the project at Royston Museum as they had already installed a heat pump system, which they were feeling the benefit of.
- Monthly sustainability briefings which included information on funding, upcoming events and Council activity were available to view on the Council website.
- Actions in the Sustainability Strategy continued to be monitored on a quarterly basis by the Climate and Sustainability Officer Group and Political Liaison Board.
- Decarbonisation works to leisure centres across the district were targeted to be finished by the summer.
- Hydrogenated vegetable oil was in use in all refuse vehicles, and new electric vehicles had arrived and were in use for street cleansing purposes.
- A sustainability e-learning module covering sustainability aims and how Council staff could contribute to these had been launched internally.
- New EV charge points had gone live across Council car parks.
- Work on the Warm Homes Local Grant continued to progress, and the scheme had been advertised in the Winter Outlook Magazine.
- The new Council App had almost 16,000 downloads and continued to contribute towards improving recycling rates.

- A process to record and monitor the impacts of extreme weather events on services had been implemented across the Council.
- More updates on Council activity would be issued at the next Panel meeting.
- If Members or members of the public wished to contact the Cabinet Panel outside of meetings, they could do this through the dedicated email address which had been provided.

In response to questions from Councillor Claire Strong, Officers from the Policy and Strategy Team advised that:

- Two flood kits had been provided to communities in Kimpton and Hitchin, who were at different stages of the pilot scheme.
- An extreme weather event was assessed through warnings and alerts issued by the Met Office.

22 PRESENTATIONS

Audio recording – 18 minutes 57 seconds

The Chair informed those present that the education sector was responsible for 36% of public sector building emissions and that there were many opportunities for carbon to be cut in this sector, as well as embed sustainability into schools. The Chair also advised that there were several initiatives available for schools such as Eco-Schools, Lets Go Zero and Solar Schools, and links to these would be provided.

The Chair invited Nick Dean to give a presentation, supported by slides and images, on biodiversity improvement projects at Icknield Infant and Nursery School. They thanked the Chair for the opportunity to present and advised that:

- They were the Caretaker and Site Manager at the school.
- All vegetation on their school grounds had been manicured up until 2021.
- They decided to change this after a study revealed little to no vegetation or wildlife on the extensive greenspace within the school.
- Bee Orchid Rosette locations started to be identified and marked in 2022, and 45 of these reached the flowering stage.
- No mow areas and a 500 square foot seasonal flower meadow were introduced to the school grounds in 2023, which resulted in the flowering of 125 Bee Orchids and 2 Pyramidal Orchids the following year.
- Three public tours of the site were conducted to showcase the work that had been undertaken on-site, and £50 was donated by visitors towards its upkeep.
- Only 20 Bee Orchids had flowered in 2025 due to a dry period before summer. However, approximately 150 Bee Orchid Rosettes had been spotted so far in 2026.
- One new fruit tree had been planted by each class in their orchard on Arbor Day, and year 2 pupils would be planting more trees at Standalone Farm.
- Volunteers helped to run gardening clubs, sow seeds and plant vegetation in their allotment area.
- A Fairyland Woodland would be introduced, which would include a log pile habitat to increase the minibeast population.
- Animals spotted on their site included Robins, Wagtails, Black Squirrels, Hedgehogs and Foxes, and insects such as Crickets, Butterflies, Beetles and Digger Wasps had been present too.
- An Eco Council had been formed at the school in 2026 to drive eco mentality at the school and get the children more involved with projects.
- After being awarded £5,000 from the Royal Horticultural Society Grant to convert a grey space to a green one, the preference to build a pond had been expressed after pupils on the Eco Council had consulted their classmates.

- A local company called Women With Waders would build the pond over half-term and supply 50% of the pond vegetation for free as they had a vested interest in the project. As a result, the cost of the pond would be fully covered by the grant.
- Birds and frogs would be attracted to the pond, and there would be space within the fencing around the pond for a beehive to further increase pollination and biodiversity on-site.

The following members of the public asked questions:

- Diane Ketcher
- Sue Lines
- Rhys Waterman

In response to questions, Nick Dean advised that:

- Hertfordshire County Council had case studied their work and would share this with other schools in the future.
- Visits to the pond would be more than welcome once it was complete.
- Pond vegetation would create a self-sustaining, specific ecosystem.
- The grant from the Royal Horticultural Society was non-competitive and could be secured if all the criteria were met.

Councillor Joe Graziano commended the great work that had been carried out at the school on sustainability and biodiversity.

Councillor Claire Strong advised that she could put them in contact with the Rotary Club who always looked for places to plant trees from their tree nursery once matured.

The Chair then invited James Hedley-Hamilton and Mark Miller to give a presentation, supported by slides and images, on the construction and design of Buntingford First School. They thanked the Chair for the opportunity and advised that:

- Buntingford First School was the first net zero carbon school in Hertfordshire and the first carbon neutral school in England.
- The school was in line with the Sustainability Strategy of the County Council and their aim to be carbon neutral by 2030.
- The County Council had worked with Morgan Sindall Construction, Holmes Miller Architects and Sussed Sustainability to build the school, with the aim of lowering carbon emissions and improving the learning environment.
- A target had been set to keep energy demand below 65 kilowatts per metres squared per annum, and embodied carbon below 620KG per metres squared on-site, and to offset this through renewable energy sources and planting schemes.
- Building materials for the school structure were natural to ensure better breathing air within the school.
- A 20% Biodiversity Net Gain had been achieved across the wider site.
- The building had been designed to limit heat loss, water consumption and replaceable items once operational.
- A Green Travel Plan had been introduced to reduce parking provision on-site and utilise spaces at The Bury to free up space in the carbon budget.
- Key targets had been grouped under three headings which were climate, wellbeing and resilience.
- Passive house methodology had been used to track the design and performance of the building through to its completion to ensure that targets had been met.
- Recycled aggregates had been used in the foundations and interior and timber cladding from a carbon neutral source had been used for the exterior.
- An Air Quality Monitoring Plan had been devised.

