

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 **Friday 12 May 2023** at **9.30 am**

Councillor B Coult in the Chair

Members of the Committee:

Councillors E Adam, L Brown, J Elmer (Vice-Chair), L Fenwick, G Hutchinson
C Kay, I MacLean, R Potts and S Townsend.

1 Apologies

Apologies were received from Councillors P Atkinson, J Charlton, C Martin, D Nicholls, J Purvis, Cllr J Quinn, T Stubbs, D Sutton-Lloyd and Co-opted members Mr T Cramond and Mr P Walton.

2 Substitute Members

The following substitute members were present:

Councillor P Jopling for Councillor D Sutton-Lloyd
Councillor B Kellett for Councillor D Nicholls
Councillor E Peeke for Councillor J Quinn
Councillor M Simmons for Councillor C Martin

3 Minutes

With an amendment to the minutes of the meeting held on 27 March 2023 to add Councillor Hutchinson's apologies, the minutes were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

The minutes of the Special joint meeting held on 14 April 2023 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

4 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

5 Items from Co-opted Members and other Interested Parties

The Overview and Scrutiny Officer informed the Committee, that four questions were received from Mr Walton, Co-opted Member, two in relation to agenda item 6 and two questions in relation to agenda item 7. The questions would be forwarded to colleagues within the relevant service grouping for a response to be prepared and the questions and the response, when received, will be forwarded to Mr Walton and the members of the Committee for information.

6 Environment and Climate Change Partnership Update

The Committee considered a report of the Corporate Director of Neighbourhoods and Climate Change which provided background information in advance of a presentation from Jim Cokill, Director of Durham Wildlife Trust, and Chair of the County Durham Environment and Climate Change Partnership (ECCP) (for copy of report and presentation see file of minutes).

The Committee welcomed the Chair of the ECCP to deliver the presentation which provided information on the activity of the partnership over the past year and plans for the future. The Committee noted the strategic priorities included the Climate Emergency Response Plan and that Durham County Council is responsible for delivering the Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS).

The Chair of the ECCP referred to the importance of collaborative working with the major institutions of the county, the business sector and community organisations in order to promote inclusive environment action. Two knowledge sharing events had taken place recently with Durham University to develop joint working opportunities and meetings had been held with regional local authority colleagues, the Wildlife Trusts and the Tees Valley Local Nature Reserve Partnership on cross-boundary coordination of the LNRS. Members noted the important role that the natural environment plays in terms of place, health and communities and that work is also conducted with community based partners in relation to projects to promote walking and cycling across the county.

The Committee received information on how the ECCP partnership had contributed to the Inclusive Economic Strategy, to address the green economy within the strategy and it had also been involved in the County Durham Community Engagement consultation on areas of interest.

The Climate County Durham website was a new initiative to promote local climate action and social media promotion of the website will be undertaken in the near future.

The partnership had also worked with the Northern Echo to encourage households to reduce energy use, in light of the cost of living crisis and it had joined in the Food for Planet campaign to promote the adoption of low carbon diets.

The Chair of the ECCP described the three workstreams, Climate Emergency, Place Health and Communities and the Ecological Emergency and he highlighted that future work would support the delivery of the ECCP Plan for 2022-25 including projects such as the Local Electric Vehicle Infrastructure Project (LEVI), Project Greenscape and the Gull-e trial. He requested Members to encourage residents to engage in the development of the countywide local heritage list of non-designated heritage assets.

In conclusion, the Chair of the ECCP commented that the production of the LNRS was merely the start of the process and whilst some funding would be available, it may be necessary to seek further resources in the future.

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

Councillor Elmer referred to the Government's aim to restore 30% of landscape for nature by 2030 and he expressed the view that it would require a step-change in behaviour, adding that there was more work to be done to engage with communities on the value of the natural environment.

Councillor Adam welcomed the Committee's recent visit to nature reserves and open spaces, observing that more resources will be required to take forward approaches such as rewilding contained in the LNRS and he asked whether the Cabinet had held discussions regarding the resources required. The Chair agreed to make enquiries with the Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Neighbourhoods and Climate Change, for information to be provided to the Committee.

Councillor Adam continued by requesting further information on the amount of funding that was predicted to be required to deliver the LNRS. Stuart Priestley, Principal Ecologist, explained that funding had been secured for the statement of priorities and mapping elements of the strategy, however, it was not clear, at this stage, whether Defra funding would be available in respect of the consultation process. The Principal Ecologist also pointed out that it was not known how regularly the Local Nature Recovery Strategy will be required to be reviewed and that will also have financial implications. In addition, monitoring and actions to deliver the LNRS will also require funding.

