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HEALTH AND ENVIRONMENT POLICY COMMITTEE

Thursday, 3 July 2025

Attendance:

Councillors
Pett (Chairperson)

Bennett
Brophy
Latham
Lee

Miller
Power
Westwood

Others in attendance who addressed the meeting:

Councillor Learney (Cabinet Member for the Climate and Nature Emergency).

Others in attendance who did not address the meeting:

Councillor Cutler (Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance and Transformation)

[Full Video Recording](#)

1. **APOLOGIES AND DEPUTY MEMBERS**

There were no apologies received at this meeting.

2. **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

Councillor Lee made a personal statement that he was Trustee of WinACC should any discussion arise in this respect during the consideration of items.

Councillor Pett declared a disclosable pecuniary interest in respect of agenda item 8 (Nature Improvement Plan) due to being a member of the South Downs National Park Authority. However, as there was no material conflict of interest regarding this, he stated that he had a dispensation granted by the Monitoring Officer that enabled him to speak and vote on these matters.

3. **APPOINTMENT OF VICE-CHAIRPERSON FOR MUNICIPAL YEAR 2025/26**

RESOLVED:

That, Councillor Brophy be appointed Vice-Chairperson for the 2025/26 municipal year.

4. **CHAIRPERSON'S ANNOUNCEMENTS**

There were no announcements made at this meeting.

5. **TO NOTE THE DATES AND TIMES OF FUTURE MEETINGS OF THIS COMMITTEE.**

RESOLVED:

That the dates and times of meetings for 2025/26 be agreed, as set out on the agenda.

6. **MINUTES**

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the previous meeting held on 26 February 2025 be approved and adopted.

7. **PUBLIC PARTICIPATION**

Ian Tait spoke during public participation and a summary of his comments are set out below.

In addition, Andrew McMurtrie spoke during Item 8 (Nature Improvement Plan) and a summary of his comments are set out under the relevant minute below.

Ian Tait

- Expressed concerns regarding the Council's Electric Vehicle (EV) Charging Strategy and the lack of support for taxi drivers, drawing on the council's commitment to reducing carbon emissions for the district by 2030.
- Reference was made to the committee's terms of reference to maintain a strategic overview of progress towards relevant priorities in the council's plan, including greener faster, working with and enabling businesses, organisations, and residents to reduce carbon emissions and achieve the council's net zero carbon commitment for the district by 2030.
- Stated that he previously addressed this committee on 19th September 2024, questioning the relevance of the council's EV charging strategy, particularly as it had been quoted as part of the reason to refuse the three-made super EV charging hub. In response to his previous points, the then Chairperson had suggested that these issues be raised at a future meeting of the licensing and regulation committee, but this committee deals with council's licensing functions and not policy.
- With only two fully electric taxis registered through the Winchester Licensing Department, Mr Tait questioned the value of the council's priorities if there was no tangible support for businesses to go greener.
- He considered that the council's now "out of date" EV charging strategy was intended to map out how the council could support taxi drivers, with specific mention to switching to all-electric vehicles, but the strategy had regrettably failed.

- It was recognised that it was a significant financial commitment (approximately £60,000) for self-employed taxi drivers to take on a green taxi. He urged the committee to support the city's taxi drivers in going greener faster.
- In conclusion, he stated that the super hub was not a solution for taxi drivers who needed a super charging point in central Winchester, as set out in the current strategy.

In response, the Cabinet Member acknowledged that the EV charging strategy was out of date and was being reviewed. Hampshire County Council had received government funding to expand EV charging, and the council was awaiting their direction prior to making commitments. It was emphasised that the installation of super rapid chargers was expensive and required significant infrastructure. Charger locations relied on the upgrading of electrical infrastructure that required significant investment.

It was noted that although the Instavolt charging hub was impressive, developers had to fund a substantial electricity cable into the site and invested heavily in solar panels and battery storage which would be difficult for the council to achieve in the heart of an historic city. It was suggested that officers be consulted on whether this matter could come to the committee within the municipal year.

8. **NATURE IMPROVEMENT PLAN (HEP043)**

Andrew McMurtrie addressed the Committee on this item. He stated that he was encouraged by the Nature Improvement Plan and asked if the council would commit to cutting grass and hedges less often and less comprehensively to provide more habitat and food for animals and insects. He acknowledged that areas adjacent to pathways and play areas needed to be kept under control but felt that contractors often cut back further than necessary.

In response, Councillor Learney acknowledged the conflicting priorities in managing hedgerows and advised that the council was reviewing its requirements with contractors to allow for more flexibility. Rick Smith, Service Lead: Sustainability and Natural Environment added that this review was ongoing and aimed to balance biodiversity benefits with operational practicalities.

A supplementary agenda containing a revision to Table 2 – Condition of SSSIs within the Winchester District in 2025 of the draft plan was circulated prior to the meeting. A copy of this can be viewed on the councils website [here](#).

Councillor Learney, Cabinet Member for the Climate and Nature Emergency introduced the report and outlined the following points:

1. The Nature Improvement Plan was a draft document, and the committee's comments were sought, particularly on the five pathways, principles, and measures.
2. The plan would supersede the current Biodiversity Action Plan (2021-2026), reflecting significant changes in the national context, including

the 2021 Environment Act and the new Local Nature Recovery Strategy.

3. The council had declared a nature emergency, and this plan represented a move from an activity-based model to one with clear aims, objectives, and targets to restore nature and reduce pollution.

