

Environment and Green Investment Committee: Minutes

Date: 13 March 2025

Time: 10:00 a.m. – 12:32 p.m.

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

Present: Councillors Nick Gay (Vice-Chair), David Ambrose Smith, Anna Bradnam, Adela Costello, Steve Count, Piers Coutts, Stephen Ferguson, Ian Gardener, Ros Hathorn, Catherine Rae, Philippa Slatter, Mandy Smith, Steve Tierney and Andrew Wood.

234. Apologies for Absence and Declarations of Interest

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Lorna Dupré, Mandy Smith, John Gowing (substituted by Councillor David Ambrose Smith), Peter McDonald (substituted by Councillor Philippa Slatter), and Steve Corney (substituted by Councillor Adela Costello).

In relation to item 8, Kingsway Solar Farm NSIP Proposal, Councillor Ferguson declared an interest as a District Councillor and Cabinet Member for Huntingdon District Council.

235. Minutes – 16 January 2025 and Action Log

The minutes of the meeting held on 16 January 2025 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Vice Chair.

An updated Action Log had been circulated to the Committee and updates were noted at the meeting.

236. Petitions and Public Questions

No petitions or public questions were received.

237. Finance Monitoring Report

The Committee was presented a financial monitoring report on the capital and revenue updates for the Place and Sustainability directorate that projected an overspend of £1.9m, for which the main driver was energy projects which had not achieved projected income due to project delays.

The North Angle Solar Farm as well as St Ives were complete, therefore generating income, and Babraham was in its final stages of completion. This would enable the Council to achieve its income targets projected for 2025-2026. Regarding the Heat Network, the 2025-2026 business plan adjusted the income target to reflect realistic uptake. Lessons had been learned regarding delivery of energy projects commissioned which had been reported to the Audits and Accounts Committee. The key issue with the Environment and Green Investment Committee regarding the overspend related to

waste, particularly additional cost of waste disposal with current PFI contract as well as PFI review. The gross overspend within the directorate was offset by income with services outside this Committee, particularly highways development managements.

Addressed was the capital variation budget which was set up to ensure a mechanism in place to confirm the Council would not over-finance the capital programme thereby spending too much of its budget to service debt. Performance for the directorate in this year had improved thus creating a capital variation pressure, linked to improved performance in delivering capital programmes.

While discussing the report:

- A Member addressed the capital variation budget, acknowledging there had been a slippage of 30% set in the 2024-2025 year for contingencies, which was suggested to be high. Officers agreed that the slippage for the capital variation budget would be expected to be much lower, with an expectation of achieving 90% or higher delivery against the budget. When queried what the slippage was for the Place and Sustainability directorate as outlined in the 2025-2026 budget at Full Council in February 2025, officers stated this was approximately £20m, though agreed to share the correct figure and percentage with all Committee Members. ACTION REQUIRED
- Officers clarified that the Council's overspend would be better known at the point of the outturn, however recorded at the time as a pressure within the directorate which had contributed to an overspend of £1.9m. It was confirmed that once ascertained, the overspend would be covered from reserves. A Member shared the overall overspend as of January 2025 had been £6m, however the Section 25 statement at Full Council allowed for £3m of the overspend not to come from reserves. Furthermore, the Section 151 Officer suggested at the Strategy, Resources and Performance Committee that it was hoped this figure would be reduced in the January to March 2025 period, therefore the maximum pressure on reserves would be £3m.

It was resolved to review and comment on the report.

238. Corporate Performance Report Q3 2024-2025

The Committee received a report on performance with key strategic indicators, providing updates relating to carbon, performance relating to waste management, indicators around county matters planning decisions, and an update on the broadband connectivity target. Performance indicators all showed on target, apart from carbon with pressures around Scope 3 emissions.

Arising from discussions of the report:

- Indicator 002 was addressed given a dip seen in 2021 following which there was an increase. Officers confirmed the 2021 dip related to reduction in construction projects commissioned by the Council due to Covid, and that the subsequent uptake was linked to the increased commissioning of school projects. Furthermore, a pressure seen in Scope 3 was attributed to the significant carbon footprint of the Council's large rural estate, though further mitigating measures

were being considered to reduce the carbon impact through methods of construction.

