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NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

CABINET PANEL ON THE ENVIRONMENT

MEETING HELD IN THE REMOTE MEETING
ON WEDNESDAY, 22ND FEBRUARY, 2023 AT 7.30 PM

MINUTES

Present: *Councillors: Councillors Steve Jarvis (Co- Chair), Amy Allen (Co-Chair), Chris Hinchliff, Val Bryant and Claire Strong*

In Attendance:

Georgina Chapman (Policy Officer), Deborah Coates (Principle Strategic Planning Officer), Andrew Mills (Service Manager - Greenspace), Edward Leigh (Senior Transport Policy Officer), Henry Thomas (Planning Officer - Graduate), and Eleanor Hopcraft (Committee, Member and Scrutiny Officer)

Also Present:

At the commencement of the meeting approximately 5 members of the public, including registered speakers.

61 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Audio Recording – 3 minutes 20 seconds

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Carol Stanier and Gerald Morris.

Having given due notice, Councillor Claire Strong substituted for Councillor Morris.

62 MINUTES - 11 JANUARY 2023

Audio Recording – 3 minutes 33 seconds

The Chair moved the Minutes for approval and it was:

RESOLVED: That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Committee held on 11 January 2023 be approved as a true record of the proceedings and be signed by the Chair.

63 CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

Audio Recording – 3 minutes 48 seconds

- (1) The Chair advised that, in accordance with Council Policy, the meeting would be audio recorded as well as filmed. The audio recording would be available on mod Gov or via the Council's YouTube Channel.
- (2) That Chair reminded Members to make declarations of interest before an item, the detailed reminder about this and speaking rights was set out under the Chair's announcements on the agenda front sheet.
- (3) The Chair reminded Members that the Council had declared a Climate Emergency. This was a serious decision and means 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 agreed to change the order of the published agenda, with Item 7 'Information Note: Work Programme and Action Tracker 2022/2023' ahead of Item 5 'Public Participation'

64 NOTIFICATION OF OTHER BUSINESS

There was no other business notified.

65 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Audio Recording – 84 minutes 55 seconds

The Chair invited Roger Lovegrove to present. Mr. Lovegrove thanked the Chair and gave a presentation, with slides and advised:

- There was a keen interest to get zero carbon housing introduced into new estates.
- He called for the Council to specify that no mains gas should be enabled in large new estates in the new SPD.
- With the Climate Emergency and the significant increase in gas prices, alternative heating methods were available.
- The Local Plan stated that the SPD was highly relevant in the promotion of sustainable development, which could justify the ban of gas on larger estates.
- A true zero carbon home would require around 3kilowatts of heating due to high insulation, a mechanical heat recovery system, its compact design and large south-facing windows with shading.
- There would also be adjacent car parking facilities with EV charging points and an unheated area for storage or recycling.
- Bricks were not good insulators, water or air tight and had a high carbon content. Wooden frames with rigid insulation could be used instead.
- By declaring no gas would be used to heat larger estates, this could force developers to take insulation and draft-proofing seriously.
- North Hertfordshire District Council could implement a no gas policy before 2025.

The Chair thanked Mr. Lovegrove for his presentation.

The Chair invited John Webb to present. Mr. Webb thanked the Chair and provided a verbal presentation, which included that:

- He had concerns about some of the statements made at the previous meeting of the Panel, specifically that depending on how, when and where they are purchased, electric vehicles were not necessarily more expensive than fossil fuels vehicles.
- Electric vehicles do not increase levels of particulate matter in the air.

The Chair commented that reducing travel was an important part of reducing emissions. Electric vehicles were certainly preferable to cars that run on fossil fuels, but construction carbon impacts and if the electric used to charge them was from renewable energy sources should be considered.

The Chair thanked Mr. Webb for his presentation.

66 **SUSTAINABILITY SUPPLEMENTARY PLANNING DOCUMENT (SPD)**

Audio Recording – 95 minutes 52 seconds

The Chair invited Deborah Coates, Principle Strategic Planning Officer to present. Ms. Coates thanked the Chair, gave a presentation with slides and advised:

- The SPD was currently in the draft phase, and once finished would go to consultation.
- The SPD built upon the current Local Plan policies, but did not form part of the development plan.
- The SPD would provide further technical interpretation of requirements, processes that needed to be followed and expand on 'directions of travel'.
- Sustainability referred to the means by which we meet our needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.
- The SPD would consider the work of HCCSP, which covered water sustainability, biodiversity, carbon reduction and transport.
- The Sustainability Development Goals from Central Government were also being considered.
- The SPD Technical guidance would cover energy efficiency, low carbon energy, passive design, EV charging points, waste, materials and water use.
- The North Hertfordshire Sustainability standards would also be considered.
- The SPD looked to introduce Sustainability Standards rated Low/Medium/High.

The Chair thanked Ms. Coates for her presentation, commented that there were benefits for developers to deliver more than the minimum standard outlined in the SPD.

