

Assets and Procurement Committee: Minutes

Date: 13 January 2026

Time: 10:00a.m. to 11:42a.m.

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

Present: Councillors Batchelor, Boden, Bostanci, Bywater, Clark (Vice Chair), M Fisher, Gardener, Green, Hathorn, Hawker-Dawson, Ioannides, Meschini, Morgan, Murphy, Young (Chair)

22. Apologies for Absence and Declarations of Interest

There were no apologies for absence and no declarations of interest.

23. Minutes – 18 November 2025 and Action Log

The minutes of the meeting held on 18 November 2025 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

The action log was noted.

24. Petitions and Public Questions

No petitions or public questions were received.

25. Shared Service ERP Print Procurement

The Committee was reminded that ERP Gold was one of the Council's key systems, providing financial management, payroll and procurement functions. The system was shared with three other principal Councils (West Northamptonshire Council which hosted the contract, North Northamptonshire Council, and Milton Keynes City Council) through a lead-authority model. The report under consideration focused on the print and postage solution integrated with ERP Gold, which operated on a pay-as-you-use basis.

Officers explained that the Council had been actively working to reduce print and postage expenditure. In accounts receivable, the Council had achieved a 12% reduction in printing over the previous two years by shifting clients toward direct debit and other digital solutions, and similar progress had been made in payroll by reducing paper payslips.

The report recommended pursuing a compliant route to re-procure the current supplier. Officers outlined the factors supporting this recommendation in the report, including the existing technical integration with ERP Gold and the results of cost comparisons undertaken as part of the review.

In response to the report:

- A query was raised regarding the wording 'pay-as-you-use' with no minimum spend and it was confirmed that it meant the Council could enter into the contract without ever using the provider or paying anything.
- A Member questioned the report's wording that in March 2028 after Local Government Reorganisation, successor Councils could 'choose to novate' the contract after local government reorganisation in March 2028. The response confirmed that the contract would indeed automatically novate to successor Councils, who would be free to decide whether or how much to use it.
- The report's four-year cost calculations were based on a known, one-off 7.5% postage increase that had been confirmed and would be written into the contract. It was acknowledged that further postage cost rises were likely over the life of the contract due to market fluctuations such as pricing changes, but these were difficult to predict and therefore had not been forecast. It was explained that postage, rather than printing, formed the largest portion of overall costs, and that the Council's aim to reduce mailing volumes was a key factor in managing these potential future increases.
- Suppliers had undergone a quality and price assessment and a review showed that while the incumbent provider ranked highest on quality, it was third out of five on price. Although not the cheapest, switching to a different supplier would create a substantial one-off cost estimated at £370k based on previous experience of changing contracts, along with additional time, business disruption, and opportunity costs. When these wider impacts were considered, the overall assessment indicated that directly awarding the contract to the current provider would be more cost-effective than selecting a lower-priced alternative.
- Quality was described as covering several aspects of the printing and dispatch service, with reliability identified as a key component. The service requirements were noted as complex, especially because they operated across multiple partner organisations. Quality included the flexibility to handle documents differently rather than simply printing and posting everything in one batch. This required providers to give clear breakdowns of what was printed, posted, or returned. Additional quality factors included the ability to manage special workflows, such as returning some items to the Council for internal distribution and consistently meeting strict service-level timescales. Providers were expected to print and dispatch items the same day files were received, making reliable turnaround an essential measure of quality.
- Feedback was given that the price appendix had been difficult to interpret because it displayed large volumes of numerical data without being easy to compare, suggesting that future papers present pricing information in a more accessible and intuitive format. Officers agreed to improve the presentation of competitive pricing in future, noting that a simple summary might have been more effective.
- While significant opportunities to reduce print volumes and shift toward digital channels had been identified, no specific trajectory or percentage reduction target had been set for the four-year term. Several initiatives were already underway, such

as pilots using text messaging in areas like accounts receivable and Adult Social Care, but these were still at an early stage. Although reductions in print had already been achieved, the team felt it was premature to commit to fixed targets. The focus on cost savings remained strong within the Council's wider budget planning process, where print-related savings had already been considered and incorporated for the current financial year.

- It was explained that the contract did not require explicit social value or net zero commitments from the supplier, nor did it include any cost implications tied to such measures. However, the supplier had expressed a willingness to explore opportunities to deliver social value, including participation in the 'Match My Project' initiatives, though these were not formal contractual obligations. Any additional social value negotiated with the supplier would not affect the fixed prices set under the framework agreement.