Councillor Adam referred to the plans being put forward in terms of the response to the climate emergency and asked what work was being done to increase the number of new homes being built with solar panels. Ellie Grimes, Low Carbon Development and Partnerships Officer explained that close work takes place with social housing providers and housing colleagues in respect of retrofit work. She also informed the Committee that work was taking place in relation to District Heat Networks, to identify funding available through the Heat Networks Delivery Unit.

Information is also provided to householders on the schemes available to help to make properties more energy efficient.

In response to a question from Councillor Adam as to whether lobbying of government takes place, officers highlighted that Durham is part of the Net Zero Hub which feeds regional issues into central government and that dialogue is increasing with regard to the new devolution deal, to ensure Durham's voice is heard.

Councillor Potts observed the difficulties that can be encountered when engaging with parish and town councils to persuade them to reduce the frequency of grass cutting. He recognised the importance of educating the public and that Countryside Rangers are an integral part of the engagement work. He suggested that if the Council were to reduce the amount of grass cutting, the money saved on the purchase and maintenance of the equipment for that purpose could be used to recruit additional Countryside Rangers.

Councillor Potts then asked for an explanation of the greening benefits in relation to solar car ports. The Chair of the ECCP explained that this aimed to incorporate natural features and introduce habitats into projects of this nature.

Councillor Peeke commented that the number of people signing up to the Climate Change and Carbon Reduction pledge on the Climate County Durham website was low and she asked how long the website had been live and how it was promoted. The Low Carbon Development and Partnerships Officer responded that the website was launched in 2021 and she acknowledged that there was more work required in terms of promotion and plans were in place for a social media page which it is hoped will increase the reach. She highlighted that although the number of people who had signed the pledge was relatively low, many more people had visited the site. There had been increased engagement work with town and parish councils through webinars, which had received positive feedback and the Low Carbon Development and Partnerships Officer agreed to circulate the links to the webinars to members of the Committee.

The Chair suggested that placing an article in the County Durham News publication may be an effective way to promote the Climate County Durham website.

In response to a comment from Councillor Peeke who expressed concern at the number of planning developments being approved which lack sustainable development measures such as the installation of solar panels The Low Carbon Development and Partnerships Officer commented that policy within the County Durham Plan encourages developers to consider sustainability.

Councillor Jopling expressed interest in the mine water project and asked what plans are in place to expand the project. Officers highlighted that work takes place with the Durham Energy Institute to support the work.

Referring to the projects at Seaham Garden Village and Horden, the Low Carbon Development and Partnerships Officer explained that water was pumped to the surface by the water authority and therefore the risk and cost to the Council had been minimised.

Councillor Jopling also commented on the support in the community to enhance the natural environment through tree planting, however, the planning application process in relation to tree planting on council land was complicated and could be discouraging. The Chair highlighted that an item on tree management will be considered at the July meeting of the Committee and she welcomed Councillor Jopling to attend the meeting.

Councillor Brown asked whether the hydro turbine at Freemans Reach generated electricity and, if so, how much electricity was generated and for what it was used. The Low Carbon Development and Partnerships Officer agreed to provide a response for circulation to the members of the Committee.

Councillor Fenwick commented on the support locally for rewilding and she added that she would like to see it further promoted. The Chair of the ECCP recognised that elected members play a significant role within their communities to be positive influencers, to encourage and influence change.

Councillor Fenwick spoke of the number of complaints received regarding the use of chemical herbicides and members also questioned whether they were being used correctly. The Chair agreed to raise this with the Cabinet Portfolio Holder.

The Principal Ecologist explained that the Clean and Green team were currently conducting trials of alternative herbicides to determine their effectiveness and work was ongoing to develop an overarching biodiversity intervention strategy.

Cllr McLean made reference to the former pit site at Horden and the planting of trees on the site and he highlighted that the proposal related to only a quarter of the total site and he suggested that the scheme could be extended to include more of the site. Steve Bhowmick, Environment and Design Manager agreed to take up the proposal and he added that he would follow it up with appropriate colleagues in connection with the Town and Villages Programme.

Councillor Elmer referred the Climate Change and Carbon Reduction pledge and he observed that it was important to generate interest from those who have a strategic countywide interest in nature and he pointed out that engagement requires capacity in terms of staff and resources.

Councillor Adam commented that mine water projects had been discussed at Committee meetings over many years, however, little progress had been made and he added that he would like to see action to develop the work.