- The building had been attuned for learning by limiting the CO₂ concentration to 900 parts per million, regulating temperatures, and eliminating any toxins by using water-based products in the interior decorations.
- Satisfaction surveys had been conducted with pupils and staff to ensure that the environment was comfortable.
- Flexibility and expansion of the building in the future had been thought about during the design process.
- Weather files in 2050 and 2080 had been studied to ensure that the building could withstand both future rainfall volume and temperatures.
- Annual checks were carried out on the school to monitor its functionality, and the data so far showed that it had performed better than intended.
- Certification for Passive House accreditation on the school building had been applied for.
- Buntingford First School had provided a blueprint for future carbon neutral schools, and events had been held at the school to showcase it.

The following Members and members of the public asked questions:

- Councillor Emma Fernandes
- Glyn Holt

In response to questions, Mark Miller advised that:

- All classrooms were north facing with big windows to facilitate natural lighting without glare, and windows on the south side of the building were smaller to control heat fluxes.
- DALI Bias Lighting had been implemented so that lighting would switch off automatically when natural light was detected, which saved energy and ensured lighting balance.
- Positive feedback had been obtained from the evaluation work, with good pupil concentration and stable temperatures reported.
- Outreach had been done by the school to promote its qualities to other schools.

In response to questions, James Hedley-Hamilton advised that:

- The school had been delivered at a premium cost, however, savings had been made on the building interior as materials had been unaltered and finishes had been avoided.
- Learnings from the design and construction of this school would mean that more schools built like this would come at a reduced cost.
- New requirements would push new schools to meet the standards that had been by Buntingford First School.
- Operational expenditure over the lifetime of the building would be lower than standard as the capital expenditure had been higher than typical.

The Chair invited Rhys Waterman to give a presentation, supported by slides and images, on green initiatives at Hitchin Boys School. They thanked the Chair for the opportunity and advised that:

- They had been the Sustainability Lead at Hitchin Boys for 1.5 years.
- The school had achieved the Eco-Schools Green Flag of Distinction for their work on biodiversity.
- Elements of sustainability were visible across the school grounds and in school policies such as the School Development Plan.
- All lighting had been changed to LEDs which had reduced their energy demand.
- Solar panels had been installed on all new buildings on-site.
- A travel survey with students had revealed that expanding the bike shed would encourage more cycling to school.

- They had worked with Lets Go Zero to devise an Action Plan and conduct carbon counting, and other organisations such as Herts Wildlife Trust, Nature Park and Operation Future Hope to provide learning materials.
- There were three key areas of focus to their work which were increasing community engagement with sustainability, improving biodiversity and inclusion.
- Their Eco Committee met every week and had participation from all ages.
- 420 saplings had been planted on school grounds at community tree planting events that had taken place in each of the last two years.
- Daily emails were sent to both students and parents as part of Green Week to promote sustainable activities.
- Half of their autumn non-uniform day contributions had been donated to Just One Tree who planted trees globally, and the other 50% went to on-site sustainability projects.
- Twilight Sessions were run for staff to encourage them to embed sustainability into the school curriculum where appropriate.
- Various school trips on the themes of wildlife, biodiversity and sustainability had taken place, including visits to sustainability conferences.
- On-site biodiversity had been improved through habitat creation such as log piling, dead hedging, wild flowering, long grass creation, and the installation of bird boxes and feeding stations.
- They ran inclusion programmes with pupils to improve their engagement such as their Voyager Programme for Year 9 students, which focused on sustainability projects and mental health.
- A Horizons Pathway programme would be introduced for Year 10 and 11 students.
- They also offered qualifications linked to sustainability such as the Kings Trust PDE Level 2 and a BTEC in Land Based Studies to students.
- Sustainable food practices would be learned about in the summer, and a space to plant fruits and vegetables would be created for this.

The following Members asked questions:

- Councillor Joe Graziano
- Councillor Claire Strong

In response to questions, Rhys Waterman advised that:

- The best way to make children appreciate nature was to get them to experience it and learn to take care of it.
- Students and volunteers conducted litter picking weekly.

Councillor Claire Strong advised that they should contact the Community Team at the Council to find out more on grant funding sources, in addition to Community Lottery who would help with vegetable and fruit planting.

23 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Audio recording – 1 hour 51 minutes 30 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.

24 SUGGESTED ITEMS FOR FUTURE MEETINGS

Audio recording – 1 hour 51 minutes 33 seconds

The Chair led a discussion to consider items for future meetings of the Cabinet Panel with Members and members of the public present.

The following Members took part in the discussion:

- Councillor Emma Fernandes
- Councillor Joe Graziano

The following points were raised as part of the discussion:

- There had been a Government report in January on a national security assessment relating to biodiversity loss and ecosystem collapse.
- Concern had been raised over food security and provision in the event of a breakdown.
- Grant schemes related to insulation and heating should be further signposted to those on low incomes as there were lots of people who were still unaware of them.

In response to points raised in the discussion, the Chair advised that any further suggested items for future meetings could be emailed to the Environment Panel Inbox after the meeting.

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

The Chair thanked members of the public for their participation at the meeting and speakers for their presentations, in addition to Officers and Members.

The meeting closed at 9.28 pm

Chair