

**Minutes of the meeting of Environment and Sustainability
Scrutiny Committee held at Conference Room 1 - Herefordshire
Council, Plough Lane Offices, Hereford, HR4 0LE on Tuesday 16
December 2025 at 10.00 am**

Present: Councillor Louis Stark (chairperson)
Councillor Justine Peberdy (vice-chairperson)

Councillors: Elizabeth Foxtton, Nick Mason, Rob Owens, John Stone and
Richard Thomas

In attendance: Councillor Elissa Swinglehurst (Cabinet Member Environment).

Officers: Simon Cann (Democratic Services Officer/Committee Clerk), John Coleman (Democratic Services Manager), Victoria Eaton (Senior Planning Officer), Daniel Lenain (Principle Sustainability and Climate Change Officer), Siobhan Riddle (Strategic and Climate Change Officer), Richard Vaughan (Acting Head of Environment).

141. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies had been received from Cllr Robert Highfield.

142. NAMED SUBSTITUTES

Cllr John Stone was the named substitute for Cllr Robert Highfield.

The Chair noted that -- to maintain political proportionality within the committee -- Cllr Elizabeth Foxtton (Independents for Herefordshire), would be joining the committee as a permanent member and Cllr Helen Heathfield (Green Party) would be stepping down from the committee. The Chair welcomed Cllr Foxtton and thanked Cllr Heathfield for her contributions to the committee's work.

143. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

144. MINUTES

The minutes of the previous meeting were received.

Resolved: That the minutes of the meeting held on 12 May 2025 be confirmed as a correct record and be signed by the Chairperson.

145. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC

One questions had been received from a member of the public, which had been published, along with a response, as a supplement to the meeting agenda on the Herefordshire Council website.

A record of a supplementary question asked and a verbal response provided during the meeting, are attached at Appendix 1 to these minutes.

146. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE COUNCIL

There had been no questions received from members of the council.

147. CARBON NEUTRAL HOUSING

The Chair took the report on Carbon Neutral Housing as read and opened the item up for debate. The key points of discussion included:

1. Members were advised that the Future Homes Standard was expected to become legally enforceable from December 2027, requiring new homes to be net zero ready, predominantly electric and removed from the gas grid.
2. Officers confirmed that while carbon neutral homes had higher upfront installation costs, particularly for heat pumps and insulation, running costs could broadly balance out where homes are well insulated.
3. It was reported that industry awareness of the Future Homes Standard was increasing, although readiness to deliver at scale remained mixed, with larger developers better placed than smaller builders.
4. Officers confirmed significant and ongoing skills shortages across key construction trades, with limited training capacity and a risk that locally trained workers may leave the area.
5. Members were advised that housing delivery was developer-led, with most construction labour subcontracted, limiting incentives for developers to invest directly in workforce training.
6. Officers advised that the Future Homes Standard would add cost and complexity to housing delivery and could place additional pressure on housing numbers alongside existing viability challenges.
7. It was confirmed that all new housing, including affordable and social housing, would be required to meet the same standards, as well as the required percentages for such housing laid down in the Local Plan.
8. Officers advised that while low-density development was less efficient, it remained necessary to meet housing needs, and that higher-density development may improve efficiency where appropriate.
9. Members were advised that accommodation for construction workers was already constrained and was being considered as part of Local Plan development.
10. Officers confirmed that heat networks were uncommon in domestic settings due to cost and management challenges and that new homes were expected to be fully electrified.
11. It was confirmed that electricity grid capacity was a significant challenge and that the council was working with the Distribution Network Operator to inform future investment planning.

12. Officers advised that retrofitting of existing homes was unlikely to be mandated, with current support focused on voluntary grant schemes such as Warm Homes.
13. Members were advised that while planning policy could be prepared in advance, development management and building control services would face increased pressures once the standard became statutory.
14. Officers confirmed that no specific mortgage or finance products recognising lower running costs were identified, although this was noted as an area for potential future exploration.

