

**Minutes
Environment Scrutiny Panel**

**14 June 2007
5.30 p.m.
Studio, GALA**

Present: Councillors Wolstenhome (in the Chair), Colledge, Crooks, Kelly, Martin, Mavin, Mitchell, Moderate, Turnbull and Wilkinson

Also in Attendance: Councillors Cowper, Marsden and Wilkes

Mr Jonathan Elmer – Sustainable Development Manager, City of Durham
Mr John Westgarth – Senior Engineer, City of Durham

Apologies

There were apologies for absence received from Councillors Carr and Simpson.

Minutes of the Meeting held on 18 April 2007

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

Review – Biodiversity (Sustainable Development)

The City of Durham's Sustainable Development Manager, Jonathan Elmer was in attendance to bring Members up to date as regards issues previously looked at within the Scrutiny of "Biodiversity". As a number of the Members of the Panel being newly elected Members the Sustainable Development Manager gave an overview of the work he is involved with. A briefing note was provided for Members' information (attached as Appendix A) and was used as the framework for the verbal briefing for those in attendance.

• **Friends Groups**

Friends Groups have been established in order to give local people a mechanism of taking control over environment issues within their area. It is intended to roll out further Friends Groups across the district for 11 sites over the next 2 years, building on the success of those established for Addison Park and Witton Dene. It was noted though that it can be a lengthy process getting a group active though can depend upon the individuals involved and the amount of time volunteers can dedicate. It is important that the City of Durham gains the confidence of those involved by showing that the City can help such groups establish themselves as a powerful voice within the community. Examples of working together with Friends Groups can be seen in the work of the Witton Dene Friends Group, setting up of voluntary groups for litter picking and clearing of weeds and working with local schools to raise awareness. Also the City of Durham helped in the formulation of a Management Agreement for the Witton Dene Friends Group.

Note: *Councillors Mitchell entered the meeting at 5.35 p.m.*

Where well established community groups exist, such as the Coxhoe Together and Sherburn O.A.K. it would be an unnecessary duplication to establish a new Friends Group. Instead it would be preferable for the City of Durham to continue to offer support to this existing group.

- **Green Flag Awards**

It was noted that whilst the terminology is “award”, the Green Flag Award is more of an accreditation that demonstrates a high degree of quality relating to grounds maintenance. Initial candidate parks were those that were either already at, or near to, the standard required to gain accreditation.

- **Wildlife Meadows**

The City of Durham had reviewed the state of the grassland areas that it owned and sites for potential “Wildlife Meadows” were identified. The previous term used to describe the sites, “Biodiversity Sites”, was changed as it was felt this was too dry and scientific. There are now interpretation panels in place which outline maintenance activities.

The usual routine for grassed open spaces is for 10 -15 grass cuts per year. Wildlife Meadows are cut once per year after the reproductive cycle, this ensures yearly growth so that the soil nutrients are depleted such that a poor soil is left after approximately 10 years. It is this poor soil that rather counter-intuitively leads to a higher degree of biodiversity as no individual species can dominate. This is similar to traditional hay meadows where this process had been in place for many years. Many “agriculturally improved” areas, i.e. fertilised, cleared and farmed etc. actually tend to have a lower biodiversity than many redundant industrial sites.

The views of the local Residents are important in the shaping of such sites. Indeed some sites at Newton Hall return to the regular grass cutting schedule at the request of Residents.

Improvements have been made at the site at Holliday Park and also at the site adjacent Meadowfield Leisure Centre.

It was noted that improvements would take many years to manifest, but similar schemes began at Great Aycliffe 10 years ago are now excellent examples of what can be achieved.

- **Site Management**

£12,207 of funding from the Coalfield and Lowland Meadows project has been secured by the City of Durham in conjunction with the Durham Wildlife Trust. These funds unfortunately cannot be used for ongoing maintenance, as they must be attached to capital and one-off items. These could include setting up viewing areas, interpretation panels and some minor footpath works.

Some areas within the district are suffering from encroachment by Himalayan Balsam, a species that tends to shade out other vegetation, impoverishing habitats. As this plant is annual it must be prevented from seeding. Indeed, the Friends of Witton Dene have organised volunteers to hand pull the plants from areas within Witton Dene. Whilst some of the plants have reappeared the number is vastly reduced from previous years.

A grant was secured to help towards the removal of overgrown bracken at Flass Vale which was presenting a problem.

