

# **DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL**

## **ENVIRONMENT AND SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

At a meeting of the **Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee** held in **Committee Room 2, County Hall, Durham** on **Monday 25 March 2024** at **9.30 am**

**Present:**

**Councillor B Coult (in the Chair)**

**Members of the Committee:**

Councillors J Elmer (Vice Chair), E Adam, C Lines, I McLean, J Purvis, K Rooney, A Simpson, T Stubbs and D Sutton-Lloyd

**Co-opted Members:**

Mr P Walton

**Also Present:**

Councillor M Wilkes, Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Neighbourhoods and Climate Change

### **1 Apologies**

Apologies were noted from Councillors P Atkinson, L Brown, D Nicholls and S Townsend.

### **2 Substitute Members**

Councillor K Rooney attended as substitute for Councillor L Brown.

### **3 Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting held on 19 January 2024 and the Special meeting held on 23 February 2024 were confirmed as correct records and signed by the Chair.

### **4 Declarations of Interest**

No declarations of interest were made.

### **5 Any items from Co-opted Members or Interested parties**

No items were reported from Co-opted Members or interested parties.

## 6 Durham City Green Corridor

The Committee considered a report of the Corporate Director of Neighbourhoods and Climate Change which provided background information in advance of a presentation on the Durham City Green Corridor (for copy of report and presentation see file of minutes).

The Committee welcomed the Green Corridor Project Manager National Trust, Laura McIntyre-Brown and Durham County Council's Strategic Manager for Culture, Sarah Glynn, to the meeting to deliver the presentation.

The Project Manager introduced the presentation by informing the Committee that the Durham City Green Corridor (DCGC) is a partnership project between Durham County Council and the National Trust. The green corridor covers the northeastern fringe of Durham city along a 6.5mile corridor of the river Wear which connects the city of Durham and Crook Hall Gardens with 1,000 hectares of green and blue space. The aim of the project is to work with the public and nature to provide an accessible resource whilst enhancing the natural environment, with Crook Hall Gardens which is a National Trust property, serving as a hub between the urban and natural settings.

The Committee noted recent research estimates that one third of people in England have no access to green and blue space within 15 minutes of their home and, since the Covid-19 pandemic, people in the UK have been spending less time outdoors. The three-year DCGC project was launched to explore and develop the green space in Durham city and to support the National Trust's Urban Places programme. The Project Manager outlined the vision of the project is to recognise the bond between nature, culture and heritage in Durham city and enable people to connect with nature. The project has three broad objectives, to improve physical connectivity to and within the DCGC; to develop actions with landowners and communities for greater biodiversity and climate action and to identify and deliver ways to connect people to nature and culture across Durham city and the green corridor.

The Project Manager highlighted that the project aims to support a number of the Council's strategic plans such as the Climate and Ecological Emergency Response Plans and the Local Nature Recovery Strategy and the project will also contribute to the Council's strategic priorities to improve health and wellbeing and promote active travel. The partnership element of the project will draw on skills and resources from the Council, the National Trust and partner agencies. Challenges for the project include lack of clarity with regard to rights of way and connectivity of routes, however, opportunities will be far reaching in terms of engaging with and delivering for the community.

The Project Manager concluded the presentation by describing the development of key priority areas. Health and wellbeing will be an area of focus through enhancing the walking and cycling offer and engagement with Public Health.

The project will also focus on work to improve accessibility through better connectivity and clarity of routes. The Committee noted the Festival of Blossom will be held in May to promote nature and wellbeing in the city. Funding strategies will continue to be developed for nature-based engagement projects relating to the DCGC.

The Project Manager was thanked for the presentation and questions and comments were invited.

Councillor Sutton-Lloyd commented on recent improvements to connectivity and access in his ward and he asked for further information on the future plans for progressing the DCGC project, particularly in relation to education. The Project Manager commented that connecting green spaces is at the very core of the work and the work this year will include community and landowner engagement. Plans will have an education lens and will incorporate learning from established National Trust programmes.

Councillor Adam asked whether the project links with Durham County Council's Ecology team in relation to the Local Nature Recovery Strategy and how the work will feed into the Climate Emergency Response Plan. The Project Manager confirmed the work will align with the Local Nature Recovery Strategy and the wider climate emergency actions and that a good working relationship exists with the Ecology team.

