

**Public
Key Decision – Yes**

HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Title/Subject Matter: Paxton Pits Nature Reserve Extension of Leases

Meeting/Date: Overview & Scrutiny Committee - (Environment, Communities & Partnerships) – 4th September 2025
Cabinet – 16th September 2025

Executive Portfolio: Councillor Julie Kerr – Executive Councillor for Parks and Countryside, Waste and Street Scene

Report by: Gregg Holland – Head of Leisure, Health & Environment

Ward(s) affected: All Ward/s

Executive Summary:

Paxton Pits Nature Reserve currently consists of 78 hectares. Gravel extraction has taken place there since the 1940's. In September 2006 Cabinet approved the extension of Paxton Pits Nature Reserve by way of the acceptance of leases of land adjacent to the existing reserve. A Section 106 agreement created in September 2006 obliged the Council to enter into the leases of the conservation land.

From 2008 to 2016 Little Paxton Quarry was mothballed during the economic recession which delayed the restoration works. In 2017 planning permission expired so Aggregate Industries submitted a revised proposal to Cambridgeshire County Council for the period up to 2029. In 2017 it was felt that the 2007 lease which was annexed to the S106 needed modernising. Since then, the legal representatives for the different parties have been negotiating the terms of the leases. Now, the terms of the lease have been agreed.

Typically, the agreement of leases such as this would be delegated to Officers, based on previous decisions, however, owing to the passage of time in this case, and the potential for linked opportunities, further approval by Cabinet is recommended in this instance.

Following further gravel extraction, the reserve is set to increase substantially (more than 3.5 times) to 280 hectares which would make it one of the largest nature reserves in Cambridgeshire. This can be seen in **Appendix 1**. The additional land is owned by Oxford University Chest and Thornhill Estate. Holcim UK (formerly Aggregate Industries) has planning consent for the extraction of gravel and the associated restoration.

The land will be released to the Council in phases as gravel extraction and restoration is completed. Leases will be granted to the Council for a minimum period of 80 years with options to extend and the rent will be a peppercorn.

Once completed, the Nature Reserve and the adjoining land in private ownership will provide a complex of lakes and public open spaces covering over 600 hectares in total situated between the River Great Ouse and the A1 stretching from Little Paxton to Diddington. It will have a network of footpaths, bridle paths and cycle ways covering the whole area. Management of the site will be governed by a reserve management plan which is agreed by the Council, TOF and Thornhill in accordance with the S106 agreement. This management plan will set out in detail how the conservation land will be managed, monitored and maintained.

Taking on these sites has benefits to the Council, and has alignment with our established Place Strategy, Corporate Plan, and wider environmental, social and community aspirations. There are also potential opportunities from an economic perspective in relation to the visitor economy.

This report seeks approval to give delegated authority for the signature of the leases of land adjacent to the current reserve creating the extension of Paxton Pits Nature Reserve following the completion of gravel extraction operations and agreed restoration works.

Recommendation(s):

The Cabinet/Committee is

RECOMMENDED

- To fully approve and give delegated authority to fully execute the leases for the land adjacent to the current nature reserve allowing for an extension of Paxton Pits Nature Reserve following the completion of gravel extraction operations and agreed restoration works.
- To agree and approve the feedback from 3C Legal Shared Services outlined in Section 10 which provides confidence and clarity to the Council in moving forward with the extension of leases.
- To support the principle of Officers engaging in efforts to acquire land and buildings in connection with the principle of exploring wider opportunities to not only develop existing sites across the Council's parks and open spaces but also new sites and spaces to support wildlife and conservation, health and wellbeing, physical activity and commercial sustainability opportunities.