- **Planning Policy & Development Control**

The Council's Sustainable Development Manager now comments on large schemes and applications where there may be an impact on biodiversity. It may be in some cases possible to avoid any loss or rebalance a scheme to minimise impact. Also it may be possible in some cases to "lever in" planning gain such that other open spaces can be improved.

Whilst this system offers an opportunity for comments, it would be best if involvement could be in the pre-planning application discussion stage to help ensure the best possible application in terms of sustainable development. This would also give more time to raise issue, as once an application has been submitted formally, there are statutory timescales (8 weeks) then a decision must be reached.

Also the Sustainable Development Manager has been involved with the Local Development Framework, on issues relating to energy efficiency, waste minimisation, wildlife protection amongst others.

- **Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006 (NERC)**

A requirement under the NERC Act is that any public sector organisation must consider any impact upon biodiversity that decisions taken by the organisation may have. A briefing for City of Durham Management Team is being prepared to highlight issues this would raise.

- **Open Spaces Needs Assessment / Green Spaces Strategy**

The City of Durham utilised the skills of the Tees Forest (North East Community Forest) to consult with communities on open space needs. This was carried out using random samples across the District, to identify where there was under-provision and over-provision of various land use types. The results will prove a useful Planning tool as it can help to identify sites for infill development and where development would impinge upon amenity etc. Indeed, the consultation will provide an evidence base for the City of Durham's Green Space Strategy which will set out the future management plans for green spaces.

- **Questions from Members**

Members wished to ascertain whether the hay crop taken from the Wildlife Meadow sites was achieving a profit upon being cleared. The Sustainable Development Manager explained that due to the time of cropping, i.e. after the reproductive cycle, the hay has very little nutrients and consequently has little use as silage or fodder and therefore could not be sold for a profit.

Councillors also wished to have a list of the Wildlife Meadows for their information. The Sustainable Development Manager reminded Members that a list of sites had been reported to Cabinet previously, though it could be useful for newly elected Members if a list was circulated for their information.

Members wondered whether the Green Space Strategy would be potential Scrutiny Topic. The Sustainable Development Manager informed the Panel that there was a Steering Group in place for this and that it may be possible to include a Member from the Environment Scrutiny Panel to join the Steering Group if this was felt to be appropriate.

It was queried whether existing Community Groups would be offered similar support as the new Friends Groups being established. Members were informed that this would be the case, should these existing groups make contact with the Council.

An issue that had been noted was that when the Wildlife Meadow areas had been cut (specifically a site at Newton Hall though it was thought it may apply universally) litter that had collected in the grass had also been cut by the machinery. This led to a spread of chopped up litter across a relatively large area. Many of the small pieces would prove difficult to remove and would be easily blown by the wind. Members suggested that a litter pick be scheduled prior to any periodic hay cropping and this was noted by the Officer.

Again it was reiterated by the Sustainable Development Officer that the initial tranche of Wildlife Meadows were to instigate the project and that Residents, and hopefully Friends Groups, would then pick up the idea of looking after these types of areas. If a particular area was not felt to be working, i.e. too much litter, then it could be that additional litter picks may be required or that volunteer groups could assist to maintain an area. If a Wildlife Meadow is felt by Residents to be inappropriate the designation can be looked at again.

It was queried whether the City of Durham could influence private land owners as regards sustainable development issues. This was felt to be only possible through the planning process when applications for development were submitted.

Members asked whether the City of Durham was working in conjunction with the Durham County Council as regards identifying areas that could be suitable for consideration as a Wildlife Meadow or some other type of site with biodiversity importance. Indeed the City of Durham has worked in part with the Durham County Council as regards the current Open Space Needs Assessment which looks at all the open spaces within the district, excluding what would be considered large open countryside. A sample of 140 sites were chosen and surveyed with 60 "spare" surveys retained for use for sites identified through public consultation.

Note: *Councillor Martin left the meeting at 6.12 p.m.*

It was also noted that the district has an area of Magnesian Limestone Grassland, notably Cassop Vale, which is also a site of special scientific interest (SSSI). This land however is owned by the Church Commissioners and therefore the City of Durham has little direct influence at this site.

Review – Unauthorised Parking on Council Owned Land, Provision of Additional Parking

The City of Durham's Senior Engineer was in attendance to bring Members up to speed with the current position of the Council on the issue of the Provision of Additional Parking.