It was resolved unanimously to:

- a) Approve procurement for the ERP Print service, using the Procurement for Housing (PfH) framework – Lot 3: Print, Mailing and Digital Communications to pursue a direct award.
- b) Delegate authority for awarding and executing a contract for the provision of ERP Print starting 1 May 2026 for the period of 3 years and 1 year extension periods to the Executive Director of Finance and Resources, in consultation with the Chair and Vice Chair, and in turn to West Northamptonshire Council (WNC) in accordance with the Shared Services agreement.

26. Property Disposal – Signet Court, Cambridge

The report considered the freehold disposal of 18-20 Signet Court, Cambridge, a Cambridgeshire County Council office building identified for disposal following an asset challenge and office portfolio review. Staff contractually based at the site were consulted in line with HR policy and were all relocated by 1 October 2025. The property was first offered to This Land Limited and Cambridge City Council under the Council's disposal policy, but both declined.

An external agent was then appointed, and open marketing began at the end of October for an eight-week period, including targeted outreach, where a small number of viewings took place. In accordance with the Member Engagement Protocol, the Chair and Vice Chair of Assets and Procurement Committee as well as the local Member were notified of the intention to market. The selling agent, the Council's chartered surveyor, and legal colleagues all confirmed that the final bid met the best consideration requirements of Section 123 of the Local Government Act 1972.

The prospective purchaser intended to convert the building to residential use under permitted development rights, though this was not a condition of sale. The report set out the financial terms, purchaser identity, and due diligence findings. Approval of the sale was expected to generate a substantial capital receipt, reduce ongoing property

costs (including maintenance, utilities, and business rates), and support the Council's business and budget plans.

Members noted the officer responses to their queries:

- The agreed sale price was a very small percentage below what had been assumed in the business plan and budget, and very close to the guide price, with no significant changes in market conditions or key drivers affecting the outcome. The amount supported the conclusion that the sale remained compliant with Section 123 requirements.
- The Council had not commissioned a formal valuation, as its disposal policy relied on open marketing to establish market value. In line with the Local Government Act and best consideration requirements, the Council's policy required the appointed agent to provide a letter confirming that, in their professional view, the sole offer received and accepted represented the best consideration achievable. Officers agreed to provide a copy of this letter to Members. ACTION REQUIRED
- There was a question as to whether permitted development rights would be easy to obtain for a proposed office-to-residential conversion and how this factored into decisions about selling the property. While not absolutely guaranteed, the property appeared to meet the necessary criteria for prior approval because it was not in a conservation area, was not listed, and had no other constraints likely to block conversion. The team had taken this into account before marketing the site and had offered it to a range of potential buyers without restriction. More generally, it was noted that, when selling properties, they routinely assess whether securing planning permission in advance could enhance value, and they pursue this where it is likely to be beneficial.

It was resolved unanimously to delegate authority to the Executive Director of Finance and Resources in consultation with the Chair and Vice Chair of the Assets and Procurement Committee to agree any outstanding terms, to approve the execution of all necessary documentation, and to complete the disposal of the property.

27. Refresh of the Land and Property Strategy

After 19 months of implementation, the land and property strategy was being refreshed to ensure it remained up to date and aligned with the Council's wider Strategic Framework. Officers explained that the refresh aimed to update members on the approved strategy, reaffirm awareness of its purpose, and confirm that its 2024 direction continued to reflect current organisational priorities. The update also sought to highlight progress made against the existing delivery plan and to acknowledge the implications of Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) for future decision-making.

Members were advised that changes to other key Council strategies, particularly the new Strategic Framework and the Climate Change and Environment Strategy had also been considered. Officers emphasised that the core principles previously agreed were still consistent with the Council's current and proposed priorities, meaning that only minimal adjustments had been required, primarily to reflect LGR guidance.

The report presented general improvements achieved within the property service resulting from the strategy's direction. It included a refreshed Land and Property Strategy document with tracked changes for transparency, commentary on progress against the original delivery plan actions, and a set of new actions intended to guide work over the following two years.

Resulting from discussions of the report:

- With LGR approaching, the Council needed to plan its asset decisions more broadly by engaging not only with district Councils, but sensibly also with Peterborough City Council to avoid future duplication or gaps in resources.
- The Council was committed to embedding carbon net-zero principles and decarbonising its estates, including county farms and operational buildings. Future costs and investment plans for meeting net-zero goals would be aligned with the forthcoming Climate and Environmental Strategy and the wider asset review. Past funded work had already supported decarbonisation efforts, and further external funding would continue to be sought. It was also noted that fully costed options, ranging from minimum compliance versus net-zero-maximising scenarios, could be brought forward, and that a new strategy for the rural estate was being developed, given its significant contribution to the Council's carbon emissions. Work was underway to develop a programme based on baseline data to determine the investment needed, noting the responsibilities of increase climate and net-zero obligations would potentially be shared between the Council and county farm tenants.
- Though the Community Asset Transfer Policy sounded positive in principle, challenges arose when dealing with ageing or historically significant buildings that required substantial maintenance. It was noted that a guidance document was in place, but with no clear, transparent, and consistent process for carry it out. The proposed development of a formal policy aimed to create a fair framework for assessing community bids, incorporating factors such as environmental and historical considerations during the evaluation and scoping stages, ensuring consistency across the Council for future applications.
- The financial struggles faced by tenant farmers was addressed, with concerns raised about ensuring they benefited from any renewable projects so they could continue producing essential food and maintain a reasonable quality of life. It was acknowledged that managing carbon impacts on the rural estate would be challenging because farmers operated as businesses, and long-term sustainability needed to be protected. The plan involved working collaboratively with tenants to diversify and support them, with an understanding that progress would be gradual rather than a quick solution.

