

Scrutiny Sub-Committee for Looking After the Environment



20 March 2006

Meeting with the Cabinet Members for Environment Issues

Report of Head of Overview and Scrutiny

Purpose of Report

1. To explain the areas covered in a discussion between Members of the Looking After the Environment Scrutiny Sub-Committee and relevant Cabinet Portfolio Holders.

Background

2. One of the Scrutiny roles is to seek to “hold the Executive to account”. As part of this process, a series of meetings have been arranged between Scrutiny Sub-Committee Members and relevant Cabinet Portfolio Holders to provide the opportunity for discussion and debate about key issues.
3. A meeting with Councillors Brian Myers (Portfolio Holder for Waste Minimisation and Management) and Bob Pendlebury (Portfolio Holder for Transport and Sustainability) took place on 7 March 2006. Prior to the discussion, Councillor Young declared an interest in relation to the first item.
4. To structure the discussion, a number of areas had been identified in advance. The issues raised and the responses are set out below:

Waste Issues – Question

What do you consider to be the greatest challenges facing the Council in relation waste issues?

Answer – There are a number of issues facing the Authority and those identified as the areas of greatest challenge are listed below:

- Completion and adoption of the revised Municipal Waste Management Strategy for County Durham by all stakeholders. It is expected to be completed by April 2006.
- Meeting the requirements of the Landfill Allowance Trading Scheme.
- Facing up to the challenge of reduced landfill capacity and the difficulties of convincing stakeholders of the need for additional treatment facilities. This is an immediate priority.
- Reducing overall waste arisings on a year on year basis. Waste collected per

head of population increased to 575kg in 2004/5 from 560kg in 2003/4. As more and more waste is collected for recycling it has adversely affected the indicator. However, the most important issue for waste arisings in recent years has been the rise in waste going through the Household Waste Recycling Centres, particularly the rise in commercial waste. The Permit Scheme has had a dramatic affect on this and current forecasts are for a throughput of 62,000 tonnes in 2005/06 compared to 87,000 in 2004/05. This 25,000 tonnes reduction equates to about 50kg per head. Taking into account the rise in other wastes collected in the current year, the forecast for end of March is about 545 kg, well ahead of the target of 560kg and an overall reduction of 30kg on last year.

- Achieving and exceeding where possible statutory targets for recycling and composting. The 'National Target' for recycling and composting is 25% for 2005. Current un-audited performance for the Authority is slightly ahead (25.6%) of this and may improve further by the end of March 2006. Promotion of recycling is an ongoing process. The "Pride" campaign has taken place in schools and an application has been made for further funding for promotion work. A team has recently started work carrying out surveys of householders to find out what can be done to help them recycle.
- Facilitating improved working relationships with the Waste Collection Authorities (District/Borough Councils) to ensure successful implementation of the Waste Strategy, whilst delivering Value for Money in waste management.
- Successful completion of the procurement process for the next waste management contract(s). The portfolio holder referred to possible slippage in the timetable for the contract process identified by the consultants advising on the contract.

Scrutiny members commented on the need to ensure that the timetable for the new contract is adhered to so as to avoid the necessity for any extensions to the existing contract. There was also a discussion about the limited financial benefits which had accrued to the Council under the existing contract arrangements. A discussion also took place about the nature of the output from the aerobic digesters and in what circumstances it could be used. The need for the Council to ensure that a wide range of technologies (including energy from waste) be considered as part of the process for the contract from 2008 onwards was highlighted by co-opted and other members. Members were advised that a study tour of waste facilities is to take place on 4 and 5 April 2006.

- Dealing with County Durham's waste as far as possible within the County. This is an issue to be considered as part of the future contract process.

Scrutiny Members commented about the continued importation of waste from outside of the County, bearing in mind the limited availability of landfill capacity and to the existing site leasing arrangements.

- Put procedures in place to help County Durham's small and medium sized businesses and tradesmen to recycle their waste. Procedures will be put in place to deal with this through waste transfer stations. This is to be dealt with as soon as possible and also to be examined as part of the contract process.

Sustainable Environment and Transport Issues – Questions

What practical steps is the Council taking to achieve the reduction in greenhouse gases in County Durham?

Answer – Progress has been made and a number of different initiatives have been undertaken in an effort to reduce the level of greenhouse gases produced by County Council activities. These include the phasing out of solid fuel boilers and their replacement with more fuel-efficient boilers. The establishment of the Esh Winning Eco Learning Centre has provided a resource for County Durham schools to deliver training in sustainable development.

What actions are being taken to minimise the use of energy by the Council (ie in buildings, street lighting etc)?

Answer - All new schools under the BSF programme will have to meet Building Research Establishment Environmental Assessment Method standards. This should ensure that all new buildings meet a very good standard.

What is the Council doing to assist those people who depend upon access to bus services and particularly, older people, young people and those who need to access health facilities?

Answer – The County Council subsidises services with people in mind. Physical changes have been made to bus stops to enable easier access to public transport for those with mobility problems and parents with young children. In addition the County Council has supported the use of community transport. It may be necessary to target future funding at those groups of the community who have the greatest need.

Scrutiny Members referred to the problem of unreliable bus services and the need for close monitoring of subsidised bus services.

What is the latest position in relation to “concessionary fares” for older people?

Answer – It is understood that the District/Borough Councils are currently re-examining the issue at the present time and an announcement is expected shortly

How far do you think the Urban and Rural Renaissance Programme has met its objectives?

Answer – A considerable amount of progress has been made and it is felt that the programme has been very successful. Reference was made to the substantial difference that work carried out in New Brancepeth had made to that community.

Additional Issues

The following issues were also raised during the discussion:

- Reinstatement of highways – It was suggested that the Authority needs to ensure that public utilities are carrying out reinstatements to a very high standard to avoid the County Council having to fund future road maintenance.

- Park and Ride – Consideration needs to be given to extending the opening hours of the Park and Ride service in relation to people visiting the City on evenings.

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Members Present:

Scrutiny Members

Councillors Armstrong, Carroll, Chapman, Ord, Pye, Robson, Stradling, Tennant, Williams and Young.

Co-opted Member

M Jones.

Cabinet Members

Councillors Myers and Pendlebury.

An apology for absence was received from J Crosby.