In response to a question from Councillor Adam with regard to future funding of the project, the Strategic Manager for Culture explained that the Council had committed £25,000 per year to support the Project Manager role which has been matched by the National Trust and therefore the project has £50,000 funding allocated for the first three years. In addition, £50,000 had been secured from the National Trust for access improvements and £10,000 Postcode Lottery funding had been awarded for the Festival of Blossom in May. However, further funding will be required and a funding strategy is being developed to support the longer-term approach.

Co-opted Member, Mr Walton, asked whether the programme was design only at this stage and whether opportunities would be identified for funding to be matched, as the plans develop. The Project Manager clarified that the three year scoping period will consider the design of the whole area. The work will include engagement with the Council's directorates and landowners to establish strong partnerships and identify opportunities.

In response to a further question from Mr Walton who asked how the work on both sides of the river will be inter-connected, the Project Manager explained that the unique nature of the area which comprises of various different features as well as nature and heritage hotspots, has the potential to appeal to a large audience and the aim is to connect these spaces for the benefit of the community and nature.

Councillor Lines referred to the reference in the presentation that people in the UK are making fewer outdoor recreation visits than in 2020 due to poor health and busy schedules and he highlighted that in 2020 there was a spike in outdoor activity due to the Covid-19 pandemic. He added that the general trend sees an increasing number of people who are interested in outdoor activities. However, increased participation can come with problems such as littering and irresponsible behaviour, therefore, there is work to be done to educate the public to ensure the landscape is protected and preserved. Councillor Lines suggested that links could be made with organisations such as the Ordnance Survey's 'GetOutside' campaign and the 'It's Great Out There' coalition. Councillor Lines also commented that recent high profile legal cases in which landowners have attempted to restrict public access may negatively affect public perceptions of access to the countryside. The Project Manager stressed that the creation of a connected and accessible green space is at the core of the project and she thanked Councillor Lines for the suggestions which would be considered.

Councillor Elmer was pleased that the National Trust had purchased Crook Hall, ensuring public accessibility in the future. He acknowledged that Durham city is under pressure from developers and he asked whether the area designated for the DCGC attracts additional planning protections. The Project Manager responded that a large part of the area has greenbelt designation and some parts have additional designations, however there would be no additional protection for the DCGC. The Project Manager explained that the project seeks to identify the drivers for landowners and foster a mutual understanding of the impact of a green corridor.

The Committee noted that the project is part of a wider ambition to create 20 green corridors nationwide and the learning from the project will be used to inform work in other green urban spaces throughout the country in the future.

### **Resolved:**

Members received and noted the content of the report and presentation and commented accordingly.

## **7 Climate Emergency Response Plan 2 2022/23 Update**

The Committee considered a report of the Corporate Director of Neighbourhoods and Climate Change which provided an update on progress of the Climate Emergency Response Plan (CERP2) in advance of a presentation by the Net Zero Manager (for copy of report and presentation see file of minutes).

Stephen McDonald, Net Zero Manager, introduced the presentation by updating the Committee on the current position with regard to Durham County Council's carbon emissions which showed a reduction of 61% on the 2008/09 levels. Countywide carbon emissions had reduced by 54% from the 1990 baseline and the aim was to have a net zero Council by 2030 and a net zero County Durham by 2045.

With respect to Council emissions, the Net Zero Manager referred to the graph which showed no significant percentage change in relation to emissions from heat and transport since 2009. Electricity emissions had reduced significantly, partly due to the decarbonisation of the electricity grid. The Council's carbon emissions during 2022/23 were approximately 41,773 tonnes of carbon dioxide, which was a 4% reduction from the previous year which represented a 61% reduction from the 2008/09 levels. The scale of the task was illustrated by the Net Zero Manager who explained that the overall target is to reduce the Council's carbon emissions by 80% from the 2008/09 levels, by 2030. The Net Zero Manager then outlined some of the Council's building decarbonisation projects which were either complete or underway, including the low carbon depot at Morrison Busty and air source heat pump implementation at various leisure centres throughout the county.

In respect of countywide carbon emissions, the Committee noted a 54% reduction from the 1990 baseline, which equated to a 2% increase in carbon than 2020 levels which could be attributed to the increased transport, domestic and commercial emissions associated with the Covid-19 pandemic recovery. Details were provided on the development of schemes with countywide benefit including housing retrofit schemes, community resilience projects, the additional funding for further electric vehicle charging points and the Business Energy Efficiency Project (BEEP).

