

Sustainability Strategy 2025-2030

Foreword

Tackling climate change and conserving nature are among the biggest challenges which affects each and every one of us. At North Herts Council we have made a commitment to prioritise environmental sustainability - taking action around tackling climate change, protecting nature, and making better use of natural resources. Environmental sustainability is about balancing human activities with the capacity of our planet to support life and we are committed to playing our part, to protect our beautiful district and the people who live and work in it.

Local councils have a key part to play in improving sustainability through their own operations and through their role in engaging with residents and communities, and shaping the places that fall within their boundaries. The Climate Change Committee has estimated that councils can influence around one third of their area's emissions.

For that reason, Sustainability is one of our four key priorities laid out in our Council Plan 2024-2028, and will help us achieve our vision of a fairer, greener North Herts.

In 2019 we declared a climate emergency, in recognition of the scale of the climate challenges ahead and the pace at which we need to take action. Since then, we have taken action to transition our fleet to low emission and electric vehicles, installed more electric vehicle charging points in our car parks, and won funding for an ambitious project to significantly reduce emissions from our leisure centres. Meanwhile, we have been considering our role in how we adapt to climate change and conserve nature. This new Sustainability Strategy therefore replaces our Climate Change Strategy, drawing in climate change adaptation and biodiversity as other key elements of our work. It sets clear objectives and actions for both our own services and operations, as well as for the wider district.

Acting on these issues is important for the future of our planet and can also create wider benefits for our residents. For example, the transition to electric vehicles can help improve local air quality; supporting more walking and cycling initiatives can have health benefits; while action on adaptation can reduce disruption to services from extreme weather events.

Like other councils, we face significant funding challenges, meaning we will need to find other sources of funding, such as grants to deliver on some of the actions proposed. Additionally, there may be instances where competing priorities arise and we will need to carefully consider how to balance these, to ensure we are meeting our council priorities to the best of our ability. Working in partnership with other councils, community groups and other stakeholders will be critical to ensure we maximise our impact.

This Strategy is ambitious, and the work to deliver it will be challenging, but it is also vitally important. Together, we can make our council, and North Hertfordshire, a more sustainable place for us all.

Amy Allen, Executive Member for Environment

Key Areas of Sustainability

Climate Change

Climate change refers to a large-scale identifiable change in the planet's weather patterns that persists for an extended period, typically decades or longer. The global warming and associated climate change we are experiencing today is driven by human activity, particularly the burning of fossil fuels.

While the world's wealthiest countries remain responsible for disproportionately more warming greenhouse gas emissions than the poorest countries, it is currently the poorest countries who are experiencing more severe climate impacts and who are less able to afford measures to adapt to climate change.

Climate change is affecting and will continue to increasingly impact every part of the world, including the UK. These changes have serious implications for the future stability of the planet.

Indeed, many of the devastating extreme weather events we are seeing across the world, such as the California wildfires in 2024 or devastating flooding in Pakistan in 2022, are a direct result of human-caused climate change.

Over the last ten years the UK has experienced a variety of climate-related extremes, including record wet winters, major floods, heatwaves, and wildfires, with the ten hottest years on record all having occurred within the last twenty-five years according to the Met Office.

Climate Change Adaptation

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) defines climate change adaptation as "the process of adjustment to actual or expected climate and its effects".

While climate change mitigation is crucial to avoid more catastrophic warming scenarios, adaptation acknowledges that climate impacts are now unavoidable and seeks to reduce the risks and vulnerabilities associated with these.

Adaptation focuses on things like flood protection and making infrastructure more resilient to extreme heat, often making use of nature-based solutions, such as tree planting, to achieve this. As such, action taken to adapt can have positive impacts on climate change, biodiversity, as well as health and wellbeing.

Biodiversity

One of the implications of climate change is ecological crisis and biodiversity loss.

Biodiversity refers to the diversity of species in a particular habitat or area, where a high level of diversity is typically considered to be important. Each species plays a unique role in maintaining the health of the ecosystem. Biodiversity loss therefore degrades ecosystems, compromising their ability to contribute to clean air and water, soil fertility and food security, flood prevention, disease prevention, and climate change mitigation via capturing and storing carbon.

The planet is experiencing a nature crisis, caused by the rapid decline in biodiversity, habitat loss, and ecosystem degradation. While climate change plays a key part in this, there are other drivers including land-use changes (such as for development or intensive agriculture), use of pesticides, and pollution.

The UK has seen significant loss of plants, animals and fungi, and as such is one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world. Leading conservation organisations estimate that the UK has lost around half of its biodiversity since the Industrial Revolution. The State of Nature Report highlights that nearly one in six species are currently under threat of extinction from Great Britain, with many species already lost.

This biodiversity crisis both results from and further drives climate change and reduces our ability to adapt to it.