In addition, Zoe Goldsmith, Principal Ecologist/Biodiversity Officer, emphasised the following matters:

1. The plan set out a strategic approach to nature improvement across the entire district, building on the existing Biodiversity Action Plan.
2. The aim was to achieve nature improvement through five key pathways: protecting and managing land for nature; creating new spaces for nature; delivering nature-based solutions; preventing pollution; and connecting people to nature.
3. Numerical measures had been developed for the five-year period to track progress on both council-owned land and across the wider district, supported by annual action plans.
4. A set of key principles was also included to provide clarity on the council's standards where numerical targets were not applicable, for example, on the use of chemicals.

The Policy Committee was asked to note and comment on the Draft Nature Improvement Plan 2025-2030, specifically in relation to the proposed:

- a) Five Pathways
- b) Principles
- c) Measures

The committee proceeded to ask questions and debate the report. In summary, the following matters were raised.

- (i) A question was asked whether using only Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) and Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINCs) as a proxy for land managed for nature was sufficient for the district-wide target, given other large-scale private nature recovery schemes existed.
- (ii) Clarification was sought on how the plan aligned with the South Downs National Park's own partnership management plan.
- (iii) A question was asked for clarification on whether the 27.6% figure for council land managed for nature was based on the total district area, including the National Park.
- (iv) Further detail was requested on the baseline for the plan's measures, the ambition for 2030, and how progress would be measured incrementally each year.
- (v) A suggestion was made to include clearer, simpler explanations for technical terms such as 'biodiversity units' to make the document more accessible to the public.
- (vi) A question was asked if the council was using data from farming grants for tree and hedge planting to help build a comprehensive picture of nature improvement across the district.

- (vii) A question was raised regarding the council's role and responsibility for collating data on private nature schemes versus signposting to government-held data.
- (viii) It was asked if the strategy could be expanded to include a focus on engaging residents to improve nature in their own gardens and on private land.
- (ix) A question was asked whether the document could explain the limitations of setting targets to avoid creating unwanted incentives and to acknowledge that some positive outcomes take longer to measure.
- (x) Regarding the data tables, a query was raised about using percentages of the total district area more consistently to provide better context.
- (xi) Clarification was sought on how a designation like a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) could be quantified in terms of land area within the plan's measures.
- (xii) A question was asked if links to the annual ecological survey reports could be included to better demonstrate the outcomes of the council's work.
- (xiii) A query was raised about the accuracy of the number of SSSIs and SACs listed in the document, with a suggestion that the figures appeared low.
- (xiv) A question was asked whether any opportunities for wetland creation existed, particularly in relation to wastewater treatment works.
- (xv) Clarification was sought on the target to plant 500 metres of hedgerows, and why no specific action was planned for the 2025-26 period.
- (xvi) A question was asked if the maps in the document could be improved and if active links could be provided to the data for each designated site.
- (xvii) Regarding the list of completed actions, a question was asked what the outcomes of these actions were, rather than just noting their completion.
- (xviii) A question was raised about the need to strengthen the language around the document's parameters, to clarify its purpose and prevent its policies from being misinterpreted in other contexts, such as planning.

The points raised were responded to by the Cabinet Member, the Service Lead: Sustainability and Natural Environment and the Principal Ecologist/Biodiversity Officer accordingly.

RESOLVED:

1. That the Draft Nature Improvement Plan 2025-2030 be noted;
2. That the comments of the committee, as summarised above, be noted by the Cabinet Member for discussion when finalising the plan; and
3. That the updated draft Nature Improvement Plan be circulated to committee members for further comment prior to its submission to Cabinet.

9. **TO NOTE THE WORK PROGRAMME FOR 2025/26**

Councillor Power stated that following discussions at previous meetings regarding nutrient neutrality, a scoping document had been produced and circulated to the committee. Subsequently, it had been determined that there were insufficient resources to proceed with the document's recommendations, as it would have necessitated several meetings involving officers. She questioned whether there was merit in councillors forming their own working party to engage with individuals both external and internal to the council to share findings.

The Chairperson advised that he had recently taken part in discussions with the Chairpersons of the Scrutiny and Policy Committees. The three chairs had been offered the opportunity by the Chief Executive to conduct one task and finish group each on a single issue with a 90-minute allocation of senior officer time.

The committee raised two specific topics that could be taken forward as proposals for further consideration as follows:

- (i) Nutrient Neutrality (specifically, how the council could better facilitate the generation of phosphate credits in order to not only improve water quality in the rivers across the district, but allow the delivery of housing numbers)
- (ii) Electric Vehicle Charging Strategy

In response, the Corporate Head of Economy and Community clarified her understanding that the issue of nutrients had already been referred to the scrutiny committee, and a members' briefing was anticipated for the summer, which was intended as the forum for that conversation and scrutiny, suggesting it was not for a task and finish group by the committee.

Furthermore, the Corporate Head of Economy and Community emphasised that topics would need to be investigated further to ensure no conflict with other ongoing work and that the constitutional position regarding the formation of a sub-group by members, as discussed during the meeting, would need to be confirmed.

In conclusion, the Chairperson stated he would take the comments and suggestions of the committee to the next meeting for discussion with the other two scrutiny committee chairpersons and would advise members of the outcome in due course.

RESOLVED:

That the work programme for 2025/26 be noted.

The meeting commenced at 6.30 pm and concluded at 8.30 pm

Chairperson