The Net Zero Manager explained that in addition to these ongoing projects, the Low Carbon team is working on the next iteration of the Climate Emergency Response Plan which will focus on the period 2024-2027. The Committee noted that discussions are being held with colleagues within the seven councils that cover the new North East Combined Authority on cross-cutting themes, which will be influenced by the devolution deal, including climate change.

Looking forward to projects in the future, the Net Zero Manager outlined these included solar car ports, additional PV generation and the Council's first wind application project. He added that whilst significant challenges lie ahead, the Low Carbon team is well positioned and will continue to use the funding available to maximum effect.

The Chair thanked the officers for the presentation and invited questions from the Committee.

Councillor Adam thanked the team for the amount of work undertaken. He questioned whether the targets to reduce the Council's carbon emissions by a further 10% in the next year and to achieve an 80% reduction on the 2008/09 levels by 2030, were achievable. The Net Zero Manager acknowledged the mere 4% reduction in the level last year, however, he pointed out that the emission reductions from recent heat projects were not fully reflected in the annual data at this stage.

The Net Zero Manager recognised that there is more work to be done, particularly in relation to emissions from transport and he explained the Council is replacing smaller diesel and petrol vehicles with electric alternatives however larger vehicles remain expensive to replace with electrical alternatives, at present.

Councillor Adam referred to paragraph 57 of the report which stated eight out of nine towns have now completed Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plans and he asked whether data was available as to how many cars had been removed from the road as a result of the schemes. The Net Zero Manager responded that he would request the figures, for circulation to the Committee, following the meeting.

Councillor Stubbs pointed out that NETPark was identified in the presentation as the third worst performer in relation to the Council's carbon emissions and he asked what action was being taken to address this, in light of the expansion of NETPark. The Net Zero Manager clarified that NETPark Phase 3 will be off-gas. Councillor Lines commented on the importance of the Council leading by example in terms of clean energy and green manufacturing at NETPark. Councillor Wilkes, Portfolio Holder for Neighbourhoods and Climate Change, highlighted that NETPark Phase 3 will not be connected to the gas network and it will be a low carbon design in order to reduce the environmental impact.

Councillor Sutton-Lloyd asked whether further information was available in respect of the developments of geothermal energy systems. The Net Zero Manager responded that further information on geothermal energy would be provided during the report and presentation on opportunities for minewater heat, which was to follow.

Councillor McLean commended the good work of the Low Carbon team. He raised concern at the damage caused to the environment resulting from importing vehicle parts from overseas and he suggested that more could be done to encourage the Council to purchase vehicles and parts produced in the UK. The Net Zero Manager highlighted that the Council's Social Value in Procurement policy aims to reduce impact on the environment. He added that, at present, the purchase of electric vehicles can be hampered by long lead-in times.

Councillor Wilkes thanked the Low Carbon team for their work and he added that he was pleased to see the appointment of a tier 4 manager to the team. He highlighted that the recent Climate Change Action Scorecard placed Durham County Council as the highest-rated council in the LA7. Councillor Wilkes also stated that the team had used funding to good effect and he had made representations to Lord Callanan that consideration should be given to a review of the current bidding process.

Councillor Elmer echoed the comments regarding the good work. He commented that more progress is required with respect to waste management and incineration, as the carbon from burning household residual waste is not currently included in the data.

The Net Zero Manager replied that the Greenhouse Gas Protocol excludes the combustion element of waste incineration. He added that carbon capture remains an ambition for the Tees Valley Energy Recovery Facility and it is likely that future funding rounds will occur.

Councillor Elmer raised concern that the Council continues to invest in aviation and that there has been no significant progress in relation to tackling car ownership as a culture. The Net Zero Manager referred to the North East devolution deal which will provide more decision making power and funding for transport. He added that the Low Carbon team works alongside Transport colleagues and discussions are taking place with regard to future projects.

Councillor Wilkes stated that the Newcastle International Airport website provides information on their commitment to become a net zero emissions airport by 2035.

Councillor Elmer concluded by asking if there was progress on developing a metric to monitor the number of houses in private ownership which require improvements to insulation. In response, the Net Zero Manager stated that mapping is taking place and insulation projects had been carried out in the past, however, the projects require funding to encourage companies to invest. He stated that he would make enquiries with the Housing Solutions team with regard to the figures, for a response to be circulated to the Committee.

### **Resolved:**

The Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee:

- (a) Noted the significant progress made against delivering during year one of the Climate Emergency Response Plan 2.
- (b) Noted that whilst significant progress has been made, opportunities and challenges lie ahead, and guided by future CERPs, this will require resource consideration as part of the Medium-Term Financial Plan.