Mandate for Action

Tackling Climate Change

The Paris Agreement is a landmark global agreement by the member states of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), including the UK, committing to “holding the increase in the global average temperature to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels and pursuing efforts to limit the temperature increase to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels”.

The scientific basis for this goal came from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change’s (IPCC) report which indicated that warming should be limited to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels to avoid the most catastrophic impacts of climate change, and that achieving this would require rapid and unprecedented changes in all aspects of society.

In response and on the advice of the Climate Change Committee (CCC), in June 2019 parliament passed legislation requiring the government to reduce the UK’s net emissions of greenhouse gases by 100% by 2050, relative to 1990 levels. In other words, the UK should emit net zero greenhouse gases by 2050. The UK enshrined a new target in law in 2021 to slash emissions by 78% by 2035, compared to 1990 levels.

Future climate change

In 2023 the IPCC’s Sixth Assessment Report found that, globally, greenhouse gas emissions are continuing to rise and that current national and international plans to address climate change are not ambitious enough to limit warming to 1.5°C. It also found that despite progress in adaptation, many more measures are needed to live safely with the effects of climate change.

The IPCC report indicated that the world could see warming of 2°C by 2050 under current trends in emissions while the CCC advises policymakers [to plan for 2°C and assess the risks for 4°C of global warming by 2100](#).

At 2°C of warming, it is estimated that there will be an ice-free summer in the Arctic at least once every ten years – compared to once every 100 years at 1.5°C, and that 37% of the global population will be affected by severe heat (compared to 14% at 1.5°C). 2°C also represents 99% destruction of coral reefs, a significant decline in plant and animal species, reduction of crop yields and rising sea level.

Future impacts in North Hertfordshire

The impacts of climate change will also be increasingly felt in North Hertfordshire.

An assessment of the local impacts of climate change by the Met Office has indicated that with 2°C of warming, North Herts would see annually, on average, up to 51 days above 25°C, up to 11 days above 30°C. More extreme temperatures raise the risk of roads melting, railway tracks buckling, overhead power lines becoming less effective, and increased hospitalisations and heat-related deaths. Higher temperatures also increase energy demand to cool our buildings, which further contributes to global warming.

At 2°C it is estimated that there will be up to 19% less rain in the summer (causing droughts and crop failures) and up to 14% more winter rain. Extreme weather events, such as flash flooding like that seen in Hitchin in September 2024 will unfortunately become more common.

Hotter temperatures, reduced summer rain, and other impacts also drive ecological crisis by depleting nature and degrading ecosystems. This in turn weakens our planet's capacity to mitigate and adapt to climate change by reducing its ability to absorb carbon and provide protection from climate impacts (e.g. flood protection). The climate impacts associated with warming of 2°C pose a serious threat to local species and habitats, such as precious chalk streams and their inhabitants.

Adapting to Climate Change

The Climate Change Act requires the UK Government to produce a Climate Change Risk Assessment (CCRA) every 5 years. The Third Climate Change Risk Assessment was published in 2022, with the government subsequently publishing the UK's Third National Adaptation Programme in 2023, to address the 61 climate risks and opportunities identified in the risk assessment.

Central government have previously stated that local councils have a clear role to play in helping communities adapt to climate change and have provided guidance on this.

Preserving and Increasing Biodiversity

The Environment Act 2021 and subsequent regulations include legally binding targets to reduce the risk of species extinction, restore or create 500,000 hectares of

wildlife-rich habitat, and ensure overall species abundance is increasing by 2030 and increases by 10% by 2042. The Environment Act also introduced the policy of Biodiversity Net Gain from development - a means of measurably increasing biodiversity through the planning system - as well as a strengthened biodiversity duty, requiring all public authorities in England to consider how they can conserve and enhance biodiversity, and take appropriate actions to do so.

North Herts Council's Approach

Sustainability is one of our four Council priorities, as outlined in our [Council Plan \(2024-2028\)](#). This affirms our commitment to making our operations and services more sustainable, as well as to advancing sustainability within North Herts, helping our residents to reduce their impact on the environment.

In 2019 the council passed a motion to declare a Climate Emergency. The declaration recognised the urgency of acting on the climate crisis and asserted the council's commitment toward climate action, beyond current government targets and international agreements. Since then, we have taken steps to calculate our emissions and reduce them, through projects to progress the decarbonisation of our vehicle fleet and estate. Alongside this, we have progressed projects to help residents reduce their emissions, including participating in schemes which help people insulate their homes or install solar. We have also improved public Electric Vehicle charging provision and taken steps to make development that occurs in North Herts more sustainable through our Sustainability Supplementary Planning Document. We have also identified risks posed to our services by extreme weather and actions to reduce those risks.