The following Members and public participants asked questions:

- Roger Lovegrove
- John Webb
- Deolinda Eltringham

In response to the questions, Ms. Coates advised:

- The Council cannot require developers to build to a higher level than the building regulations, but they can encourage them.
- The review of Local Plan could do more to ensure developers build to higher standards.
- Circularity could be addressed in the SPD.

The Chair thanked Ms. Coates for her presentation.

Deolinda Eltringham asked if Council Tax could be redesigned to be lower for more energy-efficient houses, which could make them more favourable for purchase.

The Chair commented that the Council could not do that due to constraints. There was discussion around a change in Council Tax band if the capital value of a house was increased and its running costs were decreased, but the impact of that was unsure. The Council does not have influence in some areas such as carbon reduction and nature recovery, but aimed to set an example to the community and lobby the government to do more.

The Chair advised that this was the last meeting of the civic year, and that items for the work programme for the next civic year needed to be considered. Water and sewage and community energy should be considered as topics for the programme.

John Webb advised that the charity Transition Town Letchworth was being shut down in August 2023, and a discussion group with Letchworth Arts and Leisure group was being formed called DeCarbonise Letchworth.

The Chair commented that this was sad news, and the charity had reached beyond Letchworth in its work.

67 INFORMATION NOTE: WORK PROGRAMME AND ACTION TRACKER FOR 2022/23

Audio Recording – 4 minutes 56 seconds

The Chair invited Georgina Chapman, Policy Team Leader to present. Ms. Chapman thanked the Chair, gave a presentation with slides and advised:

- The Action Tracker would have a full review in the next Civic Year.
- The main action of the tracker was to investigate environmental employment skills modules. The Policy team was currently undertaking research into vocational training, courses and modules from Hertfordshire College, University of Hertfordshire and the Open University.
- Information for the next Green Careers Week was ready.
- The Solar Together Scheme was run by the Council in partnership with HCCSP and iChoosr.
- North Hertfordshire had the 2nd highest registrations in the County, with installation of panels set to be complete by April.
- Retrofitting was underway through the Sustainable Warmth Scheme and Fabric First Approach.
- The Sustainable Warmth Scheme allowed eligible households to benefit from up to £10k of retrofitting.
- The Fabric First Scheme was looking to fit 54 homes in North Hertfordshire, and installation would be completed shortly.
- The Council was waiting on a decision to extend the scheme and to lift the cap on D-rated properties.
- The Council was aiming to set higher sustainability standards through terms of sale agreements.
- Clare Crescent, Baldock was used as a trial. Eight affordable flats and 16 private households would have applied sustainability measures as well as EV charging points, triple glazing and the fabric first approach.
- The Council was looking at implementing this in other sites that they were planning to sell.
- The Biodiversity baseline was an action plan created for the County, which was available for Officers to use.
- The baselines would help in the development of the Local Nature Recovery Strategy, identification of strategic sites for off-setting biodiversity, maximizing opportunities in the Environmental Land Management Scheme, measuring changes in biodiversity level and evaluating land considered for development.

The following Members and public participants asked questions:

- John Webb
- Deolinda Eltringham
- Councillor Chris Hinchliff
- Roger Lovegrove

In response to the questions, Ms. Chapman advised:

- The Council was not able to implement sustainability measures through planning processes, but it was able to be a requirement for land being sold by the Council.

- The flats at the site on Clare Crescent would have a higher insulation than the houses.
- The lower uptake of the Solar Together Scheme was mainly due to cost.

The Chair thanked Ms. Chapman for her presentation.

The Chair invited Andrew Mills, Greenspace Manager, to present. Mr. Mills thanked the Chair, gave a verbal presentation and advised:

- In 2019, the Council worked with Herts County Council's Countryside Management Service to undertake a Wilding Audit of parks and open spaces within the District.
- The Audit aimed to identify opportunities to improve biodiversity.
- In 2020, implementation started in Letchworth, and the scheme was expanded in 2021 to Walsworth Common and Wilbury Recreation Ground.
- Actions involved a change of maintenance and overseeding with a wildflower seed mix.
- These areas were monitored last year, with the heatwave impacting the results.
- The Council were looking to expand the programme this year, and the previous sites were revisited and re-overseeded.
- The maintenance of these areas would involve mowing the areas of wildflower seeding on a regular basis for the first year. This is to prevent the wildflower seeds over competing with the grass seeds.
- Further works and seeding were undertaken in 2022 (and into the current year) in Butt's Close, Icknield Way Cemetery, Temple Gardens, Ransom, St. John's and Swinburne Recreation Grounds.
- Over ten and a half thousand square metres of wilding had been undertaken on the Twigden Estate, Royston. The chalk soil in Royston was likely to yield a different result than other areas of wilding around the district.
- Over 1200 metres of hedging had been planted in Clothall Common, Swinburne Recreation Ground, St John's Recreation Ground and Icknield Way Cemetery.
- Nearly 60 trees had been planted as part of the project.
- A new maintenance regime had been implemented on highway verges in urban developments around the District.
- This involved a reduced frequency of mowing and strimming, and no herbicide spraying in some areas.
- The Council were hopeful that the benefits to habitat and biodiversity would be seen this year.
- The public perception of the scheme had been good so far.
- The Council were hoping that John O'Connor's would be able to use more electric equipment in future, with trials underway.
- The Tidal Springs projects with Affinity and Anglian Water was aiming to reintroduce waterflow into the District's springs. Over recent years, many springs had dried up, mostly in the summer.
- An Augmentation Project would be undertaken, which would involve creating a borehole to pump water up into the springs.
- One issue identified was the uphill river flow, work was needed to be done to create flow away from the spring.
- The work was fully-funded by the water companies and was due to start in April.
- Another issue identified was the collapsed Weir on the river at Oughton Common, which has resulted in the river bypassing the structure.
- The Council was looking at removing the Weir without losing the body of water upstream.
- Outline designs for the plan were being considered by the Environment Agency, with detailed designs to follow.

