

Environment and Green Investment Committee: Minutes

Date: 12 June 2025

Time: 10:00 a.m. – 11:35 a.m.

Venue: Red Kite Room, New Shire Hall, Alconbury Weald

Present: Councillors Hathorn (Chair), Bostanci (Vice Chair), L Beckett, Clark, Manning, Bradnam, Poulton, Wyatt, Tierney, George, Thornhill, Watt, Black, Rees, Kerr

1. Notification of Chair and Vice Chair

It was resolved to note the appointment of Councillor Ros Hathorn as Chair and Councillor Adam Bostanci as Vice Chair of the Environment and Green Investment Committee by Full Council for the municipal year 2025/26.

2. Apologies for Absence and Declarations of Interest

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Peter McDonald (substituted by Councillor Anna Bradnam).

As a director of the company, Executive Director for Place and Sustainability, Frank Jordan disclosed interest in the Council's wholly owned company, This Land in relation to a registered public question posed. It was confirmed that Frank would leave the room when this item was discussed.

Executive Director for Place and Sustainability, Frank Jordan and Emma Fitch declared an interest in Light Blue Fibre, discussed at item 7, as the Council Shareholder Representative and Director of the company respectively.

3. Minutes – 13 March 2025 and Action Log

Comments around accuracy of the minutes were raised. Officers recommended rewording of the sections in question.

The amended minutes of the meeting held 13 March 2025 were agreed and signed by the Chair.

4. Petitions and Public Questions

No petitions were received.

A question regarding the Council's wholly owned company, This Land was presented by Councillor Lara Davenport-Ray. In line with the declarations, Frank Jordan left the room ahead of this item being discussed.

In 2021, This Land Limited received approval to build 230 homes at Eddeva Park with sustainability conditions including solar panels. In March, the company sought to

remove the solar panel requirement for Phase Two, citing changes in building regulations and the decarbonisation of the UK energy supply. This move raised concerns over alignment with the Council's climate and environment strategy, which targeted fossil-free council-owned and occupied buildings by 2025 and undermining the public investment exceeding £100m in the development.

The Chair responded that the application for variation of planning consent submitted by This Land was to be determined by the Cambridge City Planning Committee. This Land operated autonomously and independently from the Council, which did not influence its day-to-day decisions or approach to housing design and construction, therefore Members did not have the authority to intervene politically. Governance clarity between the Council and This Land had significantly improved with the formation of the Shareholder Subcommittee earlier in the year since the company's inception in 2018. The removal of politically affiliated individuals from This Land's board aligned with best practice guidance and supported the company's financial commitments. The Council had instructed This Land to ensure alignment with local plan requirements, including sustainability and environmental standards. Meanwhile, the Environment and Green Investment Committee would continue leading efforts to achieve net zero across the county by 2045, holding the wider Council accountable while respecting appropriate governance of its arms-length company. A further written response would be provided within ten working days of the meeting.

Frank Jordan returned to the room once this item finished.

5. Local Nature Recovery Strategy

The report evaluated the Council's role as a 'Supporting Authority' in relation to the Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) under development for the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority, required under the 2021 Environment Act. It proposed that delegated authority be granted to officers so the Council could respond to the Combined Authority's proposed public consultation following their Growth Committee meeting. It focused on whether the draft LNRS had met legal obligations and demonstrated comprehensive stakeholder engagement, rather than on its specific content, which was reserved for the public consultation process.

England had been divided into 48 'Responsible Authorities', in this case, the Combined Authority. These bodies received funding to lead an inclusive LNRS development process with 'Supporting Authorities' like the Council, Natural England, and key environmental partners such as Natural Cambridgeshire, Wildlife Trust, and the Environment Agency. Natural Cambridgeshire and the County Council co-chaired the LNRS steering group, and officers funded by the Combined Authority lead the development. In an approach to tackle the nature crisis in England, the Council adopted an ambition to 'double nature', and the LNRS was designed to facilitate that vision.

Under the Statutory Regulations for LNRS (2023), the Responsible Authority would provide all Supporting Authorities with the consultation draft of its LNRS and would request comments, after which each Supporting Authority would have 28 days to make a formal response, enabling the Combined Authority's Growth Committee to approve the LNRS and then proceed to public consultation.

The LNRS identified why recovery was a priority, listed critical habitats, and set out actions across diverse landscapes, including woodlands, wetlands, farmland, and urban

environments. The strategy also linked with existing frameworks like the Cambridge Nature Network and Huntingdonshire Nature Network and supported implementation of the Council's Biodiversity as well as Tree and Woodland strategies.

Throughout its development, the Responsible Authorities worked collaboratively. The steering group of Supporting Authorities remained actively involved since the issuance of regulations in March 2023, and 19 organisations contributed to the process. Stakeholders expressed general enthusiasm for the strategy. Based on thorough engagement and alignment with statutory criteria, officers concluded the LNRS was suitable for public consultation by the Combined Authority.

