

NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

CABINET PANEL ON THE ENVIRONMENT

**MEETING HELD IN THE VIRTUAL VIA ZOOM
ON WEDNESDAY, 2ND APRIL, 2025 AT 7.30 PM**

MINUTES

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

In Attendance: *Reuben Ayavoo (Policy & Community Manager), Georgina Chapman (Policy & Strategy Team Leader), Robert Filby (Trainee Committee, Member and Scrutiny Officer), Ellie Hollingsworth (Policy & Strategy Officer), James Lees (Climate Change and Sustainability Project Manager) and James Lovegrove (Committee, Member and Scrutiny Manager).*

Also Present: *At the commencement of the meeting approximately 7 members of the public, including registered speakers.*

Councillor Daniel Allen was also present.

8 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Audio recording – 3 minutes 25 seconds

No apologies for absence were received from Members.

9 MINUTES - 22 JANUARY 2025

Audio Recording – 3 minutes 43 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 22 January 2025 be approved as a true record of the proceedings and be signed by the Chair.

10 CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

Audio recording – 4 minutes 3 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 Members that following a delegated decision taken on Friday 21 March 2025, Councillor Caroline McDonnell had replaced Councillor Lisa Nash as a Committee Member on the Cabinet Panel on the Environment until the end of the Civic Year.

11 NOTIFICATION OF OTHER BUSINESS

Audio recording – 4 minutes 56 seconds

There was no other business notified.

N.B. Councillor Dominic Griffiths joined the Zoom call at 19.37.

12 INFORMATION NOTE: WORK PROGRAMME 2024/25

Audio recording – 5 minutes 5 seconds

The Policy & Strategy Team Leader and Policy & Strategy Officer presented the Information Note entitled 'Work Programme 2024/25' and advised that:

- The third round of Solar Together had commenced and would be open until 4 April for expressions of interest. There was no obligation to continue with the purchase of solar PV or battery storage once registered. As of 31 March, 579 North Herts residents had signed up for this.
- The Hertfordshire Climate Change and Sustainability Partnership (HCCSP) had been working with the MCS Foundation to develop a Retrofit Strategy as part of the Local Authority Retrofit Accelerator.
- Development of the Local Nature Recovery Strategy was ongoing and the strategy had undergone a number of engagement events in 2024 with the most recent one held in February to discuss the draft. Public consultation on the draft would reopen later in the year.
- Climate Hive, the Council engagement hub for climate and sustainability had 407 subscribers to date, and continued to update readers on relevant events, national environment days and the activities of the Cabinet Panel. As of April, Climate Hive would be provided on a different platform and subscribers had been informed of this change.
- The ECO Flex Scheme had been launched in January 2025 with the National Energy Foundation (NEF) to support low income and vulnerable households in making their homes more energy efficient. Four applications had been received through this scheme and they had all been approved.
- £1.5m had been awarded to the Council after a successful bid to the Warm Homes: Local Grants scheme. The funding would enable the Council to deliver energy efficient measures and low-carbon heating to those living in lower income households, particularly those with hard to heat, poorly insulated homes. Compared to previous schemes (ECO Flex or HUG2), a greater number of households would be eligible to apply for funding from this.
- The Council had applied for phase four of the Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme (PSDS) to fund the decarbonisation of North Herts Museum, Hitchin Town Hall and the District Council Offices. They would expect to hear back on this by May and they would keep the Cabinet Panel updated on this.
- One action was ongoing on the Action Tracker for 2024/25 which was to review the asks of Decarbonise Letchworth regarding retrofitting and Supplementary Planning Guidance. In response to this, planners were working on a Design Code for the district about what good design would look like. The Sustainability Supplementary Planning Document (SSPD) also addressed this action by encouraging developers to implement energy efficient measures on new developments. This had also been raised with the

Chief Executive who had regular meetings with the Heritage Foundation Chief Executive.