At the conclusion of the debate the committee discussed and agreed the following recommendations to the Executive.

That:

1. **The Executive should commission a piece of work in collaboration with housebuilders (including housing associations) to quantify the impact of implementation of the Future Homes Standard on the achievability of the new housing target for the County of 27,260. This should include the future availability of new affordable and social housing.**
2. **The Executive should continue discussions with relevant industry partners to evaluate the skills required to deliver the Future Homes Standard in the County and how this will feed into a joined-up approach by the Council including colleges, the youth employment hub and those involved in career advice.**
3. **The Executive should implement a review of the Council's policy and operational readiness and preparedness of planning and building control to ensure they are fit for purpose for when the Future Homes Standard finally comes into force, including training requirements.**
4. **The Executive undertake a review/audit of the government support being put in place to assist the market to deliver the quantum of carbon neutral homes**
5. **In the development of the Local Plan 'building control standards' are reviewed to ensure they are aligned with the Future Homes Standard and provide viable and affordable compliance with the development of 'carbon neutral' homes**
6. **The Local Plan – through building control policies ensures that every new home built is fitted with solar paneling and/or renewable heat sources to reduce the pressure on the national grid**
7. **The Executive encourages government and other stakeholders to investigate and consider options that allow a more balanced approach to the financial products available for home buyers to allow for downstream energy cost savings to provide more attractive purchase options for carbon neutral homes for those who have income but lower equity.**

148. BUS AND PASSENGER SERVICES TASK AND FINISH GROUP

The committee considered a progress update from the Chair of the Bus Services Task and Finish Group:

1. The committee formally approved the Terms of Reference for the Task and Finish Group, noting that these had been available to Members for some time and no amendments had been proposed.

2. Members were advised that the Task and Finish Group had held two review meetings to date, supported by lines of enquiry style sessions and officer engagement. While officer support had been positive, access to consistent data had been limited, highlighting a key issue in itself. Further detailed information, particularly in relation to subsidised routes and subsidy criteria, was expected at the next review meeting.
3. The committee noted that the council's current role in bus provision was limited to convening the Enhanced Partnership, managing infrastructure, and identifying and funding socially necessary routes. Accountability within the Enhanced Partnership was described as weak, particularly in relation to commercial operators. However, new bus services legislation would potentially expand local authority powers, including the potential for franchising.
4. Members were advised that delivery of bus service improvements was constrained by operator capacity, with all operators facing driver shortages and limited technical capability. Approximately two-thirds of local routes were subsidised, and there continued to be significant overspend on home-to-school transport, driven by increased demand for specialist provision and reliance on taxis.
5. The committee welcomed the confirmation of three-year Bus Service Improvement Plan revenue funding, providing greater financial stability and scope for longer-term planning, while noting a reduction in capital funding.
6. A lack of reliable and consistent data was identified as a critical weakness, limiting effective service planning, performance management, and the ability to demonstrate value for money in funding bids. New data tools were being introduced to help identify travel demand and network gaps, but members agreed that improving data collection should be a priority.
7. The committee noted that integrated ticketing and improved passenger information remained key public priorities. Officers were progressing a "Making Buses Easier" initiative, focusing on reliability, accessibility, digital integration, and real-time information, alongside investment in upgraded bus shelters across the county.
8. Members discussed opportunities arising from devolution, the proposed Hereford Transport Hub, improved bus-rail integration, and cross-border working through the Marches Forward Partnership.
9. The committee was advised of a forthcoming Bus Summit involving operators, users, community transport providers, and officers, at which emerging issues and potential solutions would be discussed.
10. Members raised concerns about the long-term viability of the current bus delivery model, recent operator failures, and the impact on rural communities and school transport.
11. The committee encouraged the task and finish group to consider alternative delivery models, including potential pilot schemes, alongside community and demand-responsive transport options. Members also noted the importance of developing a more strategic, long-term vision for bus provision.
12. The committee indicated flexibility regarding the reporting timetable and confirmed its support for the task and finish group to widen the scope of its

review where necessary to address the fundamental sustainability and deliverability of bus services.

