

South Cambridgeshire District Council

Minutes of the Climate and Environment Advisory Committee held on
Thursday, 12 October 2023 at 2.00 p.m.

Chair: Pippa Heylings

Vice-Chairs: Dr. Martin Cahn and Geoff Harvey

Committee Members in attendance:

Geoff Harvey

Ariel Cahn

Dr Lisa Redrup

Natalie Warren-Green

Bunty Waters

Heather Williams

Cllr Brian Milnes was in attendance remotely, as Lead Cabinet Member for Environment.

Officers:

John Cornell

Natural Environment Team Leader

Laurence Damary-Homan

Democratic Services Officer

Orla Gibbons

Project Officer, Climate and Environment

Jane Green

Built and Natural Environment Manager

Alex Snelling-Day

Waste Policy, Climate and Environment Team
Manager

Luke Waddington

Project Officer, Climate and Environment

1. Chair's Announcements

The Chair made several brief announcements. It was noted that Councillor Paul Bearpark had stepped down from the Committee; Councillor Bearpark was thanked for his time and work with the Committee and Councillor Natalie Warren-Green was welcomed as a full Member. The Chair also noted that the Council had been accredited as a Bronze Carbon Literate Organisation by the Carbon Literacy Project, and that an Action on Energy workshop had been held with officers and colleagues from all Cambridgeshire Councils, as well as community representatives, to discuss the challenges around retrofitting housing in the County.

2. Apologies

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Shrobona Bhattacharya, Ariel Cahn and Peter Sandford. Councillor Heather Williams was present as a substitute.

3. Declarations of Interest

There were no Declarations of Interest.

4. Minutes of the Previous Meeting

By affirmation, the Committee authorised the Chair to sign the Minutes of the meeting held on 06 June 2023 as a correct record.

5. Update on actions in support of Biodiversity Net Gain

The Natural Environment Team Leader presented the report on Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) and informed the Committee that pending introduction of mandatory BNG requirements into the Town & Country Planning Act, as laid out in the Environment Act 2021, was projected to be implemented in January 2024, although Government guidance was pending release. Consequently, officers were operating on best practice guidance from other bodies, with Natural Cambridge and the Wildlife Trust being cited as examples.

Throughout the discussion, Members asked a number of questions regarding how the BNG legislation would work in practice. Throughout their responses, officers gave the following advice on how they expected BNG requirements to be implemented:

- Most development that requires planning permission, with some exceptions such as Householder Full (HFUL) applications, would be subject to Biodiversity Management Plan (BMP) conditions to ensure that a minimum of 10% BNG was achieved.
- Developers would be obligated to maintain the habitats for a minimum of 30 years.
- Site assessment would be undertaken, both pre-commencement and in the lifetime of the obligations, by both the developers (or their appointed representatives) and Council Ecologists. Developers would present reports to the Council, whose Ecologists would conduct their own investigations (including site visits) and compare the findings. Where issues arise and BMPs were not followed, statutory requirements would ensure that the developers were obliged to resolve them.
- Data was required to be gathered through the standardised DEFRA Biodiversity Metric. Reports were to be produced and provided to DEFRA, as part of their national register for net gain delivery sites, in annual intervals for the first 5 years post-development, followed by reports every 5 years for the remainder of the obligation.

Members enquired as to what biodiversity data management systems were in place and officers detailed the work undertaken to identify and procure the best available software in advance of the implementation of the BNG legislative requirements. Members enquired as to if residents could contribute to the biodiversity baseline data set. Officers advised that, given the complexity of the DEFRA Metric and technical understanding required to utilise it, BNG baseline data was not an area which was expected to benefit greatly from public engagement. Both officers and Members stated that residents had a major role to play in enhancing biodiversity in the District and wider region, and it was suggested that residents submit any data they have that could be useful to the Cambridgeshire & Peterborough Environmental Records Centre (based in Cambourne). Members also expressed optimism that greater engagement with Parish Councils, noting the bid to the National Lottery Heritage Fund to assist with funding, would help empower residents to feed into the BNG process.