In response to the question from Deolinda Eltringham, Mr. Mills advised:

- There was not enough space to plant trees on the land the Council's had, as other activities such as sports use the land.

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- The Council could look at purchasing more land to plant trees, and was currently looking at Wilbury Hills Cemetery to expand into the neighboring field for landscaping.

The Chair commented that since the collapse of the Weir, the river quality had in fact improved. However, the Oughton River intervention was short-term to improve the river environment.

Deolinda Eltringham commented that this would decrease the aquifer water levels, and would have a negative effect on the environment.

Councillor Claire Strong commented that the Council gave a strip of land to the Rotary Club on Swinburne Recreation Ground, where 2,000 trees were planted.

Councillor Strong also commented on the improved river quality of the Oughton. She also commented on the approved planning permission for the building of the nitrate removal plants at Oughton Head, and asked that the panel kept the project on their tracker.

The Chair asked Edward Leigh, Senior Transport Policy Officer, to present. Mr. Leigh thanked the Chair, gave a presentation with slides and advised:

- The Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan (LCWIP) was being developed with Hertfordshire County Council (HCC) to create a coherent plan for the District.
- The intervention proposed in the draft plan include wider pavements, safer junctions, new pedestrian and cycle crossings, protected cycle lanes, modal filters and other traffic measures.
- The consultation feedback was being analysed, and amendments to the draft LCWIP were being considered.
- The final LCWIP was expected to be presented to Cabinet in June 2023, and to be adopted by HCC in September 2023.
- Active Travel England had awarded HCC money for designing and delivering schemes in 2023/24, with some in North Hertfordshire.
- Hertfordshire bus services in 2021/22 were 39% lower than 2015/16 levels, however COVID recovery could have impacted these figures.
- HertsLynx would benefit from funding. The pre-bookable service started in September 2021, completing around 1,500 person trips a month in North and East Hertfordshire.
- The service required a large subsidy, and an electric bus would join the fleet in April 2023.
- There was a £2 cap on single bus fares until the end of June 2023.
- HCC received £29.7million from the government for bus services and infrastructure. Benefit would include discounts on multi-operator tickets, new and discounted SaverCards and the introduction of ePurse.
- HCC was finalising a strategy for the installation of EV charge points. Priority areas for the charging points were car parks and hub locations.
- On-street EV charging points were challenging due to installation costs, ensuring vehicle turnover, pavement obstruction and scalability to meet future demand. On-street charging points would only be considered if other options too far away.
- The Council was working with an EV charge point provider to install 32 charge points around the district, including replacing ones installed in 2014.
- Six charge point would be for NHDC fleet vehicles, in addition to the four recently installed for Careline's electric vehicles.
- The Council's other vehicles would continue to be swapped to ULEV and would be fully electric from 2025.
- Letchworth and Royston were involved in HCC's Sustainable Travel Towns Programme, which explored ways to encourage walking, cycling and public transport use.
- The programme aimed to encourage people to change their travel choices, as well as creating safer spaces for walking and cycling and improving bus services.

The following Members and public participants asked questions:

- Deolinda Eltringham
- Councillor Val Bryant
- Roger Lovegrove
- Councillor Chris Hinchliff

In response to the questions, Mr. Leigh advised:

- If Solar Panels could be put in locations for EV charging points without being an eyesore, this would be considered. There was currently not a strategy to do that.
- There were two funds available for on-road EV charging points (ORCS and LEVI), and the Council was hoping that half of 32 charging points would be part-funded from one of these funds.
- The Council's own assets such as leisure centres would be considered for future EV charging point installation and charging hubs.
- There had been a partial update on transport from HCC, which focused on improving connections between the larger towns of the county. There were no specific proposals for new or enhanced services in North Hertfordshire other than HertsLynx.

Roger Lovegrove commented on the bottlenecks at Welwyn on the railway and A1 Motorway as an issue for transport in North Hertfordshire.

The Chair advised that while this was an issue, it was something that the Council could do little about.

John Webb asked the Panel to take into account the strategies by EV charger providers for their rollouts, including supermarkets and their encouragement of having chargers on their premises.

Deolinda Eltringham commented that the installation of solar panels in car parks to power EV charging points could be a community project or residents could invest into a community energy-providing scheme.

The Chair commented that this was an interesting idea and would be something that the Council would need to look into.

The meeting closed at 9.27 pm

Chair

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