The Policy & Strategy Team Leader and Policy & Strategy Officer then presented Appendix C to the Information Note entitled 'Sustainability Achievements 2024/25' and highlighted the following achievements in the last Civic year:

- New waste and recycling contracts with environmental commitments including all vehicles that were 3.5 tonnes and under had to be electric and use of hydrogenated vegetable oil in refuse freighters had been agreed.
- Soft plastics recycling had been trialled across the district and would be rolled out to all areas as part of the new waste contract.
- A Bee Corridor had been developed in Letchworth in partnership with John O'Connor and had won two Green Apple Environmental Awards. Another Bee Corridor would be introduced in Royston.
- Five Green Flag Awards had been given to sites in North Herts which were Norton Common, Oughtonhead Common, Ivel Springs, Howard Park and Gardens and Priory Memorial Gardens.
- Norton Common had also received a Green Award which was presented to the founder of Green Care at the North Herts Heroes Awards.
- They had worked with the County Council to facilitate engagement on the Local Nature Recovery Strategy for Hertfordshire.
- A government grant of £40,000 had been awarded to the Council to produce a strategy to decarbonise the Council Estate.
- The first Staff Sustainability Survey had been carried out to inform future work on sustainability.
- Additional EV charging points had been installed outside the District Council Offices to support the growing electric vehicle needs of the Council and to aid the transition away from petrol and diesel vehicles in their fleet.
- The ECO Flex Scheme was launched to help North Herts residents access funding for insulation and other home improvement measures.
- There had been promotion of free green home surveys and action plans through the SuperHomes project.
- More North Herts residents had been able to install solar panels on their homes as the Council had participated in a second round of Solar Together.
- Free bike repairs and vouchers for home cycle repair visits had been offered to residents at various events across the district.
- The SSPD had been published to encourage developers to incorporate sustainability into their plans and designs for developments.
- North Herts Prosperity Fund had funded various community sustainability projects including a low-emissions van for Green Care at Norton, the improvement of biodiversity at Triangle Community Garden, and a tech recycling project at Letchworth Garden Shed.
- HCCSP had been given the Gold Award in the category of Green Public Service at the Herts Public Sector Transformation Awards.

The following Members and members of the public asked questions:

- Councillor Amy Allen
- Councillor Bryony May
- Deolinda Eltringham
- Roger Lovegrove
- Councillor Claire Strong
- Dr John Webb
- Julia Sonander
- Councillor Tina Bhartwas

In response to questions, the Climate Change and Sustainability Project Manager advised that:

- The SuperHomes project was managed by NEF and they were offering free surveys of homes across North Herts and Central Bedfordshire that would normally cost £250. As part of the project, residents received a home visit from a surveyor to identify their energy priorities and to inform them of easy fixes to their homes and the cost of implementing suitable energy harnessing or efficient technologies based on their needs.
- Case studies of developments that had met gold, silver and bronze targets in the SSPD would be formed and following this, they may look at capturing data on these, however, building the case studies first would be the priority.

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

- A draft of the Local Nature Recovery Strategy was currently being looked at by Members and officers at the Council. Once it had been through the amendment process, it would be circulated to Members of the Cabinet Panel who wished to read it.
- She would liaise with the Waste Team for further information on soft plastics recycling and would advise the Cabinet Panel on this after the meeting.
- Greenspace were proactive in gaining accreditation for Council sites, but she would ask their team if it was possible to raise the standards of smaller sites to achieve additional accreditations. There was also an action on Appendix B to the Information Note that specified reviewing Council assets to investigate implementing additional features where possible which would address this.

In response to questions, the Chair advised that:

- There was misinformation on how soft plastics were not recycled due to a recent news article where air tags had been placed on soft plastics to track their location throughout the recycling process, however, the air tags were removed from the soft plastics and incinerated before the soft plastics could reach the end of the process.
- All recycling produced waste as not everything could be repurposed.
- Materials that were not specifically biodegradable could potentially last a very long time before they disintegrated.
- Within the product packaging industry, there had been a push to move away from plastic packaging and to more biodegradable materials such as paper.
- Changes to refuse collection bins had made it more logical for residents to recycle as much as they could while keeping their waste at a minimum.
- A new Waste Communications Officer had been employed by the Council to educate North Herts residents on changes to waste and recycling and why they were important.
- It would be dangerous to litter pick on land either side of the railway lines and would require a huge operation involving coordination with Network Rail workers and possible line closures to make it safe. Network Rail would be contacted again to see whether they would be willing to clear the litter close to the railway lines as it was an eye sore to the public, however, they would not be obliged to do this as it was private land.
- It would have been helpful if the litter either side of the railway had been cleared while the vegetation had, but it was recognised that the professionals who removed the vegetation did not have a responsibility to remove the litter.