- In relation to the indicators for waste, officers stated that waste and recycling were monitored through the districts, therefore the figures would lag as the Council needed to await their updates. These indicators were stated as contextual because Committee had requested that the indicators be broken down per district. A Member identified that performance monitoring would not necessarily pick up problems that could not be solved at the front end, though it would be the Council's duty, suggesting there was a lack of focus or targets on the Council's role in this area. Officers acknowledged this and suggested that through performance management, the county's operations could be looked at further.
- Regarding target 008, the percentage of premises in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough with access to gigabit capable broadband, the target had been exceeded and Members queried whether more ambitious targets would be set going forward. Officers stated the previous target had been set by government, and as it had been achieved, the Council would set higher targets which would include new builds. An Officer agreed to provide a more detailed report on Connecting Cambridgeshire with the revised strategy, breaking the information on target 008 down into rural and urban areas. ACTION REQUIRED
- In the past, developers would be required to fit at least the pipework for broadband if not the broadband itself. What transpired was that developers would strike a deal with specific suppliers to sponsor the pipework and then be the only supplier. A prior discussion was held querying whether there could be any influence on developers to make pipework available to wholesale suppliers, and a Member queried the result of that request. An Officer agreed to look into this further and provide a written response. ACTION REQUIRED

It was resolved to scrutinise and review the performance information provided in this report.

239. Tree and Woodland Strategy

The Committee was presented a report deriving from the Climate Change Strategy to consider the development of trees and woodland across the county. England was considered one of the most nature depleted countries in the world, and Cambridgeshire one of the most nature depleted counties in England. A canopy assessment identified that Cambridgeshire County Council's landholdings had 10% canopy coverage. This document set an ambition to improve this to 13% by 2040, and increase hedgerow cover to 15km total. Acknowledging the barrier that there was minimal Council-owned land with this potential, the opportunities on how to achieve this included a programme of planting outside of Council-owned land by working with partners to identify tree planting schemes which would deliver nature access and climate outcomes. The programme would also prioritise areas with limited access to green space. The strategy was categorised into ambitions, a detailed report, and an action plan setting out contributions from all departments across the Council. The programme was intended to start later in 2025.

In response to the report:

- Officers described that areas in the northeast of the county had agriculturally rich lands but were low-lying with peat soils where hedgerows were removed in the 1980s to improve access for farm machinery, making it hard for trees to flourish and unsuitable for tree planting. Members expressed not wanting rewetting of the peat soils in the Fenlands, stating that planting trees would drain moisture from nearby soil. Rather, it was suggested to look at delivering a county park in Fenland such as land promoted for the Fens Reservoir, avoiding peat areas. An Officer addressed the consultation on the land use framework which intended to determine the optimal use of land. Furthermore, Officers identified schemes, such as tiny forests, which could be used flexibly to improve green space in urban areas.
- Funding had been secured from the Forestry Commission to complete the woodland creation accelerator project, which would include assessing county-wide canopy cover. The national average for tree canopy coverage across England was 15-16%. At 10%, Cambridgeshire sat at second from the bottom of the list of counties. Officers agreed to include this information in the report.
ACTION REQUIRED
- Timescales for the programme were not definitive as it was a 40-year strategy. Much of the rural estate where tree planting was proposed was tenanted, therefore opportunities for planting would be explored with Rural Estates as tenancies came up for renewal, especially in areas where land was least productive. Officers agreed to review the timeline and seek to be more prescriptive. **ACTION REQUIRED**
- Officers confirmed that the low tree cover of 8.8% on highways was due to areas being outside of the Council's management and responsibility as these would be on private land.
- A Member queried the long-term care of trees, including the cost and consequences of their maintenance. Officers expressed the Council's mantra of having 'the right tree in the right place'. This would ensure proper care of plants at all points, from when trees are becoming established, their suitability in their particular location in 20 to 30 years' time and removing trees if and where they cease to be viable. It would consider the effects of trees in their respective locations, including consulting with district councils for planting in playgrounds and ensuring street trees would be in the right location where roots would not affect paving areas. This consideration would need to be demonstrated before receiving any funding. The money received would be used to establish a relationship with Farming Wildlife Advisory Group East of England to ascertain appropriate locations for planting schemes and communicating with parish councils.
- Officers explained that a tree nursery would be subject to a feasibility study and business case, acknowledging this would be conducted with Rural Estate colleagues. A Member identified there was an established nursery business in Cambridgeshire which supplied much of the country and suggested the Council would be engaging in competition with a private business should it embark on

building its own nursery. Officers suggested the business plan would pick up on such risk and proposed the possibility of working with partners rather than competing.