Many of the problems are in areas where estates have been constructed over 30-40 years ago (or older) and at the time of construction, the necessity for parking facilities was not as great as it is now. Indeed many of the roads are narrow and with parking on both sides of the carriageway this can lead to the situation where bus routes are blocked and also emergency vehicle access can be compromised.

The City of Durham currently inputs £50,000 towards schemes of additional parking, with the Durham County Council contributing a corresponding amount of £40,000 for the City of Durham district.

Now there is a system of prioritisation in place to ensure those schemes with the most need are attended to first, to avoid a first come-first served approach that had existed in the past. Schemes are prioritised in line with similar criteria that the Durham County Council apply to schemes. The criteria include consideration of access, damage to an existing site, alternative parking, congestion and public transport.

So far 34 sites have been prioritised, with 20 to be prioritised still. 11 schemes have been carried out, with Residents appearing to be happy with the results.

The schemes are usually carried out on behalf of the City of Durham by the County Council's Service Direct. Some schemes being undertaken by the County Council include Parkhouse Gardens at Sherburn Village and Grey Gables at Brandon, Henry Avenue at Bowburn, Lime Park at Brandon and a scheme at Cassop. A list of City of Durham sites will be finalised within the next few weeks.

Research from the Department of Communities and Local Government has shown that in the UK, car ownership is less than the EU average, although it is likely there would be a 20% increase in the need for in the next 30 years. Clearly there would be a corresponding increase in the need for additional parking in the future.

- **Questions from Members**

The Chairman pointed out that it is possible for Members to input funds from their discretionary funds for parking schemes and also in some cases it may also be possible to work with Parish Councils towards the completion of schemes.

Councillors noted the success of a scheme of parking carried out near to the Doctor's Surgery at Framwellgate Moor which had helped to alleviate congestion in the area, especially at the times when parents drop off and pick up their children at the nearby school and nursery.

Members queried the average cost of a scheme. The Council's Senior Engineer explained that it depends upon the location, but can be in the order of £15,000, with the average cost per bay being approximately £1,500-£1,800.

It was again noted that when enforcement is to take place en masse, i.e. leaflet drops, notices etc., local Members should be informed in advance, to avoid situations similar to that at which occurred at Brandon. There many Residents approached local Members after a series of notices were placed on vehicles that were parked on Council land without authorisation, Members were not aware that this was going to happen and received many complaints.

Note: *Councillor Mitchell left the meeting at 6.31 p.m.*

Members made reference to potential schemes within their particular areas and the Councillors' suggestions were noted by the Senior Engineer.

Note: *Councillor Marsden left the meeting at 6.35 p.m.*

Some Members queried as regards having a time limit placed on parking bays to prevent people taking advantage of this parking for all day parking, i.e. commuters. The Senior Engineer noted that the intention is for unauthorised parking to be decriminalised and therefore this kind of issue would be a County Council issue rather than a Police one.

Note: *Councillor Turnbull left the meeting at 6.40 p.m.*

The Chairman thanked the witnesses for their attendance on behalf of the Panel and for answering Members questions on the topics.

Any Other Business

There were no further matters to discuss.

The Meeting terminated at 6.45 p.m.

Conservation and Enhancement of the Natural Environment / Biodiversity

PROGRESS REPORT TO ENVIRONMENT SCRUTINY PANEL

Friends Groups

- Established for Addison Park, Witton Dene, management plans under preparation – process to be rolled out.

Green Flag Awards

- Applications made for Coxhoe and Sherburn Parks through Coxhoe Together and Sherburn OAK.

Wildlife Meadows

- Signage – covers maintenance activity, friends group / consultation proposals.
- Access improvements to Browney Meadow at Holliday Park.

Site Management

- Funding of £12,207 awarded to Council through Coalfield and Lowland Meadows project.
- Removal of encroaching Himalayan Balsam and Bracken at Witton Dene and Flass Vale.

Planning Policy and Development Control

- Procedure under development for involvement of key Officers in Pre-planning Application discussions.
- Development Control Policies – issues and alternative options under consultation.

Natural Environment and Rural Communities (NERC) Act 2006

- The Sustainable Development Manager to prepare a briefing note for OMT on the implications of the NERC Act to Council service delivery.

Open Space Needs Assessment / Green Space Strategy

- Consultants currently consulting with communities on open space needs, aim to complete work by late summer. Council will then develop Green Space Strategy.