

OFFICER DECISION RECORD

Lead Officer: Kirsty Paul, Planning Policy Manager	Service: Planning Policy
CMT Officer: Carol Pilson, Corporate Director and Monitoring Officer	Delegated Power Being Exercised: Part 3 Responsibilities for Functions, Table 5, Para 8 – to approve any action within their functional area up to the value of £250,000
Subject of Decision: Contract extension for ecology support services - planning	

Decision Taken:

To extend our existing contract for ecology support services for a further 12 months.

Reason for the Decision:

G2V Group is a specialist recruitment agency that successfully sourced a Principal Ecologist for the Council earlier in 2025, following an unsuccessful recruitment exercise via Comensura. Since January 2025, the appointed consultant has provided high-quality ecological advice, supporting a wide range of statutory and strategic planning functions.

The role includes providing specialist input on Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) requirements, reviewing planning applications for potential ecological impacts, and supporting the Council's engagement with Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects (NSIPs), including the proposed Fens Reservoir. This work is essential to the Council's ability to meet its statutory ecological duties, including:

- Compliance with the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017, through the identification and assessment of impacts on protected species and designated sites.
- Delivery of Biodiversity Net Gain, a legal requirement from November 2023 under the Environment Act 2021.
- Fulfilment of duties under the Natural Environment and Rural Communities (NERC) Act 2006, particularly the requirement to conserve biodiversity.
- Undertaking Habitats Regulations Assessments (HRAs) and Ecological Impact Assessments (EclAs) as part of the planning process.
- Supporting Appropriate Assessment processes where development proposals may affect internationally designated sites.

The temporary ecology post was established to maintain capacity while the Council explored the potential for a permanent role, potentially funded in part through planning fees associated with NSIPs. However, ongoing uncertainty arising from local government restructuring, together with delays in finalising Planning Performance Agreements (PPAs), has meant that it has not been possible to fully assess the feasibility or funding model for a permanent post at this time.

The consultant has developed effective working relationships with internal services and external partners, attended technical briefings, and reviewed specialist evidence that informs the Council's responses to major infrastructure proposals. Continuity of this specialist input is critical to ensure that the Council can respond to evolving proposals with appropriate pace, technical robustness, and confidence.

Over the coming year, the Council will be required to respond to a number of statutory and non-

statutory Development Consent Order (DCO) consultations. In parallel, the Council is actively participating in ecology-focused technical working groups relating to habitat management, site master planning, and mitigation design. Ongoing ecological input is also required to support development management casework and emerging planning policy documents, including the Local Plan.

Without continued access to specialist ecological expertise, there is a risk that the Council will be unable to engage effectively in these processes. This could lead to adverse ecological outcomes, reduced environmental protection, and diminished quality and resilience of new development.

While there is a recognised need for longer-term continuity, particularly for multi-year projects such as the Fens Reservoir, any longer-term arrangement would be subject to a competitive procurement process. This decision therefore relates to a medium-term contract extension to ensure service continuity while long-term delivery options are assessed.

Alternative Options Considered (if appropriate):

Option 1: No Further Specialist Ecology Support

Under this option, the Council would not extend the current contract and would operate without dedicated specialist ecological support.

This option is not considered appropriate. The Council has ongoing statutory responsibilities in relation to biodiversity, protected species, and designated sites, alongside a growing workload linked to development management, plan-making, Biodiversity Net Gain implementation, and Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects. Without specialist ecology input, there is a significant risk that the Council would be unable to respond adequately or within required timescales to planning applications, statutory consultations, and Development Consent Order processes. This could result in non-compliance with legislative duties, increased legal risk, delays to decision-making, and potential adverse environmental outcomes. The absence of specialist advice would also place unsustainable pressure on existing staff who do not hold the required technical expertise.

Option 2: Procure Ecology Support from an Alternative Provider

This option would involve sourcing ecology support from a different consultancy or provider through a new procurement exercise.

This option is not considered appropriate at this time. The current provider has an established understanding of the Council's policy context, local environmental constraints, and major infrastructure proposals, including ongoing NSIP-related work. Transitioning to a new provider would result in a loss of continuity, require additional time for familiarisation, and risk delays during a period of high consultation activity and time-sensitive statutory responses. In addition, a procurement exercise would introduce further delay and resource demands at a time when the requirement is for immediate and consistent specialist support. Given that the proposed contract extension is short-term and intended to maintain continuity while medium-term service delivery options are assessed, a change of provider would not offer a proportionate or efficient solution.

Background/Reports/Information considered and attached:

Procurement paperwork available on request.

Legal and Procurement Implications

The Council has a range of statutory duties in relation to ecology, biodiversity, and environmental protection, including obligations under the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017, the Environment Act 2021 (including mandatory Biodiversity Net Gain), and the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006. The Council is also required to undertake or

support Habitats Regulations Assessments and Appropriate Assessments where development proposals may affect protected habitats or species.

Continued access to suitably qualified specialist ecological advice is necessary to ensure that planning decisions, consultation responses, and engagement with Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects are legally robust, evidence-based, and compliant with relevant legislation. Failure to secure appropriate ecological input could expose the Council to an increased risk of legal challenge, including judicial review, planning appeals, or failure to discharge statutory duties, particularly where decisions are taken without adequate technical evidence.

The proposed contract extension is short-term and intended to maintain continuity of service while longer-term options are assessed. Any longer-term arrangement would be subject to the Council's Contract Procedure Rules and, where applicable, the Public Contracts Regulations 2015, including a competitive procurement process. The proposed extension is therefore considered lawful and proportionate in the circumstances, provided it remains within relevant financial thresholds and delegation limits.

Financial Implications

The proposed contract extension will be funded from existing, identified funding sources and does not require additional unbudgeted expenditure. Costs will be met through a combination of planning fees associated with Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects and planning applications, earmarked funding to support the implementation of Biodiversity Net Gain, and the Plan Making Grant received in March 2025 to support ecological input into Local Plan preparation. The short-term nature of the extension provides cost certainty while enabling the Council to maintain essential specialist capacity during a period of high workload and statutory consultation activity. This approach avoids the financial and operational risks associated with gaps in service provision, including potential delays to planning decisions, increased appeal or legal challenge costs, and inefficiencies arising from the need to re-procure services at short notice.

Any longer-term arrangement for ecological support would be subject to a separate business case and, where required, a competitive procurement process, ensuring compliance with the Council's financial regulations and value-for-money obligations.

Officer's Signature:	Date:
Kirsty Paul, Planning Policy Manager	16 December 2025

Please forward to Democratic Services upon completion

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Date copy passed to Democratic Services 16/12/25	Implementation Date: 16/12/25 (if not called-in) (Allow 5 clear working days after publication of decision)

Circulation: Democratic Services, Portfolio Holder, Officer and Accountancy.