1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to gain full approval from Council and to allow delegated authority to Senior Officer's to fully execute the leases for the land adjacent to the current nature reserve allowing for an extension of Paxton Pits Nature Reserve following the completion of gravel extraction operations and agreed restoration works.
- 1.2 This report also seeks to set out the current legal position as supplied by 3C Legal Shared Services and to provide Council the full confidence in which full approval for this scheme and delegated authority can be given to Senior Officers to proceed with this matter.
- 1.3 The purpose of this report is also aimed at gaining approval for the Head of Leisure, Health & Environment and associated teams in principle to explore wider opportunities to develop existing and new sites across the Council's parks and open spaces to support wildlife and conservation, health and wellbeing, physical activity and commercial sustainability opportunities.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 [On 7th September 2006, Cabinet approved the extension of Paxton Pits Nature Reserve](#) by way of the acceptance by HDC of leases of land adjacent to existing reserve following the completion of gravel extraction.
- 2.2 [In the meeting minutes it stated](#); *"Having considered the terms of the leases the Cabinet agreed that the Director of Central Services after consultation with the Executive Councillor for Resources and Policy, be authorised to approve the terms of the leases."*
- 2.3 A Section 106 agreement was produced in September 2006 which obliged HDC to enter into the leases of the conservation land. The form of lease was annexed to the S106. The parties are HDC, Oxford University (TOF), Thornhill Estates and Aggregate Industries (now HOLCIM UK).
- 2.4 In 2008, the economic recession led to the quarry being moth balled until 2016 which meant that gravel extraction and the associated restoration works ceased for 8 years. Consequently, this extended the timeframe of the reserve extension.
- 2.5 In 2017 it was decided that the 2007 lease, which was annexed to the S106, needed modernising.
- 2.6 Since then, the legal representatives for the different parties have been negotiating the terms of the leases. The terms of the lease are now agreed. HDC will enter into;
 - an overreaching agreement with TOF and HOLCIM UK Ltd (formerly Aggregate Industries)
 - an overarching agreement with Thornhill and HOLCIM UK Ltd

- these will be for the surrender of HDC's current 2007 lease and the grant of the new leases for the various phases detailed in the plan.
- 2.7 Typically, given the previous approvals, and the existing content of the Scheme of Delegation, the agreement of leases would be delegated to Officers to resolve. However, in this instance, owing to the passage of time that has occurred it is considered prudent for Members to re-authorise the proposed approach.
- 2.8 Following the approval of the extension of leases it will allow the Head of Leisure, Health & Environment and other Senior Officer's to explore wider opportunities to develop existing sites across the Council's parks and open spaces to support wildlife and conservation, health and wellbeing, physical activity and commercial sustainability opportunities.
- 2.9 Another key reason and purpose for progressing with the extension of leases at Paxton Pits is that it is strategically aligned to the Council's' Place Strategy, Corporate Plan and will as be outlined in 2.8 above support wider economic growth as future opportunities can be sought, reviewed and presented to Council for the benefit of residents and to underpin the financial sustainability of Council services.

3. FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS

- 3.1 The extension of the Nature Reserve will be managed and maintained by HDC's Parks and Countryside Team working in partnership with The Friends of Paxton Pits Nature Reserve (FPPNR).
- 3.2 FPPNR generate around £80,000 income per year from membership fees, visitor centre sales, donations and bequests. Of the £240,000 of assets in the bank, £127,000 is currently set aside for work in the reserve extension when land has been transferred.
- 3.3 An additional £113,000 is allocated to conservation projects on the existing reserve.
- 3.4 The salary costs of a Countryside Ranger Apprentice is being funded by the Friends for 30 months.
- 3.5 In addition to this it is not believed that the on-going maintenance of the extension of leases and associated land will incur the Council any additional expenditure and will be managed within existing financial budgets and by the wider team outlined in section 3.1 above.
- 3.6 In respect of other potential opportunities, it is considered that if such opportunities are identified, it is possible for due consideration of the financial implications to be given as part of due diligence work and the development of any business cases that may be necessary. Due regard can also be given to the budget framework at the time. Thus there would be ample opportunity to ensure that any additional land taken on, would not be to the financial detriment of the council. Moreover, there may be financial benefits arising from such activities.