## **8 Opportunities for minewater heat in County Durham**

The Committee considered a report of the Corporate Director of Neighbourhoods and Climate Change which provided information on the opportunity with regard to taking heat from flooded, disused coal mines in County Durham, in advance of a presentation by the Net Zero Team Leader, Ellie Grimes and the Regeneration Projects Manager, Chris Myers (for copy of report and presentation see file of minutes).

The Committee noted that heat accounts for approximately half of the county's and Council's greenhouse gas emissions. The Net Zero Team Leader explained that heat networks are low carbon and source agnostic in that different sources can be used for example sewage, geothermal heat and industrial waste heat.

Advantages of heat networks were cited as price stability, energy security, the creation of skilled jobs and they bring the opportunity to address fuel poverty as heat networks can be up to 40% cheaper than air source heat pumps. Disadvantages include that heat networks have a high capital cost and there are associated risks.

The Committee noted that minewater heat networks are not appropriate for all areas and there may be more cost effective alternatives, for example where minewater is not already pumped to the surface for treatment.

The Net Zero Team Leader then explained how heat is recovered from minewater by pumping the water to the surface of a flooded mine at approximately 16 to 20 degrees Celsius and a heat exchanger recovers the heat which can then be distributed to homes. Members were encouraged to view the North East Local Enterprise Partnership's White Papers in relation to minewater and geothermal energy, for detailed information on the scale of the opportunities for the North East.

The Committee received information on various national and local enablers which are encouraging heat networks such as the government's Net Zero Strategy. The Heat Network Zoning Regulations are expected to be introduced in 2025 and the zoning will identify areas where heat networks are the lowest cost solution to decarbonising heat. The Coal Authority Business Plan aims to support at least five minewater heat networks by 2025-26. Examples of local enablers include the Climate Emergency Response Plan, the County Durham Plan and the development of the Heat Network Strategy.

Chris Myers, Regeneration Projects Manager, provided details of live minewater heat projects. At Seaham Garden Village the plan is for a development of homes and commercial units to access the district heat network powered by minewater from the Dawdon pumping station. Water is pumped to the surface at 19-20 degrees Celsius, which is advantageous in terms of bringing the heat up to domestic heat levels. The agreement with the company running the network is that the heat must be provided at less cost than the counterfactual cost of an air source heat pump and therefore there will be a commercial advantage to connecting to the network.

Members heard that feasibility and project development work is underway at the Horden project. Opportunities at Durham city include consideration of geothermal sources. A heat mapping study is underway with the Centre of Sustainable Energy to identify potential heat network zones in County Durham. The Net Zero Team Leader highlighted that sources require assessment and where a minewater scheme is of interest and minewater is not pumped to the surface, there would then be a need to drill in order to pump the water to the surface and the drilling process poses risks. The Committee noted the Coal Authority has a remit to treat minewater to remove heavy metals. The Regeneration Projects Manager informed the Committee that, at the Dawdon pumping station, the Coal Authority cleans heavy metals to create iron ochre which is used as a byproduct in anaerobic digestion.



The Chair thanked the officers for the presentation and invited questions from the Committee.

In response to a question from Mr Walton regarding how minewater heat networks are more cost effective than air source heat pumps, the Regeneration Projects Manager explained that, air source heat pumps are required to heat water from lower temperatures than minewater which is geothermally warmed to approximately 20 degrees Celsius.

Councillor McLean praised the excellent work done to progress the minewater heat project at Horden which contributed to securing funding for the project development works. He commented that he is hoping to see further investment for the next stage of the project.

Councillor Adam asked whether the Coal Authority has a mapping system which can identify mines where drilling is not required. The Net Zero Team Leader clarified that Coal Authority maps identify where minewater pumping stations are located in the county and the information is fed into the Heat Network Study. However mapping information can be outdated and does not always accurately reflect how mines were decommissioned.

Councillor Wilkes referred to the North East devolution deal which provides funding opportunities and the potential for private sector funding. The NetZero Team Leader highlighted grant support is available for the development of heat networks through the Heat Networks Delivery Unit; the Green Heat Network Fund, which provides capital grants for commercialisation and construction, and BHIVE which is designed to assist public sector schemes to attract private sector investment. The Project Manager referred to the requirement to provide a business case in order to access government funding and commented that government funding was imperative in enabling the scheme at Seaham Garden Village.

### **Resolved:**

The Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted the potential for heat networks across the County.