In response to questions, Councillor Daniel Allen advised that:

- The targets within the SSPD were not enforceable but there was an incentive for developers to meet them as they could advertise that they had been achieved and potentially gain more revenue when selling properties on the accredited development.
- The Council took part in the Hertfordshire Infrastructure and Development Board that had representatives from district and borough councils across Hertfordshire as well as

leading developers in the county. The SSPD had been discussed at the board and would be talked about again when the Council hosted the next board meeting. However, the direction of the SSPD once local government reorganisation had taken place would be unknown until they had more information on what this would look like.

In response to questions, Dr John Webb advised that:

- There were lots of complications with the recycling of soft plastics around chemical additives, their reuse life and forever plastics that were impossible to destroy without producing Carbon in the destruction process.
- Much of the vegetation close to the railway lines had been cleared for safety reasons, which might allow for litter to be removed from these areas more easily.

In response to questions, the Policy & Community Manager advised that the Council were already working in partnership with the ten other district and borough councils within Hertfordshire in addition to the County Council to contribute to combined activity to address climate change and sustainability matters. It would make sense to continue this partnership and any (award-winning) work that had been produced out of it in the future, regardless of the local authority structures that were established.

In response to questions, Councillor Mick Debenham highlighted that Watford Borough Council had thirty Green Flag accredited sites, therefore, there might be scope for further sites within North Herts to be awarded with Green Flag accreditation.

Councillor Daniel Allen expressed his delight at the publication of the SSPD and how it prepared the Council for receiving planning applications.

Councillor Claire Strong suggested that they should invite a Waste Officer from Hertfordshire County Council to a future Cabinet Panel meeting to give a presentation on the recycling process that took place in the County and how they could help to improve the process. The Chair agreed with this idea and arrangements would be made for this after the meeting had finished.

13 DRAFT SUSTAINABILITY STRATEGY FEEDBACK

Audio recording – 54 minutes 16 seconds

The Policy & Community Manager presented Appendix B to the Information Note entitled 'Sustainability Strategy Draft Actions' and advised that:

- A public consultation on the Sustainability Strategy took place in March.
- The Climate Change Strategy had been expanded into the Sustainability Strategy as sustainability was now a key council priority in the Council Plan.
- It covered many areas such as reducing emissions, climate change adaptation, biodiversity and cross cutting sustainability matters.
- These four areas would be covered in the following presentations from relevant officers.

The Climate Change and Sustainability Project Manager provided a presentation on reducing emissions and advised that:

- In the draft, there was a goal for the Council to achieve Net Zero by 2030 on its own operations which was also referenced in the Council Plan.
- Within that target, they would be focusing on their own buildings, vehicle fleet and key contracted services including waste collection, leisure centres and grounds maintenance which accounted for 90.4% of all council emissions.