4. COMMENTS OF OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY

- 4.1 The comments of the relevant Overview and Scrutiny Panel will be included in this section prior to its consideration by the Cabinet.

5. BENEFITS OF THE SCHEME

- 5.1 The extension of Paxton Pits Nature Reserve will bring tremendous community benefits. These will be:

- 27 km of footpaths
- 8.4km Cycleway
- New bird hides and viewpoints

- 5.2 A full summary presentation on Paxton Pits Nature Reserve and the extension of leases and its wider benefits can be viewed in **Appendix 2**.

- 5.3 Currently about 120,000 people visit Paxton Pits each year from all over the Country and World. This figure is expected to increase as the reputation of the Reserve and the facilities and opportunities it offers become more widely known.

- 5.4 The reserve extension will deliver fantastic wildlife benefit. The reserve's wildlife will be enhanced by the addition of a mosaic of important habitats:

- A reedbed – nationally scarce habitat
- Five extra lakes
- Three new islands designed for wading birds
- Scrub – a mix of bushes, grassland, sandy banks and small ponds to support a whole host of plants, insects and birds
- Rare wildflower rich grassland
- Rare wet woodland habitat

- 5.5 The remaining 60% of the Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), which is currently in the quarry area, will be brought into the Reserve as the gravel extraction is completed by 2029.

- 5.6 As outlined within this section the benefits of this scheme are vast and allow the Council to provide increased opportunities for residents and people from far and wide to visit the Nature Reserve to see its exceptional habitats.

- 5.7 It also provides the ability for the Council to design, develop and implement a wider strategic approach not only at Paxton Pits but further across the Council's parks and open spaces to create spaces that residents want to visit, spend time with their families, spend money and support the wider financial sustainability of these services.

6. KEY IMPACTS / RISKS

- 6.1 The table below identifies the potential risk associated with this scheme and importantly the likelihood and impact. The table also demonstrates the mitigation measures that will be in place to limit any risk to the Council.

Risk	Likelihood	Impact	Mitigation
Financial risks of maintenance and management	Medium	High	Work is carried out as per management plan; secure Friends Group, volunteer and partner support; explore income streams such as guided tours, education programmes, and grants
Environmental risk of land restoration quality	Low	High	Legal agreements require restoration to be carried out to required standard; carry out staged inspections before each land transfer. HDC attends Technical Steering Group with Holicim and stakeholders.
Liability for accidents	Medium	High	Maintain public liability insurance; carry out site checks; ensure clear signage and visitor information
Operational risk of coordination challenges with multiple landowners and stakeholders	Medium	Medium	Site is managed as agreed in management plan. HDC representatives to continue to attend Liaison Group meetings and Technical Steering group meetings to discuss restoration works, management work, access and environmental issues
Reputational risks and public dissatisfaction	Medium	Medium	Communicate progress through signage, through local media and online; involve Friends of Paxton Pits group in planning and events
Environmental risks of long-term ecological changes	Medium	Medium	Build flexibility into the management plan; conduct regular

e.g. climate change, invasive species			ecological monitoring; adapt management to changing conditions
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7. TIMETABLE FOR IMPLEMENTATION

- 7.1 Land in Phase 1 and 2 is ready to be transferred to the Council once leases are signed. HOLCIM UK have planning permission to extract gravel until 2029 so further land will be transferred in additional phases once extraction and restoration is completed.
- 7.2 The table below illustrates some indicative dates that the Council and Senior Officer's will work towards to complete the execution of leases and commence direct management of land which will be transferred:

Time Period	Comment
October – December 2025	Final signatures and execution of leases
January – March 2026	Mobilise team and commence proprietary works within management plans
April & Onwards	Full utilisation of the site by residents and Council teams