Arising from discussions of the report:

- Officers agreed to provide to Members the Council's Tree and Woodland Strategy previously considered by this Committee. ACTION REQUIRED
- When renewed, Local Plans would have to refer to the LNRS regarding where habitat creation was needed as well as identifying important existing habitats, including sites of special scientific interest. The LNRS would be a material planning consideration at the local level, such as being incorporated into neighbourhood plans, and would also be mentioned in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). The LNRS could not be enforced because it would have to undergo a democratic process to approve local plans.
- Local Authorities had a duty to report on their biodiversity and nature strategy and involvement with the LNRS. It was stated a report on this would be brought to this Committee later in the year.
- The Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (DEFRA) would assess the LNRS based on its criteria set out in regulations. Though Natural England, as a supporting authority, played an instrumental role in the development of the LNRS, should it be rejected by DEFRA, a dispute resolution mechanism would be used to gain agreement.
- Members agreed with the process outlined in the report and expressed appreciation for the tools made available, such as the interactive map.

It was resolved unanimously to:

- a) Note the latest draft of the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Local Nature Recovery Strategy being finalised for approval by the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority (CPCA) set out in Appendix 1;
- b) Note the full list of Supporting Authorities, including wider contributors, in Appendix 2 involved in preparing the draft document; and
- c) Delegate authority to the Executive Director for Place and Sustainability in consultation with the Chair and Vice Chair of Environment and Green Investment Committee to review the Combined Authority's final consultation draft of the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) and confirm the Council's support for the document for the purposes of consultation.

6. Eastern Green Links 3 and 4 NSIP Proposal

Schemes deemed Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects (NSIPs) would meet certain thresholds and would be considered so large and nationally important by the Government that permission to build them would be granted at a national level. The NSIP covered in this report, Eastern Green Links 3 & 4 schemes would, if approved, be granted permission by the Secretary of State for the Department of Energy Security and Net Zero. These schemes were in the pre-application stage, and statutory consultation would run from 13 May to 23 June.

The Council had to date been a neighbouring authority as no part of the proposals had previously fallen within its boundary. The schemes proposed two new primarily offshore high voltage electricity links with converter stations and associated onshore infrastructure between Scotland and England. As part of their statutory consultation, National Grid proposed an underground cable routing option through the Roman Bank and Peckover division of Cambridgeshire, which, if moved forward, would make the Council a Host Authority. If National Grid were to progress with this option beyond the consultation, the Council would be a Host Authority; otherwise, it would be a neighbouring authority. Officers were reviewing the documentation to inform the Council's technical response.

NSIP statutory processes would present challenging deadlines, some as short as two weeks. To meet these deadlines, the Planning Inspectorate advised councils that best practice as host authorities would be to establish delegated authority. This report sought approval for delegated authority to be given to the Executive Director for Place and Sustainability, and the Service Director for Environment, Planning, and Economy, enabling them to submit NSIP related responses, in consultation with the Chair and Vice Chair of the Environment and Green Investment Committee, on occasions where there would be insufficient time for a report to be delivered to Committee.

Emerging from the report discussions:

- Officers explained that during the six-month examination period of an NSIP proposal, the Council would often receive statutory deadlines every two weeks, thereby making it extremely difficult to align with the committee timeline. Members were reassured that, where possible, officers would bring representations ahead of the examination period to Committee as these would set out overarching technical concerns.
- Officers confirmed that where delegation needed to be used, draft responses would be shared with Members of this Committee for comment ahead of signoff and submission.
- It was agreed that Members of the Environment and Green Investment Committee would be given the opportunity to provide feedback on the whole service report shared with them to understand and review how actions are taken forward. **ACTION REQUIRED**

It was resolved unanimously to:

- a) Delegate authority to the Executive Director of Place and Sustainability and the Service Director for Environment, Planning, and Economy to submit Nationally

Significant Infrastructure Project (NSIP) related responses as part of the NSIP process on behalf of Cambridgeshire County Council and its regulatory functions, in consultation with the Chair and Vice Chair of the Environment and Green Investment Committee, on occasions where there would not be enough time for a report to be delivered to Environment and Green Investment Committee; and

- b) Note that where delegated powers are used, draft responses would be sent to Local Members and the Members of the Environment and Green Investment Committee ahead of submission.

7. Overview of Directorate Budget 2025-26 and Outturn Position for 2024-25

The Committee was provided a broad overview of the current year's budget, key issues arising from the previous year's outturn, and assurances on how lessons have been learned to make appropriate assumptions and achieve a balanced budget in the coming year.