In July 2023 the council declared an Ecological Emergency to recognise that the crisis facing nature requires urgent action and is interlinked with the climate crisis. Over recent years the council has implemented reduced mowing regimes, created wildflower areas, and begun to implement Biodiversity Net Gain through the planning system. As of 2024, there is a Biodiversity Duty incumbent on public authorities, meaning we must consider what we can do to both conserve and enhance biodiversity and report on our progress. Incorporating biodiversity into our Sustainability Strategy will help us to fulfil this responsibility and consider opportunities to make a positive impact.

It is clear that many of the actions taken to address environmental issues have wider benefits that contribute to our other Council priorities. For example, supporting low-income households to access government grants for things like home insulation helps residents reduce their energy bills and make their homes more comfortable, while also reducing emissions. We will continue to try to maximise the wider benefits that can be had from environmental action.

Governance and decision-making

Climate and Sustainability Officer Group

We have a Climate and Sustainability Officer Group (CSOG) which meets quarterly and is comprised of officers from across the council. Its aim is to aid cross-team working on environmental issues and help shape our approach to sustainability. The group helps drive action to meet our environmental objectives and monitor progress against the actions in the Strategy. For oversight and accountability purposes a regular report on progress is taken to Political Liaison Board (PLB) which is comprised of Cabinet Members and senior leadership. The group are also accountable to the Director – Environment, who has constitutional responsibility for the council's work on climate change and sustainability. The detail for delivery of strategy actions (including specifics on resource and funding availability, timeframes, and measures) will sit with CSOG, who will use this information to drive forward action and monitor progress.

Assessing environmental impacts

Committees form a key part of our decision-making process and officers are required to consider and comment on the environmental implications of their policies and projects in each committee report. Fuller environmental impact assessments are undertaken where a significant impact is identified upon initial consideration. The process aims to ensure that impacts, risks, and mitigating actions are identified at an early stage, so that our projects and policies align with our sustainability objectives.

Cabinet Panel on the Environment

Our [Environment Panel](#) is an advisory panel which acts as a forum for sharing ideas, learning, and best practice, as well as engaging residents on our climate and environment work. The Panel has also been involved in reviewing and shaping the Sustainability Strategy.

Working in Partnership

The council remains committed to playing a leadership role in local efforts to address the climate emergency, working in partnership with residents, local businesses, voluntary and community groups.

Since 2020 we have worked closely with Hertfordshire County Council and the ten Hertfordshire district and borough councils, through the Hertfordshire Climate Change and Sustainability Partnership (HCCSP). The HCCSP's aim is to tackle climate, environmental, and sustainability issues in Hertfordshire across the priority areas of Water Sustainability; Biodiversity; Carbon Reduction; Transport; Behaviour Change; and Climate Change Adaptation. Various projects have emerged from this partnership including the Solar Together Project and the Local Authority Retrofit

Accelerator (LARA). We will continue our work within the HCCSP, as well as making use of more informal networks both within and beyond Hertfordshire, to drive forward environmental action over the coming years.

Aims

- **Achieve Net Zero by 2030 for the council's own operations.**
- **Achieve a Net Zero North Herts district by 2040.**
- **Ensure all operations and services are resilient to the impacts of climate change.**
- **Become a district that is resilient to unavoidable impacts of climate change.**
- **Increase biodiversity in North Herts.**

What we do

There are a number of ongoing actions that have become embedded in our day-to-day work. These are not new initiatives, but they reflect our culture of sustainability and help us shape a more sustainable future within the council and across the district.

ACTION
Install EV charging and turnover of light waste collection vehicles in 2025/26
Provide information to support employees to work and live more sustainably.
Consider opportunities to promote the use of online video conferencing platforms to reduce business travel where possible.
Continue to provide information to support residents and the district to work and live more sustainably.
Continue to promote shared mobility schemes, such as the Herts Lynx, to support ease of travel across the district
Continue to review the Council's business continuity plans in the context of climate change adaptation and resilience.
Continue with reduced mowing regimes to allow for more species diversity.
Continue to manage important habitats through ongoing implementation of our greenspace action plans.
Continue to ensure Biodiversity Net Gain is delivered through the planning process.
Continue to review what we can do to enhance biodiversity and review and report on our progress, as per the Biodiversity Duty.

Continue to work with partners like the Hertfordshire Climate Change and Sustainability Partnership and the Regional Climate Change Forum on projects to help North Herts become a net zero district.

Make use of and continue to search for potential funding streams to assist both the Council and district to meet our net zero targets and enhancing sustainability within North Herts.

Use of online platforms and in person events to engage our communities on Sustainability including Cabinet Panel on the Environment, Community Forums, Communication channels, Eco events and partner events.

Continue to assess Environmental Implications of key decisions, committee reports, including delegated decisions and undertake a full assessment where any significant environmental impacts are identified.

Continue to act on motions passed; Plastic Free, Ecological and Climate Emergency, Protection of Chalk Streams, Ultra Low Emission Vehicles, sky lanterns and helium balloons.