Further explanation was given on how BNG requirements were expected to be implemented:

- The current mitigation hierarchy (avoidance, mitigation and compensation for biodiversity loss) would be maintained.
- BNG and habitat delivery could be delivered on-site or off-site. BNG delivery would be highly contextual and implemented on a case-by-case basis, as all planning considerations were, but the 10% BNG laid out by the BMP would have to be fully delivered.
- Full on-site BNG would be very hard to achieve in practicality, but development sites would likely contribute to BNG through green infrastructure, soft landscaping, trees on site and other common parts of development that contribute to nature. Off-siting would be necessary to enable developers to provide full delivery of BNG and ensure the viability of BNG.
- Off-siting should be sought as close to the site as possible where possible in developments that impacted priority habitat areas, such as the calcareous grasslands found in South Cambridgeshire, based on guidance from non-governmental bodies.
- Priority habitat areas in the region had been mapped- Members expressed a desire to see baseline data gathered for any priority areas that might be impacted by planned future development.
- Off-site delivery of BNG measures could often involve contributions to strategic BNG sites. The network of strategic site would allow for effective management and maintenance of BNG gains, and in many cases off-siting would lead to more effective and sustainable biodiversity enhancement measures and provide greater benefit to the region as a whole.

Members discussed the need for ecologists to implement the legislation and commended the Council for hiring a new Ecologist before the requirements came into force. The Committee noted that there was a national shortage of ecologists and many public authorities were struggling to successfully recruit to posts; some Members suggested that the Council's 4 Day Week trial may have helped fill the role. Officers informed the Committee that BNG work undertaken by Council Ecologists would be funded by the charging scheme that would accompany the introduction legislative changes, which would allow the Planning Service to charge developers for both pre-application advice on BNG, and for the monitoring work undertaken in the 30 years following the completion of development. This would ensure that funding was available to ensure BMPs were effectively produced and complied with.

Further clarity was provided by officers:

- Established nature areas with existing protections, such as Sites of Special Scientific Interest, would continue to be protected and harm to them would carry

significant weight in the planning balance.

- Timescales for indications for success would vary depending on the habitat, with the example of a grassland likely taking less time to establish than a woodland being used. Monitoring and maintenance would reflect the context of each individual BNG site.
- Council owned BNG sites were very difficult to implement due to legislative requirements; sites would have to be managed by an arms-length management organisation.
- Lessons were being learned from existing strategic BNG sites in the District, such as Lower Valley Farm.
- Regional initiatives, such as the Cambridgeshire Local Nature Recovery Strategy, would assist in the progress towards doubling nature and enhancing biodiversity in the District.
- Collaboration with local stakeholders was ongoing. Ecologists from local authorities continued to meet to discuss biodiversity and doubling nature in the region, and that Council Ecologists provided advice to statutory bodies in the region, such as the local Highway Authority.

Officers stated that there was room for improvement on partner-organisation collaboration, and Members encouraged officers to do so wherever possible. Members requested that, once the BNG requirements had been made law, that Members of the Planning Committee be given a briefing on the legislative changes, and also that officers explore translocation of trees rather than felling where possible.

The Committee thanked officers for the thorough explanation the pending changes to BNG requirements, and congratulated them for all the hard work that had been done to ensure the Council was prepared for the legislative change. Members raised the aspiration of 20% BNG wherever possible and officers advised that there had been some success in BNG negotiations with developers, and that planning policy officers were continue to build the evidence base to justify a 20% BNG requirement in the next Local Plan. Officers suggested that feelings around the evidence to justify 20% BNG were positive, but that the Local Plan process was still ongoing and Members would be updated on progress when appropriate.

The Committee **noted** the report.

6. Climate Risk and Adaptation Update

The Waste Policy, Climate and Environment Team Manager provided the verbal update to the Committee. The update provided a definition of climate adaptation and risk, and the Committee was advised that a climate risk subgroup had been established with climate lead representatives from various local bodies, such as neighbouring authorities, combined authorities and other public services (e.g. police, NHS) and had held an initial workshop in July 2023. The key points of discussion from the workshop were detailed and the Committee was advised of the next steps of the subgroup, including wider stakeholder

engagement. Members were informed that an update would be brought to one of the next meetings of the Committee.

The Committee discussed the nature of climate risk and adaptation and commended officers for undertaking assessments of climate risk and potential adaptations that could be made in the region. The Net Zero and Doubling Nature strategies, as well as other initiatives, were recognised as existing climate adaptation that was ongoing in the District and the need to integrate new measures with existing action was raised. Members noted the challenges to implementing carbon reduction measures arising from changes to national Net Zero legislation. Business continuity was discussed and Members encouraged officers to utilise existing relationships with local business to inform them on climate risk. Officers advised that the work of the subgroup would explore how businesses can be helped to adapt to climate risks, alongside the adaptations that could be implemented by local authorities.

The Committee **noted** the verbal update.

The Meeting ended at 3.25 p.m.