In reviewing the outturn for 2024/2025, officers noted the directorate overspend of over £1.4m, for which the main driver was the Council's energy projects. It was acknowledged that the projects, commissioned to generate electricity to export to the grid and thereby create an income, had made incorrect assumptions around the timing of project completion. As a result, there was a mismatch between income assumptions and actual income delivery. The Executive Director for Place and Sustainability commissioned a full review which yielded lessons learned and resulted in changes to the way such projects would be commissioned, considered by officers, and presented to Committee in the future.

The waste management budget for 2024/2025 was balanced, reflecting the Council's proactive approach to addressing pressures in the service. Specific reserves had been established for this purpose, and funding was transferred from these reserves into the budget to achieve the balanced position.

The budget for 2025/2026 was set by Full Council in February 2025, with a gross budget for the Place and Sustainability directorate of £121m. This consisted of a net budget of £83m with a £38m income difference. Income would be generated from fees and charges for services rendered, government or combined authority grants, and where activities would be charged to the capital program. As well as the revenue budgets, the capital program would include £10m of investment in household recycling centres.

From that budget, £57m would be spent on the significant undertaking of waste management. A key issue was the need to bring the Council's waste private finance initiative (PFI) contract into compliance with environment regulations. In addition, £4m would be spent on key services, particularly planning, natural and historic environment, responsibilities as the lead flood authority, responsibilities around consents, and various environment strategies such as biodiversity and net zero.

For the coming year, the Council projected an overspend of £84k, which was a small percentage variance compared to the net budget of £83m. Projections considered the risks inherently attached to income such as market demands, as well as increasing energy costs which would be passed onto users, in this case the Council, from distribution companies. Mitigations were in place to achieve a balanced budget.

In response to the report:

- Officers stated that through a combination of revised assumptions in the business plan and measures implemented, the Council did not anticipate any particular risks carrying over into the 2025/26 year that would raise concerns about overspending due to unmet savings targets. The primary area of risk was identified as being in the income assumptions.
- It was agreed that future directorate budget reports would provide a cover report to outline the areas relevant to the Environment and Green Investment Committee, additional information around the salient points of the budget would be provided to committee Members by way of PowerPoint, and that Members would receive training on the budget's operations in relation to the areas under this Committee's remit. **ACTION REQUIRED**
- Officers expressed a key lesson learned that income assumptions ought not be incorporated into the budget until the project was complete and generating that income. There would be more prudence around considering both the level and timing of that income, especially in consideration of the high-risk nature of energy market projects.
- Members queried how the Council identified an investment as 'green' and how this manifested in the 2025/2026 plan. Officers stated that in the past, this was demonstrated through the Council's energy projects where it had a direct approach to renewable energy. The Council's green investment projects could be seen in the £4m revenue budget which included the reserve 'Just Transition' fund allocated to deliver environmental performance improvements, such as net zero, biodiversity, and woodland creation. However, the question of what green investments ought to look like in the future had been and should continue to be addressed by this Committee, with a suggestion of supporting community energy projects where the Council would take an enabling role rather than a direct delivery role in supporting the transition to renewable energy.
- Officers confirmed that a Performance Report would be brought to Committee which would include financial, performance and risk information summarising the investments made by the Council, the projects delivered, and the outcomes achieved as a result.
- The initial intention of the energy projects was to assist in decarbonisation of energy supply and create an income stream to support the Council's medium-term budget. Given the income generated by the projects, the Council would not consider disposal of the assets, however disposal could be considered in the future and would be decided on the basis of the best value option for the Council at the time.
- A Member expressed trepidation with local government getting involved in business enterprise, suggesting this could stunt innovation. Others supported this activity, questioning how the Council would identify a green investment as being successful. Officers stated that future projects would be determined against success criteria of environmental, financial, and risk measures to assess

whether the project is appropriate for the Council to take on at that time.

- The smaller innovative project with lower risk, Light Blue Fibre was discussed. Having been set up with Cambridge University, the company conceptualised the 'dig once' policy upon implementing infrastructure, whereby ducting was input to future proof digital connectivity of the construction and reduce potential disruptions. The company would be formally reported upon in the Shareholders Sub Committee.
- A Member supported the energy schemes undertaken over previous years by the Council, noting they were launched as a result of majority decision by Members and delivered by Officers at their request. The projects were innovative decisions with known risks but were undertaken to decarbonise the Council's footprint and invest in the future.
- A Member suggested the benefit of reporting on previous investments to identify how each of the Council's investments had performed environmentally and financially.

It was resolved unanimously that the Committee reviewed and commented on the report.

8. Agenda Plan, Training Plan and Appointments to Outside Bodies and Internal Advisory Groups and Panels

The Agenda Plan, Training Plan and nominations for Outside Bodies and Internal Advisory Groups and Panels were provided to Members.

- Members requested training on interpreting financial reports and budgets, carbon literacy, net zero, climate change, and biodiversity net gain. ACTION REQUIRED

The Committee noted its Agenda Plan and Training Plan.

Chair