149. WORK PROGRAMME

1. Members raised concerns about the robustness of the Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) supporting the Local Transport Plan (LTP), following debate at Full Council. Officers had advised that the LTP decision could not be revisited, but members agreed scrutiny should focus on delivery and implementation, with clear milestones and a defined timetable.
2. The committee emphasised the need for a more ambitious approach to rail strategy, including improved connectivity and potential line reinstatements. Despite the strategy not yet being in draft form, members felt early scrutiny could help shape development.
3. Members supported allowing more time for the bus service task and finish study group to fully examine different transport delivery models, including rural services, school transport, and cross-boundary working.
4. Flooding was recognised as a significant, ongoing issue. Members agreed scrutiny was needed across prevention, response, and recovery, but timing should avoid short-term reactive focus.
5. Capacity constraints were noted, (particularly with elections approaching). Members agreed on shared responsibility for work programme development and the use of informal meetings to support planning.

Agreed Action Points:

- Add SEA delivery scrutiny (LTP) to the June meeting.
- Move the transport task and finish study group final report to September.
- Include rail strategy scrutiny as a substantive item in September.
- Discuss establish a flooding task and finish study group, commencing June.
- Officers to provide LTP delivery milestones to support effective scrutiny.
- Arrange an informal work programme planning meeting in the New Year to plan items beyond September.
- Members to submit suggested scrutiny topics to officers for future consideration.

150. DATE OF THE NEXT MEETING

Monday 2 March 2026, 10am

151. APPENDIX 1 - SUPPLEMENTARY QUESTION FROM MEMBER OF THE PUBLIC

Supplementary question from member of the public – Environment and Sustainability Scrutiny Committee, 16 December 2025

Question Number	Questioner	Question delivered verbally by Mrs Morawiecka during the meeting:	Question to
SPQ	Mrs E Morawiecka Herefordshire	Please forgive my confusion around scrutiny responsibilities. On the basis of the answer received, this committee will not need to scrutinise the forthcoming Local Cycling, Walking and Wheeling Infrastructure Plan (LCWWIP) as the Connected Communities Scrutiny Committee undertook this in September 2025. The papers and recommendations are here	Environment and Sustainability Scrutiny Committee

		<p>https://councillors.herefordshire.gov.uk/mqAi.aspx?ID=70755</p> <p>However, despite a public consultation on the Strategic Environment Assessment (SEA) at the same time as the Local Transport Plan (LTP) consultation, at the full Council meeting in December 2025 the LTP was accompanied by a SEA – Non Technical Summary dated April 2025. Given the absence of an up to date SEA to support the LTP, is the committee confident that the plan is compliant with the applicable statutory regulations for Local Transport Plans, and despite the errors, requires no further scrutiny?</p>	
<p>Response as delivered verbally by the ESSC Chair during the meeting:</p> <p>Thank you for your supplementary question Mrs Morawiecka. As regards the Local Cycling, Walking and Wheeling Infrastructure Plan (LCWWIP) the committee has, for some time, had it in the work program to look at the plan against an earlier scrutiny that it did on active travel.</p> <p>There were four recommendations to the executive from the active travel scrutiny that was done in November 2024. The executive response to the four of those recommendations was that our recommendations from that earlier scrutiny would be covered by the LCWWIP. So, while we will not be looking at the plan itself, we will be looking at how the plan addresses those earlier active travel recommendations and that hopefully will happen in March 2026.</p> <p>As for the Strategic Environment Assessment (SEA), I've already got it in mind today to bring that forward under a work program item later on, to see if the committee wants to prioritize it as an item for scrutiny. I do accept that there was a lot of concern at Full Council on the 5 December around the SEA as regards the overarching Local Transport Plan, and the committee can consider whether it wants to prioritize that as a scrutiny item for the work program going forward.</p>			

The meeting ended at 12:50

Chairperson