The Low Carbon Development and Partnerships Officer replied that the mine water heat project at Horden was made possible through successful funding for £110,000 of which £25,000 was allocated to East Durham Trust for community engagement and the remaining sum was used for a technical feasibility study. She explained that community and commercial horticulture refers to community interventions which encourage the public to use green spaces and that the feasibility study will explore various ways to use mine water heat to benefit the people of Horden.

In Conclusion, the Chair of the ECCP noted that it had continued to support the delivery of the countywide elements of the Climate Emergency Response Plan and promote environmental messages. Partners were now looking forward to developing the ambitions set out in the Local Nature Recovery Strategy.

Resolved

- a) That the information provided within the report and presentation be noted.
- b) That a further update from the Environment and Climate Change Partnership be included in the Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee work programme for 2023/24.

7 Quarter Three 2022/23 Performance Management Report

The Committee considered the quarterly report of the Chief Executive Officer which detailed performance for quarter three of 2022/23, from October to December 2022 (for copy of report see file of minutes).

The Committee welcomed Gemma Wilkinson, Strategy Team Leader, to present the report and provide an overview of progress towards achieving the key outcomes of the Council's corporate performance framework.

Referring to performance in respect of the economy, the Strategy Team Leader highlighted the continuing recovery of tourism, following the pandemic. A number of successful cultural events had resulted in a combined economic impact of £850,000 and whilst theatre ticket sales increased by 14% in quarter three compared to the previous year, the number of people attending cultural venues had decreased since quarter two. Seasonality was considered to be a contributing factor.

In terms of the environment, it was reported that 6% less waste tonnage was collected compared to the previous year as an increasing number of people returned to their place of work, resulting in less waste entering the domestic waste stream. The contamination rate was below the same period last year, however it had increased slightly on the previous quarter. Up-to-date information indicated an improvement and further details would be provided to the Committee in the forthcoming quarterly report.

With regard to the environment, renewable electricity capacity increased across the county, with wind power being the largest contributor.

546 properties benefited from energy efficiency measures which was 31% less than the previous quarter, this was due to the Local Authority Delivery Scheme Phase 2 ending in September 2022. In terms of Selective Licensing, the Committee noted that work continues to increase the number of properties licensed within the scheme, which stood at 24% of properties and further information on enforcement will be provided in future reports. The rate of anti-social behaviour in the designated selective licensing areas increased by 14%, compared with 16% countywide.

The Strategy Team Leader concluded by informing the Committee that the performance report will be presented in a more visual format in the future, to align with the newly adopted Council Plan.

Councillor Peeke commented on the slow progress with regard to the number of properties licensed under the Selective Licensing scheme and she asked whether more work was required to improve performance.

The Strategy Team Leader explained that a three-year area based delivery plan was in place to encourage and enforce landlords and work was being undertaken to gather census data in order to ensure knowledge on private landlords was up-to-date.

Members pointed out that when bin crews refuse to empty recycling bins which contain contaminated items, this may lead to recycled items being placed in the general refuse bin. It was suggested that it may be better practice for crews to use powers of discretion in order to remove contaminated items rather than rejecting bins outright. Councillor Adam expressed disappointed that the contamination rate had increased on the previous quarter, despite the countywide contamination campaign and he highlighted that the report stated that the second phase of the campaign involved rejecting and removing contaminated bins and he questioned whether the strategy would be counter-productive.

The Strategy Team Leader explained that the contamination rate data was subject to a 3 month lag and, whilst the data being considered in the report was up to September 2022, the contamination campaign began in summer 2022. Therefore, the improvement over a six-month period would be seen in the next quarterly report. The campaign had produced a You Tube video which the Strategy Team Leader undertook to circulate to Committee members, for information.

Members highlighted that other local authorities use Material Recycling Facilities to separate and process recyclable materials.

The Chair agreed to pass members' comments to the Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Neighbourhoods and Climate Change and to share the response with the Committee.

Councillor McLean complimented the refuse crews who had acted quickly and efficiently to deal with bin contamination issues which were reported in Horden.

Councillor Potts referred to the increase in the anti-social behaviour rate in the county of 16% and he pointed out that the true rate was likely to be higher as approximately 20% of calls 101 calls were abandoned due to the long waiting time for the call to be answered and he asked what action was being taken to address the issue.

It was suggested that the Strategy Team Leader should speak to colleagues and provide a response for circulation to the Committee.

Resolved:

That the report be noted.

8 Such other business

On behalf of the Committee, the Chair thanked all the officers involved in hosting the visit to various nature reserves and open spaces in the county which took place on 10 May.

Signed.....
(Chair of the meeting held on 21 July 2023)