8. LINK TO CORPORATE OBJECTIVES

- 8.1 The extension of Paxton Pits Nature Reserve strongly supports the council's corporate plan and its key priorities which are:
- a) Improving the quality of life for local people.
 - b) Creating a better Huntingdonshire for future generations.
 - c) Delivering good quality, high value for money services with good control and compliance with statutory obligations.
- 8.2 Executing the leases for the land adjacent to the current nature reserve allowing for an extension of Paxton Pits Nature Reserve following the completion of gravel extraction operations and agreed restoration works can contribute and support the delivery of the Councils strategic priorities and Corporate Plan in the following ways:
- 8.3 The proposed leases will expand accessible green space from 78 to 280 hectares, creating one of the largest nature reserves in Cambridgeshire. The network of footpaths, bridleways, and cycle routes will provide extensive opportunities for walking, cycling, and outdoor leisure, supporting both physical health and mental wellbeing. The expansion will also enhance biodiversity and the scenic quality of the local environment, offering residents and visitors a richer and more enjoyable place to explore.
- 8.4 Additional footpath networks and a cycleway will provide residents from neighbouring villages better access to services and amenities, thereby improving the quality of life for local people.

- 8.5 The long-term leases will secure public access and protection for high-quality habitats for a minimum of 80 years. Restored land following gravel extraction will be managed to safeguard wildlife, promote ecological recovery, and strengthen climate resilience. This ensures that the area's natural capital is preserved and enhanced, providing a valuable environmental legacy for future generations.
- 8.6 Executing the leases will support and enhance priority three within the Corporate Plan as it will deliver good quality, high value for money services. The arrangements achieve significant public benefit at minimal cost, with the land leased on a peppercorn rent basis.
- 8.7 The project meets statutory duties for biodiversity, public access, and sustainable land management while ensuring effective oversight through robust legal agreements. Strong partnership working between the Council, landowners, and other stakeholders will deliver these outcomes efficiently and in full compliance with obligations.
- 8.8 This project is strategically aligned to the Council's' Place Strategy and Corporate Plan and will support wider economic growth as future opportunities can be sought, reviewed and presented to Council for the benefit of residents and to underpin the financial sustainability of Council services.
- 8.9 These opportunities will be captured in a new and innovative "Commercial Strategy" that the Head of Leisure, Health & Environment is developing and will provide a new strategic approach to how we can increase activity across our parks and open spaces, ensure they are financially sustainable and explore new opportunities to help drive engagement from residents, improve health and wellbeing and generate revenue.

9. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1 The section 106 Agreement dated 18 September 2007 as varied obliged TOF Corporate Trustee Limited ("TOF") and Edmund George William Thornhill ("Thornhill") to grant separate leases of phased areas to Huntingdonshire District Council ("HDC") and for HDC to take them for a term to expire on 20 September 2087 for use as a nature reserve within the definition contained in section 15 of the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949 and for the purposes of education and ancillary amenity use.
- 9.2 Prior to the grant of the leases to HDC referred to in 1 above, HDC will enter into the following.
 - a. An overarching agreement with TOF and Holcim UK Limited ("Holcim") (formerly known as Aggregate Industries UK Limited) to deal with amongst other things a commitment for HDC to enter into the lease with TOF referred to in 1 above and to enter into the lease surrender in c below.

- b. An overarching agreement with Thornhill and Holcim to deal with amongst other things a commitment for HDC to enter into the lease with Thornhill referred to in 1 above.
 - c. A surrender of the lease dated 21 September 2007 and made between
 - (1) The Chancellor Masters and Scholars of the University of Oxford
 - (2) HDC (3) Aggregate Industries UK Limited.
- 9.3 Following a thorough review of this transaction by 3C Legal Shared Services they are comfortable that the Council are administering its obligations under the original 2007 Section 106 Agreement similar to all other parties involved. They are content that the extension of leases can be fully executed.

10. RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1 There will be no additional financial budgetary impact on the Council, as Rangers are already managing the nature reserve under the existing management plan. The ongoing operational responsibilities for the expanded reserve will be absorbed within current staffing arrangements.
- 10.2 The Friends group is providing strong community support, including funding a full-time Countryside Ranger Apprentice and setting aside funds for projects within the reserve extension. This additional resource enhances capacity for habitat management, education, and visitor engagement.

11. HEALTH IMPLICATIONS

- 11.1 The expansion of Paxton Pits Nature Reserve will provide substantial public health benefits. The enlarged network of footpaths, bridleways, and cycle routes will encourage greater participation in outdoor physical activity such as walking, running and cycling, supporting improved cardiovascular fitness, muscular strength, and general physical wellbeing.
- 11.2 Access to high-quality green space is also strongly linked to mental health benefits, including reduced stress, improved mood, and enhanced social connection. The reserve will offer opportunities for social interaction through community events, volunteering, and guided activities, helping to reduce loneliness and isolation. This also complements our Community Health and Wealth Building strategy and approach.

12. ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE CHANGE IMPLICATIONS

- 12.1 The expansion of Paxton Pits Nature Reserve will have a significant positive impact on the local environment. By securing the long-term protection and management of 280 hectares of restored land, the project will enhance biodiversity, create a variety of habitats for wildlife, and improve ecological connectivity between existing green spaces as part of the Great Ouse Valley in Huntingdonshire. The restored gravel pits and surrounding habitats will support priority species, contribute to nature recovery targets, and strengthen the district's natural capital.

- 12.2 The expanded reserve will also contribute to climate change mitigation and adaptation. Increased tree cover, wetland areas, and vegetation will help sequester carbon, improve air quality, and regulate local temperatures. The network of green spaces will provide natural flood management benefits by slowing surface water run-off and increasing water storage capacity. The site's design encourages low-carbon leisure and travel, with extensive walking and cycling links reducing reliance on car-based recreation.
- 12.3 Potential climate-related risks include the impact of extreme weather events, drought, or invasive species on habitats and wildlife. These will be mitigated through adaptive management practices, regular ecological monitoring, and collaboration with conservation partners to respond to changing environmental conditions.
- 12.4 This opportunity will also allow Senior Officer's to explore opportunities for further funding to be developed and implemented through BNG services and credits for habitat banking. We can and will use this scheme as we do with the rest of our parks and open spaces to protect nature, conservation and ecology, but also use this to allow our services to attract more people to support our visitor economy offer.

13. REASONS FOR THE RECOMMENDED DECISIONS

- 13.1 The legal advice confirms this process can proceed and the extension of leases can be executed.
- 13.2 Obtaining full approval from the Council to allow for this extension of leases will provide local residents enhanced opportunities to enjoy this area, be physically active, allow wider work to be undertaken on site to attract a greater number of visitors and it creates a safeguard on the conservation and ecology of this space under a dedicated management plan.
- 13.3 Allows Senior Officer's the opportunity to develop a wider strategic approach to all parks and open spaces concentrating on improved accessibility and offering, health and wellbeing, commercial opportunities and financial sustainability.
- 13.4 The extension of leases not only allows an expansion of the site but with it the creation of a wider infrastructure of ecology and conservation which can be safeguarded for the duration of the leases by the Council team and the Friend's Group.
- 13.5 The extension of leases allows greater accessibility for local residents in the surrounding villages and neighbourhoods.
- 13.6 Upon the execution of leases further negotiation will be sought with Thornhill and HOLCIM UK Ltd and the Council around other areas of land under their control which may be deemed beneficial for the Council to operate in line with ecology, conservation, the wider benefit of residents and further commercial opportunities.

14. LIST OF APPENDICES INCLUDED

Appendix 1 – Paxton Pits Nature Reserve Map (Existing & New)
Appendix 2 – Paxton Pits Nature Reserve Extension Presentation

15. BACKGROUND PAPERS

- Cabinet Report – Decision Sheet – 7th September 2006
- Cabinet Meeting Minutes – 7th September 2006
- Section 106 Agreement – 18th September 2007

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