- A Member raised concerns over the Cambourne to Cambridge (C2C) project which would go through a woodland, Coton Orchard, suggesting the report did not identify the Council's effects on woodland in all its decisions. An Officer clarified that the orchard was not part of Council land, and that decisions around infrastructure would involve difficult choices and would balance the significance of the orchard compared with the public benefit of delivering low-carbon transport. In the case of Coton Orchard, this would be considered by the planning inspectorate at enquiry, rather than the County Council, and the principles of biodiversity net gain would contribute to the decision.

It was resolved unanimously to:

- a) Approve the adoption of the Tree and Woodland strategy and Action Plan as outlined in Appendix 1 (Strategy), Appendix 2 (Action Plan) and Appendix 3 (Technical Report)
- b) Approve the introduction of a 'woodland pledge' to increase woodland canopy cover and safeguard existing woodland across our landholdings
- c) Note that a revised performance target to increase woodland canopy to 13% and to increase the hedgerows to 323km will be included in the Council's performance management framework and in the Climate Change and Environment Strategy based on Appendix 4 (Canopy Cover Assessment).
- d) Delegate authority to the Executive Director of Place and Sustainability, in consultation with the Chair and Vice Chair of Environment and Green Investment Committee to authorise any minor changes to the strategy and supporting documents before publication.

240. Biodiversity Strategy

As part of the Climate Change and Environment Strategy, the Committee was presented with a plan to develop the Council's biodiversity strategy covering its land holdings. Though one of the most nature depleted counties in England, many habitats fell under Cambridgeshire's responsibility, including designated nature sites. An audit of 38 Cambridgeshire sites of significant biodiversity was undertaken which identified opportunities for creation of habitat banks and extension of key habitat areas. The action plan included work to be undertaken by a range of service areas, the output to be produced, key milestone dates, and ongoing monitoring proposals. Both short- and long-term actions reflected the length of time taken for improvements in biodiversity to be seen. The plan would unlock funding for biodiversity improvements and put the Council in a strong position to work with partners on projects.

Within Committee discussions:

- The importance of a well-planned busway was highlighted, stating it can provide connectivity not only for people but for biodiversity as well. A Member stressed the need to design a busway boosting biodiversity from the beginning through to

fruition. Officers stated the busway in question was a Greater Cambridge Partnership (GCP) scheme, noting that a Council was ecologist was involved, participating in the design scheme to influence planting and green infrastructure.

- A Member raised the opportunity for the Council to increase biodiversity in its solar farms and wished to see this presented in all its Nationally Significant Infrastructure (NSIP) and statutory authority responses to solar farms, suggesting they work on maximising biodiversity.
- A query was raised around the amount of weight given to biodiversity in fun and learning. Officers described the Council's objective around play, including in the Tree and Woodland Strategy, looking at creating more schemes and opportunities in local nature reserves such as forest schools and working together with local groups to accomplish these. In addition, a BMX track was in progress and the Council's input had been provided.
- In response to how the impacts of lighting would be considered on biodiversity, an officer stated this would be assessed as to the impact on bats, and such lighting could include bat hoods to minimise upward light spillage and thus not disturb flight paths.
- Officers discussed some of the partnership work undertaken. The Council had a service agreement with Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Environment Record Centre which would openly exchange data with the Council. The Council was presented on a local authority ecologist group which had representation from all district councils and on which the Wildlife Trust sat, thereby sharing information and seeking partnership opportunities.
- A Member queried whether there was a management plan for eutrophic standing waters mentioned in the plan. Officers confirmed audits on sites had been conducted, scoring the conservation value of eutrophic waters leading to a management plan to maintain the habitat to ensure they would not decline.

It was resolved unanimously to:

- a) Approve the adoption of the Biodiversity Strategy and its objectives, along with its supporting Technical Report and Action Plan, in Appendix 1.
- b) Note the key performance indicators (KPI) within the action plan will form part of the Council's performance management framework.
- c) Delegate authority to the Executive Director of Place and Sustainability, in consultation with the Chair and Vice Chair of Environment and Green Investment Committee to authorise any minor changes to the strategy and supporting documents before publication.