- The biggest emissions contributor was gas usage from leisure centres and lidos which equated to 45% of all council emissions. Other key contributors were electricity use in leisure centres and gas use in council buildings.
- 9.6% of council emissions were from activities that the Council had less influence over such as staff working remotely and commuting. They had a target for these wider emissions to be Net Zero by 2040.
- There were still gaps in their knowledge about understanding emissions that arose from IT and smaller contracts, as well as emissions related to Council Estate.
- Key actions to reduce council emissions included delivering decarbonisation of leisure centres in North Herts by March 2026, implementing the use of sustainable low carbon fuels in heavy duty refuse collection vehicles, and wider measures to reduce fuel consumption in the waste collection service.
- Other actions included decarbonisation of key council buildings, particularly the District Council Offices, Hitchin Town Hall and North Herts Museum.
- Work would also take place with the Contracts Procurement Group to assess their supply chain of goods and materials and how they could utilise procurement to reduce emissions in this area.
- There was a longstanding target to achieve a North Herts Net Zero district by 2040.
- Key sources of district wide emissions from the biggest to smallest emissions contributors were transport, domestic, industry, waste, agriculture, commercial and public sector. Land use such as forestry had a slightly negative emissions contribution to the district.
- They had limited influence to drive national action, but they had an important role to play in the district by place shaping new residential and commercial developments as the Planning Authority.
- They could also engage in showcasing to influence district wide emissions by providing case studies of sustainability, for example developments that had met gold, silver or bronze targets in the SSPD.
- In addition, they could participate in partnerships to bring groups and stakeholders together to influence district wide emissions.
- It was important for the Council to engage with residents through face-to-face conversations, social media and newsletters to translate national policy into local relevance and raise awareness of sustainability issues to involve them.
- Actions to reduce the district wide emissions arising from transport had been developed. These were to work with the County Council to improve public transport, expand EV charging provision across the district by installing more charging points in Council owned car parks, and to secure funding towards improvements to cycle and walking infrastructure.
- In terms of heating homes, they would encourage residents to retrofit their homes by continuing to promote and deliver government funded grants in addition to independent advice and services or schemes.
- Government funding was being made available towards community energy projects and the Council would investigate how to obtain this in the future.
- They would look to support community energy groups such as Green Heat Coop in Royston as they could play an important role in reducing domestic emissions in the district by driving local sustainability projects.

The following members of the public asked questions:

- Dr John Webb
- Roger Lovegrove
- Deolinda Eltringham
- Julia Sonander
- Chris Jones

In response to questions, the Climate Change and Sustainability Project Manager advised that:

- Replacing gas boilers with air source heat pumps, solar PV roof installation, and implementation of wall and ceiling insulation were just some of the measures that would be deployed to greatly decarbonise the leisure centres. They would not be able to fully decarbonise them as they could not carry out certain things such as replace the boilers that heated the learner pool at North Herts Leisure Centre, however, they would still be making significant progress towards full decarbonisation in this phase.
- Geothermal or ground source heat pumps were considered as a measure to decarbonise council buildings, but ultimately, they were more expensive and air source heat pumps were more cost effective.
- In September 2023, investigation into fitting solar PV on multi-storey car parks in North Herts had taken place but this was deemed to be financially unfeasible. It had been achieved in places like Tewkesbury where they had used funding from the PSDS to deliver this and solar panels in private car parks would become more common, but the capital costs associated with this were too great for the Council to carry this out on their car parks currently.
- The Planning Authority had different considerations to make when making decisions on developments and would not consider emission reducing technologies if they interfered with heritage conservation for instance.
- Energy demands from the leisure centres would be addressed by both energy generation through the heat pumps and solar PV, in addition to energy efficiency measures such as insulation.
- Heat pumps were more widely used in Nordic and Scandinavian countries due to their colder, harsher winters.

In response to questions, Councillor Mick Debenham advised that this phase of the Leisure Centre Decarbonisation scheme should reduce emissions from the leisure centres in North Herts by two thirds.

In response to questions, Councillor Daniel Allen advised that:

- Financially, it was not viable to install solar PV on multi-storey car parks as they had already investigated the possibility at Hitchin Swimming Centre car park. However, they would consider leasing space on their multi-storey car parks to private companies if they were approached.
- They would focus on decarbonising their current buildings instead of acquiring new ones that had already been decarbonised.
- Community energy would be used in the Harlow and Gilston development in East Herts with energy production taking place onsite.
- Bespoke heat pumps would be custom designed for the leisure centres to ensure that they were fit for purpose.

In response to questions, Chris Jones advised that air source heat pumps lost efficiency in cold temperatures, particularly if they were designed tightly. Because of this, the energy production of the leisure centres could be impacted if outlier views that the Grand Solar Minimum 2020-2053 would bring longer, colder winters and shorter, hotter summers came true.

