

## **Cabinet**

**6 February 2019**

### **Phasing Out of Unnecessary Single-Use Plastics**



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#### **Report of Corporate Management Team**

**Ian Thompson, Corporate Director of Regeneration and Local Services**

**Lorraine O'Donnell, Director of Transformation and Partnerships**

**Councillor Brian Stephens, Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Neighbourhoods and Local Partnerships**

#### **Electoral division(s) affected:**

Countywide

#### **Purpose of the Report**

- 1 To review what the Council, together with partners, have been doing to significantly reduce unnecessary single-use plastics (SUPs) across a wide variety of services and functions.
- 2 To consider adoption of a County Durham pledge to further reduce unnecessary single-use plastics, supported by an action plan to guide this work.
- 3 To invite a wide variety of partner organisations from the public, private and community sector to also make similar commitment through adopting this pledge, thereby helping to magnify the positive impact this could make.

#### **Executive summary**

- 4 Plastics are cheap, durable and highly versatile material which form an essential component to many items in everyday use. There is however an inherent wastefulness in designing items for single use only, much of which does not go on for recycling. Furthermore, there is a growing realisation of the harm that plastics can do to our marine environment and whilst in the United Kingdom we have well developed waste management processes to prevent much of this, nevertheless the

durable nature of plastics still makes it a major pollutant on our beaches too.

- 5 On 24 January 2018 the County Council made a resolution for a report to go to Councils Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Management Board (COSMB) to consider options for significant reductions in unnecessary single use plastics. This resolution included consideration to the signing of a “plastic free” pledge, and development of partnership work to tackle the issue.
- 6 At the recommendation of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Management Board, a Task Group from the Environment Partnership (part of the County Durham Partnership) was established to investigate the issue of Single Use Plastics (SUPs) and to produce a report on its findings to be considered by the Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee (ESC OSC).
- 7 The report, which is attached, details a number of “early wins” the Council and partners have already achieved such as eliminating plastic straws and stirrers and use of compostable cutlery. It also highlights the good work a range of partners have also been doing in their own organisations and in promoting reuse such as through the national free tap water refill scheme. Some of this work is innovative on a national level, such as the country’s largest trial use of unrecyclable plastic products in road surfacing schemes.
- 8 The Task Group have formulated a pledge and this is set out for Members consideration, together with an action plan which supports this. This report has been considered and modified through the Scrutiny process in particular through a special meeting of ESC OSC that provided a formal Overview and Scrutiny response to revise the SUPs action plan.
- 9 The Overview and Scrutiny response acknowledged the significant work undertaken by the Council and partners in a short period of time and commended their implementation of ‘quick wins’. It agreed those actions and timescales identified within the report and supported the introduction of a bespoke County Durham local pledge. It recommended that the Council and partners develop a communications plan to ensure that residents are informed of both why and when alternatives to SUPs are being used and it provides residents with an opportunity to identify how SUPs usage can be reduced. Finally, the response recommended that the Council and partners continue to offer pricing incentive schemes for the use of alternatives to SUPs and that the Council and partners reconsider handing out SUPs ‘free gifts’ at future promotional events.

- 10 At its meeting on 17 December 2018 COSMB noted and endorsed the response of ESC OSC to the report. In addition, it was recommended that consideration to the development of a process to collect empty crisp packets for recycling. This has been incorporated into the final action plan.
- 11 The COSMB agreed that the report be now shared with Cabinet and is hereby presented for decision and comment.

### **Recommendation(s)**

- 12 Cabinet is recommended to:
  - (a) Consider and note the content of the report of the County Durham Environment Partnership 'Phasing Out Unnecessary Single Use Plastics' and the resulting SUPs action plan on the work the Council and partners have been undertaking to reduce single use plastic, which fulfils the County Council resolution made on 24 January 2018.
  - (b) Note the Overview and Scrutiny response to the County Durham Environment Partnership task group report identifying additional actions for inclusion in the SUPs action plan.
  - (c) Agree that Overview and Scrutiny continues to monitor progress made by DCC and partners against the actions identified in the SUPs action plan.
  - (d) Agree to the principle of signing a local pledge for further reductions in single use plastic, supported by an action plan to deliver this.
  - (e) Promote adoption of the pledge across the County Durham Partnership with a wide variety of organisations and groups being invited to make similar commitments, coordinated through the development of a single-use plastics network.