## **9 Quarter Three Forecast of Revenue and Capital Outturn 2023/24**

The Committee received a report of the Corporate Director of Resources which provided details of the forecast outturn budget for Neighbourhoods and Climate Change, highlighting major variances in comparison with the budget, based on the position to the end of quarter three 2023/24 (for copy of report see file of minutes).

Presenting the report, the Finance Manager for Neighbourhoods and Climate Change, Philip Curran, reported a forecast cash limit overspend of £97,000 against a revised budget of £123.766 million for Neighbourhoods and Climate Change, with Culture, Sport and Tourism forecasting an overspend of £0.328 million. The report included a comparison of the forecast outturn with the budget, by Head of Service and variance explanations were provided. The forecast cash limit reserve position for Neighbourhoods and Climate Change at 31 March 2024 was £22,000 after taking the latest outturn position into account.

The Committee noted the revised capital budget for Neighbourhoods and Climate Change stood at £56.603 million with expenditure to 31 December of £26.876 million. It was reported that key areas of spend during the period included strategic highways and low carbon schemes. Culture and Sport's revised capital budget was £24.706 million with expenditure of £18.312 million.

### **Resolved:**

That the report be noted.

## **10 Quarter Three 2023/24 Performance Management Report**

The Committee received a report of the Chief Executive which provided details of progress towards delivery of the key priorities within the County Plan 2023-27, in line with the Council's corporate performance framework. The report which was presented by Tom Gorman, Corporate Policy and Performance Manager, covered performance in and to the end of quarter three (October to December) 2023/24 (for copy of report see file of minutes).

Highlighting areas of performance, the Corporate Policy and Performance Manager referred to the 'Our Economy' theme and commented that the Lumiere 2023 festival had attracted an additional 36,000 visitors than the previous Lumiere festival which was held in 2021. Leisure Centre memberships increased during the quarter and the number of active library borrowers and digital borrowers performed better than the target.

Occupancy rates at cinema screenings and theatre performances were also better than target during quarter three however average yield at cinemas remained below target.

Moving on to the 'Our Environment' theme, the Corporate Policy and Performance Manager referred to the Council's plans in response to the government's ambitions set out in the Environmental Improvement Plan 2023. It was reported that the Council continues to divert a smaller proportion of waste to landfill and the contamination rate of household recycling had decreased during the quarter, which represented a fall for the fifth consecutive quarter. The number of notices issued for contaminated recycling bins during the quarter had increased.

Concluding the report, the Corporate Policy and Performance Manager updated the Committee that the percentage of private sector properties fully licensed under the Selective Licensing Scheme stood at 43%.

The Chair thanked the Corporate Policy and Performance Manager for the report and invited questions from the Committee.

Councillor Stubbs pointed out that although cinemas and theatres were achieving occupancy targets, performance in respect of yield remained below target and he questioned the accuracy of the targets. The Corporate Policy and Performance Manager responded that he had requested the service to provide further details on how attendances and yield are defined, for a clearer picture to be provided in the quarter four update report.

In response to a comment from Councillor Sutton-Lloyd who asked for an update on the progress of the Selective Licensing scheme, Diane Close, Overview and Scrutiny Officer noted that the Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee will be invited to a meeting of the Economy and Enterprise Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 22 April, at which a report will be presented which will provide a detailed update on the Selective Licensing Scheme.

### **Resolved:**

The Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted the overall position and direction of travel in relation to quarter three performance and the actions being taken to address areas of challenge.

## **11 Minutes of the Environment and Climate Change Partnership Executive Board**

The Committee received the minutes of the Environment and Climate Change Partnership Executive Board meeting held on 11 December 2023, for information (for copy see file of minutes).

## **12 Such other business**

Members were reminded that a Special joint Overview and Scrutiny meeting, with Economy and Enterprise Overview and Scrutiny Committee, will be held to consider the County Durham Visitor Economy on 12 April 2024 at 9.30am and a workshop will take place on 17 April 2024 at 1pm focusing on the feedback from the Perceptions Survey to inform the new 'Place' brand for County Durham. Members were asked to contact Diane Close or Ann Whitton, Overview and Scrutiny Officers, to confirm their attendance at the workshop. The Chair encouraged Members to attend both the meeting and the workshop, if possible.

Members were also reminded that a visit is planned to Hardwick Park on Wednesday 1 May 2024, with transport to leave County Hall at 9.30am and return by 1pm. Members were requested to contact the Overview and Scrutiny Officers to confirm their attendance.