

**Minutes
Environment Scrutiny Panel**

**19 September 2006
5.30 p.m.
Town Hall**

Present: Councillors Wolstenhome (in the Chair), Colledge, Leake, McDonnell, Marsden, Pitts, Simpson and Turnbull.

Also in Attendance: Councillors Cowper, Hepplewhite, Robinson, Thomson and Wynn

Sustainable Development Manager – Jonathan Elmer

Apologies

There were apologies for absence from Councillors Carr and Graham

Minutes of the Meeting held on 19 July 2006

The minutes of the previous meeting were confirmed as a correct record.

Review of Previous Scrutiny Topic – Presentation regarding Biodiversity

The City of Durham's Sustainable Development Manager, Jonathan Elmer gave a presentation to the Panel, outlining the achievements made over the last year in this regard and of the work that is planned for the future. Members put questions to the Sustainable Development Manager and a summary is set out below:

- It was noted that the Council had conducted and completed a "Parks Audit" based on Green Flag Criteria, Members queried whether this was similar to the Blue Flag Status for coastlines and it was noted that indeed they were broadly comparable.
- The maintenance of "Biodiversity Areas" – now called Wildlife Meadows has been refined and improved. There are contracts in place with local Farmers to "hay crop" the appropriate sites around August each year. A large area at Meadowfield known as the Ponderosa is to be seeded with Yellow Rattle which is a predatory plant. The Yellow Rattle will thrive at the expense of the coarse grass currently on the site, leaving sufficient gaps for more wild flowers to take hold. Also there is a site at Holiday Park that will receive similar treatment. Whilst this is a long term strategy it is considered best way of improving the sites. Current uses of the sites, such as cross county running would not be affected insofar as activities could continue, except during the period in which the plants reproduce.
- Signage for the Wildlife Meadows will be produced (Interpretation Panels) in consultation with local Residents – utilising the Open Space Development Officer and Community Development Staff.

- “Learning Lunches” have been held regarding the subject of the “Natural Environment and its association with Quality of Life”. It was noted that this service could be repeated if sufficient interest from Members was received.
- Now, as part of the planning process, the Council’s Sustainable Development Manager reviews applications as regards energy efficiency, transport impact etc.
- The Council has formed a “Green Space Steering Group” and has allocated a budget to this group. Tenders were invited to conduct an “Open Space Needs Assessment” and the North East Community Forest (NECF) was appointed. As NECF is a Trust rather than a company and within their remit integrated landscaping and long term partnerships are paramount. Consultation with user groups will take place, an audit of provision/quality/value, analysis of under or over provision and review of opportunities for providing new open spaces. Knowledge gained by NECF will be valuable in the future in helping when considering development opportunities as this Assessment will consider all open spaces, not just the sites previously labelled as “biodiversity” areas.
- The establishment of the “Friends of Witton Dene” as a pilot scheme has been well received and there have been subsequent improvements to the scheme. The County Council’s Countywide Rangers have been involved by working with schools to install bird boxes. It is hoped that a site management plan can be drawn up for Witton Dene and that similar Friends Groups can be set up for other sites across the District.
- Amongst other awards, the City of Durham achieved a special award from Northumbria in Bloom for best biodiversity project. The Council’s large scale ambition and long term goals in this area were considered important factors in securing this award.
- Funding has been awarded from SITA for access improvements to Ponderosa, Holiday Park and Flass Vale. Members agreed that access and signage were important issues. It was hoped that these issues would be addressed by the formation of the Site Management Plans, where they would fall within a Heritage area, Cultural Services would lead.
- A report regarding Parks and Open Spaces would be submitted to O.M.T. Included within the report would be items regarding:
 - Achieving Green Flag Status for Sherburn and Coxhoe Parks, chosen as they require little work, by comparison, to achieve the status
 - Progress summary for Wharton and Bowburn Parks, Heritage Lottery Fund bids have been applied for in relation to Wharton Park
 - Programme of Friends Groups Establishment – Management Plans – Costs, building up relationships and public confidence is felt to be essential in this regard

- Funding, as always, is an issue. It is hoped that through the development of site management plans that the budget allocation required can be estimated so that appropriate funding can be obtained from the various possible sources, e.g. Heritage Lottery Fund. Formal site management plans are good evidence and can only help to strengthen any case regarding the obtaining of these types of grants.
- Members queried whether funds could be obtained by Parish Councils from the County Council regarding the improvement of paths and access to certain open space sites. The Sustainable Development Manager informed Members that this could be possible, but that it would be the Parish Council or a countryside voluntary group that would need to apply. In addition, that it should be noted that this funding may not be long term and that this must be considered when taking into account future maintenance costs etc.

Councillor Thomson left the meeting at 6.07pm.

- The Panel wondered whether in areas where City of Durham land abutted Durham County Council land whether it would be possible for arrangements to be put in place along these “borders” so that there was continuity of maintenance provision. Members were informed of the correct Officer within Environment and Leisure Services to contact.
- Members wished to know whether links would be established with schools and youth groups in relation to local sites. The Sustainable Development Manager hoped that schools, youth groups and Residents’ Associations could be encouraged to join the relevant Friends Groups. In addition, some open spaces could prove useful to schools in relation to Biodiversity as this is a topic that increasing features in the National Curriculum. Due to time constraints for Officers, appropriate levels of training and limited resources, it would prove difficult to provide support to schools at this current time. It is hoped that in the future if additional funding could be secured that this may be possible.
- The Panel was informed that it can be shown that where access to an area of open space is improved, anti-social behaviour is marginalised. This is thought to be due to the fact that it is more likely that anti-social behaviour is more likely to occur “out of sight” along vennels and in areas that people generally do not use.

Councillor Robinson left the meeting at 6.15pm.

- The issue of “Greenfield” sites being used for development over “Brownfield” sites was raised, with some Members being quite concerned regarding the effects on wildlife etc. The Sustainable Development Manager explained to Members that Open Space Needs Assessments would identify the areas of poor, satisfactory or surplus provision which in turn could then be used to identify which sites were appropriate for development. Further, it was explained to Members that the terms “Brownfield” and “Greenfield” were somewhat arbitrary and in many cases old industrial sites were of a much higher value in terms of biodiversity and ecological interest than many sites categorised as “Greenfield”.

Indeed intensely farmed land is usually relatively poor in terms of biodiversity due to the economic needs of Farmer to keep all plants other than the cash crop to a minimum and the use of pesticides and herbicides.

- The Sustainable Development Manager concluded by emphasising how important these issues were in relation to climate change. Only by integrating the issues of how people relate to nature into all levels of decision making can enough be done to combat climate change. It is likely that Climate Change Strategies will be produced in the near future by many companies / organisations / authorities etc. and whilst this may not be presently a large issue, within 20-30 years it will be.

The Panel thanked the Sustainable Development Manager for the informative and interesting presentation.

Any Other Business

A letter from a Resident of the District was published in the local press regarding the Resident's attendance at the meeting of the Environment Scrutiny Panel 19 July 2006, and its contents were noted by Members.

Actions for the next meeting:-

- An interim review of the previous Scrutiny topic of Unauthorised Parking on Council owned Land, more specifically the implementation of the schemes to provide additional parking within the district – representatives from Property Services to be in attendance.

The Meeting terminated at 6.35 p.m.