

**Minutes
Environment Scrutiny Panel**

**05 March 2008
5.30 p.m.
Abbey Leisure Centre, Pity Me**

Present: Councillors Wolstenhome (in the Chair), Carr, Colledge, Crooks, Kelly, Mavin and Simpson.

Also in Attendance: Councillor Marsden.

Mr. Jonathan Elmer – Sustainable Development Manager, City of Durham.

1. Apologies

- 1.1 Apologies were received from Councillors Martin, Moderate and Turnbull.

2. Minutes of the Meeting held on 06 February 2008

- 2.1 The minutes of the meeting held 06 February 2008 were confirmed as a true record.

3. Review of Riverbanks, Necklace Park Project – Draft Report

- 3.1 The Panel agreed that the report be sent to the next Scrutiny Panel for consideration.
- 3.2 In relation to the Necklace Park Project, the Panel were informed that the scheme at Belmont Viaduct requires approximately £1 million of funding and that Connect2 were providing approximately half of this amount with the rest needing to be raised. There was a possibility that Durham County Council could apply for “Cycle Demonstration Town” funding, administered by the Department for Transport, which may be matched to the contribution made for the viaduct scheme, mutually benefiting both initiatives. The application must come from Durham County Council, with the deadline for submission being the end of March 2008. The Panel asked that the Clerk correspond with the Highways Manager to seek the current position of this issue.

4. Review of Biodiversity

- 4.1 The Sustainable Development Manager informed the Panel of the areas of progress since the last review. These areas were:-
- Witton Dene
 - Coalfields and Communities Scheme
 - Access to Nature
 - Woodland in the City
 - Open Space Needs Assessment
 - Cassop Vale

4.2 Witton Dene –

- 4.2.1 A Friends Group has been established and a Management Plan has been developed for the site, and the Friends Group has put together various funding bids. Funding is expected from the Minerals Valleys Project and Breathing Spaces Fund to cover costs associated with access improvements, including paths through the site and wetland scrapes. The Witton Dene Friends Group was noted as an excellent example of an empowered community group.

4.3 Coalfields and Community Scheme –

- 4.3.1 Improvements have been made at Browney Meadow with a new footpath in place, an interpretation panel installed and a viewing point having been established.
- 4.3.2 The Pondarosa at Meadowfield has benefited from the installation of two interpretation panels.
- 4.3.3 At Flass Vale, all of the land in the Council's ownership has been designated as a Nature Reserve. Additional funding has been obtained to install interpretation panels to give historic, access and wildlife information.
- 4.3.4 The Sustainable Development Manager informed the Panel that a Local Strategic Partnership Group had been keen to support Flass Vale to improve the quality of the footpaths. Also funds had been obtained to improve a footpath at Hopper's Wood.

4.4 Access to Nature –

- 4.4.1 This scheme was started by Natural England (previously English Nature) and there were invitations for applications for funding (which come from the Big Lottery Fund's Changing Spaces programme as well as Natural England), with the deadline for this being April 2008. The City of Durham has come together in partnership with the Dean & Chapter, University of Durham and North East Community Forest, however, Dean & Chapter and University of Durham are principally concerned with the riverbanks within the City Centre. The funding is prioritised so that it is awarded to those areas of high social, economic and/or environmental deprivation. The issues associated with the woodland within the City Centre will be considered by a City Woodland Partnership who will look at opportunities to consider estate management for the woodland areas and consider how to gain access to, and link, various funding pots in an attempt to try and support woodland improvements. A new core partnership had been established with City of Durham, North East Community Forest, Durham County Council and the Local Strategic Partnership. A bid had been submitted for funding to allow for a new post that can focus on engaging district communities, giving them information relating to local wildlife hopefully leading to an increased appreciation. This bid will also enable the establishment of a further post to look at County wide issues and another post related to I.T. issues associated with this work.

- 4.4.2 Members were reminded at a previous meeting of the Panel, the Dean & Chapter and the University of Durham advised that the cost to remove one tree was approximately £1000 and consequently it would prove to be very expensive to remove many of the trees and plant saplings along the Riverbanks. The Sustainable Development Manager advised the Panel that Sedgefield Borough Council had an area of woodland, of a similar size, which cost a sum of £90,000 per annum to maintain. The City of Durham, University of Durham and the Dean & Chapter would probably require £200,000 per annum to properly maintain woodland areas within the City Centre.
- 4.4.3 The Panel were reminded of the risks associated with ill managed woodland, with the example of an incident on land owned by the Dean and Chapter where a mature tree was blown down after a storm. Not only did the tree require removal, subsequent to its removal, the bank side suffered a landslip which in turn presented a danger to the public, and had an associated cost for rectification. The City of Durham Council receives legal claims associated with damage caused by trees.
- 4.4.4 The Sustainable Development Manager suggested that the Council should take a holistic approach to the maintenance of the Riverbanks. An example of this in practise can be seen in York where the City of York Council, who see their riverside as an integral piece of their tourism puzzle. Accordingly, they ensure funds for effective maintenance are in place to ensure a high standard is realised, making the areas attractive to tourists.
- 4.4.4 Care should be taken in the management of the trees along the riverbanks within Durham. Many of the trees are part of a 19th century plantation and as such a lot of the trees are reaching the end of their lifespan. At this stage, the trees can rot internally, and whilst appearing healthy from the outside, they can be structurally unsound, and therefore there is a risk not only that the trees could fall causing damage or injury, but also of the loss of stability to many of the steeper areas of the riverbanks (that rely of the trees and their roots to help retain the soil in place). This could have an impact upon not only the aesthetic of the riverbanks area, but also could lead to structural damage to properties situated above the riverbanks.
- 4.5 Open Space Needs Assessment
- 4.5.1 The Sustainable Development Manager informed the Panel that a draft report relating to the Open Space Needs Assessment was due the end of March 2008 and this would be circulated to Members for comments. The report investigates the different types of open space and the levels of provision associated with each type of open space. It was noted however, that the Open Space Needs Assessment looks at people's needs within settlement areas rather than large open spaces within the "open countryside".
- 4.6 Cassop Vale
- 4.6.1 The Sustainable Development Manager informed the Panel of a recent visit to Cassop Vale at the invitation of Local Ward Member, Councillor Marsden. The visit was to check for the presence of water voles but unfortunately, none were spotted. However, there was clear evidence of the presence of water voles and it is believed that there is a large colony. This would be exciting news as in the last 20 years the national water vole population has dramatically decreased.

- 4.7 The Panel thanked the Sustainable Development Manager for his attendance at the meeting and for the very interesting information in relation to the various projects and schemes.

5 Any Other Business

- 5.1 No further items were raised for discussion.

The Meeting terminated at 6.20 p.m.