

SERVICES, CLIMATE AND COMMUNITIES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

7 October 2025

5.30 - 8.15 pm

Present: Councillors Young (Chair), Gardiner-Smith (Vice-Chair), Glasberg, Griffin, Hauk, Payne, Pounds and Swift

Also present: Cabinet Member for Communities, Councillor Anna Smith
Cabinet Member for Nature, Open Space and City Services, Councillor Smart

Officers:

Communities Director: Sam Scharf

Director of Economy & Place: Lynne Miles

Deputy Director of Planning: Heather Jones

Assistant Director Public Realm & Environment: Alistair Wilson

Strategic Enabling Communities Lead: Vicky Haywood

Interim Committee Manager: Matthew Stickley

Democratic Services Officer: Sarah Michael

FOR THE INFORMATION OF THE COUNCIL

25/9/SC&C Apologies

Apologies were received from Councillor Divkovic.

25/10/SC&C Declarations of Interest

No declarations were made.

25/11/SC&C Minutes

It was noted that Councillor Porrer should be recorded as having attended the previous meeting, as their attendance had been omitted from the minutes.

The minutes of the meeting held on 1 July 2025 were then confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

25/12/SC&C Public Questions

There were no public questions.

25/13/SC&C Local Communities and Democratic Engagement

The Director of Communities presented a report on the delivery of an updated model of local engagement and democratic involvement. The report outlined the emerging model for engagement and democratic involvement following the stopping of Area Committees and following learning developed from several engagement pilots that had taken place throughout 2024-25.

Members were asked to discuss and provide recommendations in response to the proposed approaches in:

- i. Adopting a new approach to local engagement and democratic involvement; facilitating active participation in decision making at a neighbourhood level as well as a focus on key non-geographical communities.
- ii. Prototype participatory budgeting mechanisms where localised budgets and small funding is available at a neighbourhood level.

The Cabinet Member for Communities said the following:

- i. The paper presented was not a definitive set of proposals for submission to the next Cabinet meeting. Instead, it comprised a series of stimulus questions and ideas intended to initiate discussion.
- ii. Expressed the importance of collaboration not just with this scrutiny committee but across the Council to ensure that any future proposals were appropriate for all, the Council, the city and residents.
- iii. The purpose of presenting the paper to the Scrutiny Committee was to seek early feedback on whether the approach appeared to be on the right track and to invite additional suggestions that could inform the development of proposals.

In response to questions, the Director of Communities, Director of Economy and Place, Deputy Director of Planning and Strategic Enabling Communities Lead said:

- i. Noted the following points raised:
 - Clarity on structures, responsibilities, and trigger points for community engagement were required.
 - Visibility of how feedback and local insight translated into decisions and action.
 - Support and resources were required to make engagement realistic, consistent and sustainable.
 - Important that the framework connected democratic participation, Officer practice, and neighbourhood working, into a single, intelligible system.

- Some Councillors had considered Area Committees as a valuable tool as this allowed a cross-party forum for all ward councillors to meet and discuss issues. These provided opportunities to engage directly with external partners such as the police. The meetings also provided useful coordination between city and county representatives.
- ii. The report covered four areas which Officers would be working on: Cambridge Conversations, Shaping Neighbourhoods, Seldom Heard Communities and Member and Resident Engagement; these threads would be used throughout the process.
- iii. Members did have ongoing community engagement through casework and surgeries.
- iv. There were also established channels for residents to ask questions, such as Full Council or any other public council meetings with other ways to influence decision-making such as the Council's petition scheme.
- v. The following practical outcomes from the Shaping Abbey project had taken place:
 - GP Surgery Transition: Coordinated communication between health services and the Council during GP changes, reducing confusion for residents.
 - Community Centre: New centre developed in partnership with Abbey People following sustained engagement.
 - Youth Cabin: Joint project with health services and local schools; new youth facility opening near Abbey Pool on 15 October, designed by local young people.
- iv. Highlighted the following lessons learnt from Shaping Abbey:
 - The need to improve internal coordination across Council departments to address community concerns holistically.
 - Need for better communication flows between Officers and members.
 - Would suggest a shift away from formal meetings to more informal, accessible formats such as community events or lunches, as example.
 - Officers to continue to attend spaces where residents already gathered, ensuring conversations were meaningful and linked to tangible outcomes.
- v. Future initiatives such as Cambridge Conversations would be member-led, with Officers available to support facilitation and coordinate involvement from other public services (e.g., health, police) as required.