- The Asset Programme Board was chaired by the Executive Director of Place and Sustainability and functioned as one of the Council's five change boards. The board included senior representatives from across all service areas to enable high-level, well-rounded discussion.
- A Member noted that achieving net zero carried costs, but these were outweighed by the far greater financial and existential risks of inaction, such as rising expenses from climate-related impacts like flooding and road damage. The direct financial costs to the Council of sustainability measures were also noted, such as insulating buildings thereby lowering energy use and reducing ongoing costs.
- It was confirmed that the intention was for the County Farms Estate Strategy to be brought to the Assets and Procurement Committee in June 2026.
- Addressed was the refresh Land and Property Strategy that combined routine estate management with wider climate-driven ambitions. Support was expressed for data-driven oversight of Council assets, rationalising surplus buildings, and generate capital receipts, but concerns were raised that the document aligned the estate plan with broader political goals such as achieving net-zero emissions, decarbonising buildings, and reshaping rural estates for climate purposes without providing clear costings or payback analysis. It was argued that the absence of quantified financial implications contradicted references to significant decarbonisation work and risked creating open-ended commitments. Officers explained that the strategy functioned purely as a framework reflecting the Council's agreed direction, with any specific investments to be separately approved and fully costed, potentially funded through disposals, fees, or grants. It was suggested that updating aging properties for climate resilience was evidence-based, financially sensible, and necessary, and that the strategy simply set out principles rather than authorising spending.
- A Member raised concerns around how the developing Property Strategy would be used during the transition period for LGR. Concerns were raised that combining the various Councils' existing property documents would likely prove more complex than expected, particularly once emerging boundary details became clearer. It was noted that significant input would be needed as officers from different authorities began working together to determine the allocation and use of buildings. Also acknowledged was the scale of the negotiations ahead, indicating that substantive matters would return to the Committee. It was explained that extensive data sharing and background discussions were expected, with the shadow authority assuming responsibility for asset-related decisions from May 2027. While some asset allocation might appear geographically straightforward, it was recognised that service patterns, especially in rural areas, would complicate decisions about which buildings would best support ongoing service delivery.

It was resolved to consider and approve the refreshed and amended Land and Property Strategy 2024-2029 which took account of impacts of Local Government Reorganisation along with its accompanying Delivery Action Plan which included new actions.

28. Procurement Compliance Report

The report noted a reduction in procurement breaches compared with previous periods. Two breaches were identified, one low-value and specialist, and another involving the rural estate, which was noted for attention. The latter was uncovered through enhanced financial controls and transparency measures. The report outlined the remedial actions taken, including moving current spending onto a compliant framework and beginning work to establish a sustainable long-term procurement approach.

The report prompted questions and comments:

- The rural estate accumulated a spend of over £850k, with over £780k classed as non-compliant. This occurred because officers correctly tendered individual works valued between £5k and £30k, but they did not record and aggregate those amounts over time. As a result, it wasn't identified that the cumulative value awarded to certain contractors exceeded procurement limits. The issue was neither deliberate nor negligent, rather stemmed from a missing aggregation check. Once new monitoring controls were introduced around 18 months earlier, the issue was identified, a compliant term contract was put in place, and officers began preparing a formal contract position to return to the Committee for decision.
- It was noted that the Council had significantly strengthened its governance over the previous eight years, with substantial improvements made over that period. The reported figures covered several years and reflected legacy issues, including a recent spike caused by the single systemic failure of officers not identifying to cumulative value of procurement between £5k and £30k, though this was unintentional and officers were found to have acted in good faith. Ongoing actions included mandatory training, updating contract registers, and tighter monitoring. Confidence in an imminent reduction in the total value of compliance failures was not expressed, however the transparency in the Council's reporting was emphasised and commended.
- A Member queried how future procurement systems were being designed to ensure small independent contractors could still bid, even when contracts were aggregated into larger packages. Concerns were raised that smaller firms, which might deliver parts of the work more effectively or cheaply, could be excluded if required to bid for all elements. It was explained that some rural estate tasks required niche local skills not typically offered by larger organisations, so bidder days and engagement events were used to shape tender documents in ways that supported smaller providers.