N.B. Councillor Joe Graziano left the Zoom call at 21.02 and did not return.

The Policy & Strategy Officer and Policy & Strategy Team Leader provided more information on climate adaptation, biodiversity and cross cutting matters of Appendix B to the Information Note and advised that:

- There were broad themes within the appendix on the Council ensuring that its operations and services were resilient to the impacts of climate change and that the district was also resilient to the unavoidable impacts of the changing climate.
- They had assessed climate change risks through the HCCSP.
- Adaptation was defined as changing lives, work and communities to help face climate change.
- There were several actions listed in Appendix B regarding climate adaptation. One of which was to signpost residents and businesses to resources that would provide information to them on climate change mitigation and adaptation.
- Another action was to engage with water companies on reducing water usage within Hertfordshire as the county had a low water supply but high usage.
- They would signpost communities to cool and warm spaces within the district. The County Council currently provided a map of locations available which the Council would help to keep updated with the possibility of using Council buildings as cool and warm spaces.
- Learnings from the Resilient Together project would be established and applied to sites within North Herts.
- After recent weather events, they would endeavour to record extreme weather events in the district and how the incidents resulting from these effected both council services and the district as a whole by setting up a monitoring system to record the incidents.
- They would establish learnings from emergency volunteer work when aiding a response to emergency weather events that would become more frequent with the changing climate.
- In addition to broadening the Sustainability Strategy as part of a key priority on the Council Plan, the Council had also declared an Ecological Emergency to recognise that the climate crisis and ecological crisis were supportive of each other.
- Since the Climate Change Strategy had been developed, the Council now had an enhanced biodiversity duty to not only preserve biodiversity, but enhance it as well.
- Actions within the actions table could be separated into three categories. Actions to improve biodiversity on Council owned land, actions to work with partners to improve biodiversity on other land in the district and actions to improve biodiversity through the planning system such as Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) requirements for developments.
- They would look at the success of the wilding audit recommendations over the last few years and whether there would be further opportunities to implement further recommendations.
- Opportunities to deliver the aspirational Greenspace Action Plans and additional aspirations as each plan came up for renewal would be considered and reviewed, however, they were constrained by resources so they would look at grant funding to help deliver these aspects.
- The Greenspace Team already worked with the Wildlife Trust to improve rivers and chalk streams but they would also look to support their aspiration to reintroduce Water Voles in Purwell.
- There were opportunities to expand reduced mowing regimes across the district but it was acknowledged that they received a lot of complaints on this. To address this, they would improve communication by working with volunteers and resident groups to expand into the areas where they had struggled to in the past.
- They would look at the final version of the Local Nature Recovery Strategy to see where the Council could contribute to the actions listed in this.
- In terms of planning actions, there would be a full review of the Local Plan and they would consider biodiversity within this by encouraging developers to implement more than the Statutory 10% BNG on developments where possible.

- Council owned land, both big and small scale would be assessed to see where more wildflower areas and wilding could be implemented.
- They would support habitat banks in accordance with the Local Nature Recovery Strategy.
- Opportunities for the Museum to host climate or nature exhibitions in their space would be investigated.
- There were crosscutting actions in the actions table that encompassed multiple areas of sustainability and climate change.
- One of these was detailed as increasing communication both internally to reduce other sources of council emissions and externally to support residents to act more sustainably.
- Introduction of water saving measures at the allotments would be looked into, however, water saving actions within the district relied on the Environmental Agency or water companies to act.
- Areas within the district that would benefit from cooling would be identified, and they would undertake feasibility assessments in these areas to see whether trees could be planted to provide shade to cyclists and pedestrians in addition to improving biodiversity.
- Assessment of council sites to ascertain the value of green infrastructure and nature-based solutions to understand the best use of council owned sites would be considered.
- The feedback from the public consultation in March was being reviewed and would be implemented into the Sustainability Strategy.

Councillor Daniel Allen highlighted the brilliant work that had taken place on sustainability and that the fairer, greener statements in the Council Plan had been addressed through this work.

14 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Audio recording – 1 hour 48 minutes 19 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.

The meeting closed at 9.22 pm

Chair