- vi. Focus was on improving the process for delivering Section 106 projects, rather than the technical negotiation handled by the Planning Service. Key priorities include:
 - Timely and effective member engagement.
 - Correctly prioritising and delivering projects.
 - Maintaining clear, accurate records and improving data efficiency.
- vii. S106 funding was intended to mitigate impacts of development (e.g., additional strain on roads, schools, health, and leisure services). While technical assessments determined mitigation needs, there was scope for judgment and community input, particularly on priorities like leisure facilities.
- viii. Currently in the process of reviewing the S106 process which would be brought back to Members when concluded.
- ix. The Section 106 Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) was currently out for consultation, and all stakeholders were encouraged to provide comments.
- x. The SPD addressed technical aspects of development mitigation.
- xi. The Greater Cambridge Shared Planning Services had invested in a new IT system to improve transparency, allowing residents to search for Section 106 allocations and spending.
- xii. Data migration was underway; the system was not yet fully operational but had been demonstrated to Residents' Associations.
- xiii. Discussions were ongoing regarding the potential impact of Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) on community engagement processes.

The Committee discussed:

- i. The new restructuring of City Council Teams working with residents on such matters as resettlement and community equity, health and neighbourhood working, young people, voluntary and community sector.
- ii. Whether the proposals are sufficiently ambitious.
- iii. As Area Committees were no longer part of the Council's constitution, stressed the need for clear expectations for engagement and defined trigger points for initiating processes.
- iv. The current focus appeared to be on listening and engagement rather than participatory decision-making.
- v. Emphasised the importance of maintaining smaller, informal opportunities for residents to share views, as many are reluctant to engage in formal settings.
- vi. Suggested exploring:
 - Citizens' assemblies for major decisions.
 - Greater citizen involvement in grant-making beyond current EIPs.

- Citizens' panels, referencing recent government announcements on neighbourhood panels and community-led funding decisions.
- xiv. Advised that Community meetings should have a focused agenda on specific community issues rather than an open-ended agenda for general discussion. This could help to ensure clarity, relevance, and more productive engagement with residents.
- xv. What topics would be of interest to the public and the various experience with public engagement such as a S106 funding and public art planning.
- xvi. Important to consider the physical location of where the community engagement would take place.

The Scrutiny Committee recommend the following:

- i. Adapt the paper into a framework organised around five pillars: structure and roles; members as community champion; community participation and decision-making; formal democratic processes and accountability; and tools, data and resources.
- ii. Map enabling structures and relationships between teams, Members, and partners.
- iii. Develop clear trigger point guidance defining when and how local conversations are initiated.
- iv. Draft a Member support and induction module aligned with the framework.
- v. Pilot a neighbourhood forum model in one or two areas to test inclusive methods and data sharing.
- vi. Create a visibility tool for S106 and community funds.
- vii. Set out performance and feedback measures to assess engagement effectiveness and inclusivity.

25/14/SC&C Herbicide Free Weed Management Work Programme

The Assistant Director Public Realm and Environment introduced the report which provided an update on the City Council's transition to herbicide-free weed management across all wards. It summarised progress to date, outlined challenges encountered, and highlighted next steps for delivering a sustainable, city-wide approach.

Cabinet Member for Nature, Open Space and City Services said the following:

- i. The Council had initiated a citywide herbicide-free approach, which they strongly supported and intended to continue under future authorities.
- ii. Cambridge remained among the leading Local Authorities in adopting this policy, with around fifty other UK authorities also herbicide-free.
- iii. Commitment expressed to ensure the policy was fully implemented and sustained.

- iv. Objective was to remove significant weeds from pavements and public spaces without chemical herbicides, using manual and mechanical methods.
- v. Recognised there were differing resident views, with some who preferred completely weed-free streets, while others valued the natural growth on verges and alleys.
- vi. Current year had seen high weed growth, increasing challenges since herbicide use had ceased.
- vii. The plan was to clear all major weeds by March 2026, after which maintenance would be easier.

