

HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES of the meeting of the OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL (ENVIRONMENT, COMMUNITIES AND PARTNERSHIPS) held in Civic Suite, Pathfinder House, St Mary's Street, Huntingdon PE29 3TN on Thursday, 3 October 2024.

PRESENT: Councillor J E Kerr – Chair.

Councillors T Alban, S J Criswell, M A Hassall, N J Hunt, M Kadewere, C Lowe, S R McAdam, S Mokbul, D J Shaw and C H Tevlin.

APOLOGIES: An apology for absence from the meeting was submitted on behalf of Councillors S Bywater.

IN ATTENDANCE: Councillor S L Taylor.

24. MINUTES

Cllr Hassall wished to clarify that his concerns with the project were related to the funding of the project and that he had suggested BAU as an additional investment opportunity as an example that he would have liked to explore as an alternative.

He also stated that he had felt that success criteria was lacking from the report and that he would have liked Cabinet to explore that.

With these amends being noted the Panel agreed that the minutes of the meeting of 5th September 2024 were approved as a correct record and were signed by the Chair.

25. MEMBERS' INTERESTS

None declared.

26. OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME

With the aid of a report by the Democratic Services Officer (Scrutiny) (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) the Overview and Scrutiny Work Programme and the current Notice of Key Executive Decisions which had been prepared by the Leader for the period 1st October 2024 to 31st January 2025 were presented to the Panel.

27. HUNTINGDONSHIRE PRIORITY NATURAL LANDSCAPES

By means of a report and presentation by the Parks and Countryside Project Manager (copies of which were appended in the Minute Book), the Huntingdonshire Priority Natural Landscapes Report was presented to the Panel.

The Panel heard that, following questions from Councillor

Alban, the project was an evidence based piece of work and whilst discussions had been held with local landowners during the evidence gathering process, this had not been opened to public consultation at this stage. The Panel were also advised that the study was not focussed on access to the identified spaces, many of the spaces had public rights of way or assumed access and it was noted that during adverse weather some rights of way may be closed in order to protect the habitats and environment of the location.

It was clarified to the Panel, in response to an enquiry from Councillor Shaw that there were nine identified locations within the document and that the tenth location were the river corridors.

Following a question from Councillor Hassall, the Panel heard that the report had not been presented to the Local Plan Advisory Group (LPAG). The Panel were advised that the report would be further presented to Cabinet and to Council during the October cycle of meetings. The Panel were reassured that the priority landscapes identified were where the Council wanted to enhance and not inhibit development and would be part of an evidence base being pushed into the Local Nature Recovery Strategy which is a County wide piece of work that will be a planning document with formal consultation built in. This piece of work would be developed by Cambridgeshire County Council who will be undertaking the work on behalf of the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority. This Strategy will help to identify the right locations for new developments. It was noted that the work so far is a technical study, which will form an evidence base which, once developed and adopted, could be used by Planning to make informed decisions. This work is part of a framework of evidence and will be used as supporting evidence once adopted. Councillor Hassall argued that this study would be of great benefit to LPAG in developing the Local Plan as an evidence based piece of work. It would be helpful for the Group to know where the biodiversity priority areas are and would be fantastic to get this overlay to sit alongside the Local Plan whilst that is in development to ensure there are no conflicts in identified areas.

Councillor Hassall proposed to add an additional recommendation to the Cabinet report, this recommendation was seconded by Councillor Mokbul and the Panel voted unanimously in favour of forwarding the proposed recommendation to the Cabinet.

6) to agree that the report and presentation be also presented to the Local Plan Advisory Group.

In response to a question from Councillor McAdam, it was clarified to the Panel that whilst the team did not have the

knowledge of how many farmers were currently adopting a nature friendly farming approach, it was known that interest in and adoption of this approach was increasing. This was due to a generational shift in farmers and a resulting change of approach and attitude. It was anticipated that there would be a significant shift in support of this approach over the next decade.

Following a query from Councillor Hunt, the Panel heard that whilst it was not anticipated for the identified locations to change in the future, the detailed measures and actions which sit alongside the geology would be updated as appropriate.

The Panel heard, following questions from Councillor Alban and Councillor Shaw, that this evidence base would assist in assessing the Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) and would not be prohibiting development but identifying where BNG credits could be used. It was noted that developers may not be able to apply BNG credits to their own sites and whilst there was not a requirement to use those credits within the district of development, developers were penalised if that was invested away from the original site with the penalty increasing the further away the investment was made. It was noted that there was a process to be followed in spending these credits and that the priority was to be invested locally in the first instance. It was noted that the BNG credits were administered by the Council and that this was an emerging system. It was noted that a criteria to claim credits was a commitment to maintain the proposed project for 30 years. It was also advised that BNG credits were one element in achieving nature recovery and that many other actions would assist with the wider vision of developing this.

It was clarified, following a further question from Councillor Alban, that the definition of a minor amendment as used in Recommendation 4, was a common term used within reports to allow for adjustments or corrections to the detail of the documents. It was assured that this would not undermine the progress of the documents and would be keep the same intention and direction of the current report.

In response to a question from Councillor Hassall who enquired whether there were enough East West corridors, the Panel heard that this would be monitored as it would take time to assess how this would progress. It was noted that where focus could be made on increasing the population and resilience of species within specific areas, it was often found that, with time, this would then encourage the spread and development of that species in the surrounding areas.

Following the discussion, it was

RESOLVED

that Cabinet be encouraged to consider the comments from Overview and Scrutiny when making a decision upon the recommendations within the report; and;

that Cabinet be encouraged to add the proposed recommendation 6 to the report;

6) to agree that the report and presentation be also presented to the Local Plan Advisory Group.

Chair