241. Kingsway Solar Farm NSIP Proposal

Officers presented the report on the Kingsway Solar Farm, brought by Downing Renewable Developments, consisting of a battery energy storage system pylon route to connect to the National Grid at Burwell. The 500-megawatt scheme would cover 1,500 hectares located in Burwell, Fulbourn, Linton and Woodditton. An informal public

consultation had been conducted in October to December 2024, and the promoter would be required to conduct a statutory consultation intended for summer of 2025 presenting further detail, the feedback for which would inform the design going ahead. The application, intended for the end of 2025, would be submitted to the Secretary of State for the Department of Energy Security and Net Zero. Following this, a pre-examination and then examination period would follow.

This report sought delegation the enable to Council to meet deadlines which could be as short as two weeks, thus preventing decisions from being able to be taken to the Environment and Green Investment Committee. However, where delegated powers would be used, draft responses would be sent to local Members and Members of this Committee ahead of submission.

During discussion of the report:

- Councillor Alan Sharp, local Member for Woodditton, was invited to contribute. Councillor Sharp raised concerns by local residents about the development on agricultural land which was proposed to be over 3,700 acres making it the largest in the United Kingdom and eighth largest in Europe. It was suggested that the nation ought to be exploring solar panels on all buildings, as well as the use of wind on and offshore, and nuclear power before putting solar panels on farmland which would reduce food security. Another Member echoed this sentiment stating they did not support the use of agricultural land for solar farm use.
- The formal statutory consultation would last at least four weeks, likely longer. A Member noted that some Parish Councils only meet once a month, therefore having the consultation period last longer than four weeks would allow them the opportunity to meet and discuss within that period.
- Members expressed trepidation around providing delegated authority, questioning whether this would include authority to oppose the proposal. It was clarified that it was not the role of the delegated authority to express a position on the project. Officers confirmed that the Local Authority's input on the application would be to provide information on a technical basis in response to the planning application.

It was resolved 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 is not 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 will be sent to Local Members and the Members of the Environment and Green Investment Committee ahead of submission.

The Committee took a ten-minute comfort break.

242. Grimsby to Walpole NSIP Proposal

The Committee was presented an update on National Grid's proposal for the Grimsby to Walpole high-voltage electricity transmission line, a scheme which is part of The Great Grid Upgrade. The overhead transmission line would connect Grimsby to Walpole with new substations at each location, passing through the Roman Bank and Peckover division, making Cambridgeshire County Council a host authority for the project. The scheme was in the pre-application stage of the NSIP process, and statutory consultation would be held later in the year. Application submission to the Secretary of State for the Department of Energy Security and Net Zero was intended for 2027. The Council 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 in consultation with the Chair and Vice Chair of this Committee, on occasions where there would be insufficient time to meet required deadlines for a report to be delivered to this Committee.

It was resolved 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 is not 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 will be sent to Local Members and the Members of the Environment and Green Investment Committee ahead of submission.

243. Minerals and Waste Development Scheme (MWDS) Update

The existing Minerals and Waste Local Plan (MWLP) was adopted on 28 July 2021 and legislation requires that a review would start in July 2026. However, an updated MWDS set out the proposed timetable for the review of the MWLP, which had been informed by statutory requirements, the Council's Statement of Community Involvement (SCI) commitments, the length of time that the previous review took, and future committee dates. This item sought approval for publication of the MWDS and delegated authority to the Executive Director for Place and Sustainability and the Head of Planning to make minor alterations to ensure the MWDS would be maintained and remain accurate. Should any more than minor alterations be required, an update to the MWDS would be prepared and presented to this Committee and approval to adopt the final MWLP would be brought to this Committee or Full Council as appropriate.

In response to the report:

- It was stated that the undertaking of a MWLP review would take several years. Officers clarified that should any applications for mineral and waste development be brought forward during that process, they would be determined against the existing development plans.

- Members queried how the Local Government Reorganisation would affect this scheme. Officers explained procurement work had been scheduled to be completed in 2026 however the Council's reorganisation proposal was due to be submitted by November 2025. Therefore, preparatory work would be completed in the meantime, which would be needed by any future council(s), and the scope of the MWDS would be reassessed as a result of any decisions on the structure of local government to ascertain whether any updates or amendments would be required. Furthermore, senior managers had given consideration to how the transition would occur regarding strategic work.

It was resolved unanimously to:

- a) Agree and approve for publication the Cambridgeshire Minerals and Waste Development Scheme (March 2025).
- b) Delegate authority to the Executive Director of Place and Sustainability and the Head of Planning to make minor alterations and republish the Cambridgeshire Minerals and Waste Development Scheme (MWDS).

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

The Committee noted its Agenda Plan.

Chair