The Assistant Director Public Realm and Environment said the following:

- i. It was easier to remove the weeds in wards with wider streets that had ample parking.
- viii. Upcoming work in Romsey, Petersfield, and Newnham would require changes in approach due to narrower streets and limited access.
- ix. Planned measures include:
 - Advanced warning signs requesting residents did not park on designated streets prior to work.
 - Returning to areas later if vehicles obstructed initial operations.
- x. As work progressed across the city, the team were continuously learning and adapting methods.
- xi. Currently worked to four-day scheduled programme for planned work, with flexibility and time to address urgent issues on Fridays, as an example
- xii. Had incorporated adaptable scheduling, during school holidays would work to clear school frontages and routes when children are absent.
- xiii. Initial deep cleans were time-consuming, but once completed, subsequent visits were significantly faster.
- xiv. Believed that after initial clearance, each ward could be visited up to three times per year, improving frequency and responsiveness.
- xv. Clarified that the herbicide-free policy applied to streets, communal spaces, and the wider public realm.
- xvi. Noted specific challenges in Trumpington, particularly on new growth sites with permeable paving, which created conditions for weed growth and required targeted treatment. It was important to manage expectations.
- xvii. If residents could be encouraged to report issues via the Council website this would enable the team to adjust schedules and dedicate time (one day per week) for targeted work to address ward-specific concerns.
- xviii. The current equipment was performing well. It had been selected following a thorough evaluation and was considered the best in the industry.
- xix. The process involved one machine for weed removal followed by another for clearing debris, ensuring efficiency.

- xx. There were plans to purchase a second machine to speed up operations; the cost was low in comparison to larger sweepers.
- xxi. Coordination needed with County Council on gutter clearance schedules, which currently did not align.
- xxii. Leaf fall management was a separate regime; a second sweeper was on hire to address autumn leaf fall to prevent gutter blockages.
- xxiii. No Temporary Traffic Regulation Orders (TTROs) had been used; instead, there was a reliance on residents' cooperation to move vehicles for short periods (15–20 minutes).
- xxiv. The Communications Plan would be refreshed, including enhanced social media engagement, and continued collaboration with Pesticide-Free Cambridge and On the Verge, who were instrumental in initiating the scheme.
- xxv. The City Council's approach had gained national attention, with Officers invited to speak at conferences.
- xxvi. Certain species (e.g., Buddleia, sycamore) grew quickly and required targeted intervention. Certain areas had been identified as significant growth areas, such as Elizabeth Way which required more attention.
- xxvii. Weed removal schedule was flexible, allowing adjustments for problem areas like Castle ward, despite its position at the end of the current clockwise program.
- xxviii. Street cleaning continued alongside the herbicide-free program, including litter collection, street walks, bin maintenance, and school routes.
- xxix. Noted that communication with Members should be improved to ensure they have the necessary information when engaging with residents
- xxx. Previously herbicide applications were up to four times a year, usually in May, second in July, September and if required October. This was a laborious task because every street and every corner had to be sprayed four times a year, early mornings, late evenings and on overtime.
- xxxi. The Budget for new equipment had been approved in February, with purchasing finalised in March. There was a significant lead time required for procurement, team recruitment, and training. There was also the completion of the risk assessments and method statements and training for safe operations on the highways. These preparatory tasks slowed initial mobilisation, but all requirements were now complete, enabling the program to progress more quickly going forward.
- xxxii. Covered areas of the city owned by Cambridge City Council.

The Chair outlined the main points of discussion:

- i. Emphasised the need to align operations with the growth season for maximum effectiveness.
- ii. Highlighted the importance of improved communication, including:

- Publishing an overview program and timeline so residents knew when weeding would occur (e.g., approximately three months in advance).
- Continued effective street-level notifications for vehicle movement.
- iii. Requested a clear plan of action and forward-looking strategy to reassure residents that current challenges are temporary, and future maintenance would be more efficient.
- iv. Encouraged the Council to work with other parties to discourage herbicide use.

RESOLVED:

- i. To note the progress of the herbicide-free work programme.
- ii. Endorsed the continued city-wide roll-out and engagement with communities.
- iii. Supported a review of bin and street cleansing routing to align with weed removal operations.
- iv. Agreed that Cabinet should receive a further update in March 2026 with a full evaluation of costs, outcomes, and recommendations for any required future funding.
- v. To note that perceptions of weeds could be expected to change. Over time, there would be increased knowledge of the issues involved. The herbicide-free approach would guide expectations as the plan develops. Some residents could become more involved in the management of their own streets, as in the Happy Bee Streets Scheme. This approach, working in partnership with communities, should be valued and encouraged. The Council had declared climate and biodiversity emergencies, and this work was in response to that

25/15/SC&C Work Programme

- i. Suggested that the performance of the Regen recycling contract be reported to the committee.
 - Noted that the contract had been previously scrutinised under the old system and was now a five-year agreement with an external provider, limiting scope for changes. A performance report on how the contract was operating would be useful.
 - Raised concern following a Freedom of Information response indicating the contract may not yet be signed; Officers to clarify and circulate the facts to Members.

- ii. Potential reorganisation of bin collection routes anticipated early next year.

The meeting ended at 8.15 pm

CHAIR

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