The aim was to avoid higher costs and protect local capability while procurement plans continued to develop.

It was resolved unanimously to note the content of this report.

29. 2026-2029 Business Plan and Budget

The Committee was presented the proposed budget and Strategic Framework, following training given to Councillors earlier in the month. It was explained that Strategy, Resources and Performance (SRP) Committee would receive feedback from all committees before making recommendations to full Council for debate on 10 February 2026. The officer noted confidence that the previously identified £6.4m gap would be closed following the provisional settlement, though detailed work was still underway. The Committee heard that the wider capital programme totalled £750m over ten years, with borrowing requirements and related revenue impacts outlined. For this Committee, the focus lay in the part of the report covering savings in building rationalisation, procurement, and property management. Highlighted was the capital programme for assets and procurement areas, mainly property and digital contracts, along with the accompanying fees and charges schedule.

Members identified significant points and raised questions:

- Several property disposals had been in progress for some time, and clarification was given on how these were reflected in the capital programme. It was explained that the report assumed £32.5m in future capital receipts arising from asset rationalisation, with these funds not earmarked for other purposes and therefore set aside for Treasury management. Assumptions had been built in regarding the timing of asset disposals over the coming years. It was also acknowledged that some issues, such as carbon considerations cut across multiple committees, and that related comments would be captured and fed into SRP alongside input from other relevant committees.
- The discussion focused on concerns about whether the Council's targets for over £1m in revenue savings and £5m in capital receipts by March 2027 remained achievable, given the slowdown in the commercial property market and delays to the assets change programme caused by LGR. It was explained that the asset change programme had experienced slippage, prompting a pause while the implications were assessed and a revised, backloaded plan was developed. Officers had identified alternative savings in the interim and undertook soft market testing, staff and trade union discussions, relocation planning, and mothballing of some buildings to strengthen assumptions. Several assets were considered deliverable within the year, with examples given of properties nearing vacancy and others requiring further work. It was acknowledged that further slippages remained possible, but ongoing monitoring through integrated financial reports and contingency measures would be used to manage risks, with updates brought to Committee as needed.

- Addressed was the Council's £300k savings forecast for maintenance, which assumed reducing planned and reactive work to essential levels without compromising statutory testing and compliance. Concerns were raised that no allowance had been made for higher maintenance and lifecycle costs associated with ground sourced heat pumps, which were known to be more expensive to maintain than gas systems. It was acknowledged that the approach carried risks, particularly given the need to maintain building safety, heating reliability and compliance. It was explained that decisions would depend on each building's future use, and that buildings with limited remaining life might not justify continued investment, potentially leading to relocation. Although condition surveys and ongoing compliance maintenance were in place, the ageing estate meant difficult choices could arise. A £2.1m capital programme was available to be drawn down on, but financial pressures might still require mitigation measures or estate reduction. Concerns were ultimately expressed about the deliverability of the savings and the potential impact on safety.
- Concerns were raised that a £40m funding gap still remained and that the business plan lacked clear costings showing how proposals would affect residents. Although debt reduction and efficiencies were welcomed, it was argued that wider ambitions, including environmental goals, were embedded in other strategies without transparent financial implications, creating uncertainty about value for money. In contrast, it was argued that the Council had already cut spending to the minimum, with most spending driven to statutory services outside its control. The proposed budget and property strategy were viewed as realistic measures to reduce debt and manage ongoing financial pressures.

The Executive Director of Finance and Resources summarised the discussion as follows:

- *Councillors were generally supportive of asset rationalisation and using receipts to manage the Council's borrowing, thus recognising the importance of capital receipts. There was challenge to the assumptions around the assurance of delivering revenue and capital savings from the Change Programme, with Councillors recognising this needed to be monitored closely throughout the coming financial year.*
- *There was challenge in relation to the maintenance savings, particularly the desire to ensure that colleagues across the organisation remained safe in compliant buildings, and that this would be prioritised and monitored throughout the year.*
- *There was support for the full cost charging for electric vehicles.*

It was resolved to:

- a) Consider and scrutinise the proposals relevant to this committee within the 2026-29 Business Plan and Budget put forward by the Strategy, Resources and Performance Committee on 11 December 2025.
- b) Recommend changes and/or actions for consideration by the Strategy, Resources and Performance Committee at its meeting on 29 January 2026 to enable a business plan and budget to be proposed to Full Council on 10 February 2026.
- c) Receive the fees and charges schedule for this committee included at Appendix 2.

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

It was resolved to note the Agenda Plan.

Chair