## Background

- 13 In 1950 the world produced only 2 million tonnes of plastics a year. By 2020 this is expected to have risen to 400 million tonnes a year. Whilst this cheap and versatile material has been of immense benefit, there is also a growing realisation of the harm that it brings, especially to our marine environment, where television programmes such as Blue Planet II bring into living rooms vivid images of wildlife or fishermen struggling in a “plastic soup”.
- 14 Of particular concern and wastefulness of single-use plastics. These are items such as drinking straws, cotton buds, tooth picks, stirrers, wet wipes, cups and bottles that are deliberately designed for one use only, to be then thrown away. If they are not disposed of correctly they can persist for hundreds of years.
- 15 Whilst much of the marine pollution arises from countries with inadequate waste management practices, the Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) Strategy “Our Green Future” recognises the role that all countries including our own can play as it still makes environmental (and financial) sense to avoid single use plastic items in the first place, thereby avoiding the costs of the item being recycled, the wastefulness of it being sent for disposal, or worse still ending up as a discarded pollutant either by incorrect disposal down the toilet, litter or by fly tipping.
- 16 On 24 January 2018 a County Council resolution was passed as follows:

*Request that a report be brought to Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Management Board on the options for bringing an end to the use of unnecessary Single Use Plastics (SUP) in County Durham, taking account of the following measures to:*

- a) enable Durham County Council to become a full signatory of the ‘Plastic Free Pledge’, by phasing out the use of unnecessary SUPs in all County Council buildings, and working with commissioning partners to end the purchase and procurement of SUPs through the DCC supply chain;*
- b) encourage the County’s businesses, organizations and residents to go ‘plastic free,’ working with best practice partners across the County to explore the creation of a ‘plastic free network,’ that could provide business support, practical guidelines and advice to help local businesses transition from SUPs to sustainable alternatives;*

*c) to incentivize traders on Council land to sell re-usable or non-plastic biodegradable containers and invite customers to bring their own, with the aim of phasing out SUPs; including investigating the possibility of requiring food and drink vendors to avoid SUPs as a condition of their event permission, strengthening DCC's existing guidance for exhibitors and traders.*

## **Approach**

- 17 A report was presented to the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Management Board on 14 February 2018 recommending that a Task Group be established to address the motion and that the group include representatives from both DCC and the County Durham Environment Partnership. In addition, it was recommended that the Task Group would report their findings and conclusions to the Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee (ESCOSC).
- 18 The Task Group involved not just those Council services that use or buy single use plastics but also a range of partners too, as parts b) and c) of the resolution refers to influencing of wider stakeholders. The group has met monthly since April 2018 and comprises the following:
- Durham County Council – Head of Direct Services (Chair)
  - Durham County Council – Strategic Waste
  - Durham County Council - Procurement
  - Durham County Council – Education
  - Durham County Council – Trading Standards
  - Durham County Council - Events
  - Durham County Council - Catering and Facilities Management
  - Durham Heritage Coast Partnership
  - Durham University – Procurement
  - Durham University – Catering and Facilities Management
  - Environment Agency
  - Durham Business Improvement District
  - Northumbrian Water
  - North East Nature Partnership
- 19 The inaugural meeting was attended by the Chair of the Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee, Councillor Eddy Adam who set out the requirements and gave a clear steer that there was an interest in “early wins” in advance of consideration to any pledge. This action orientated approach was further supported by Cllr Brian Stephens Portfolio Holder for Neighbourhoods and Local Partnerships.

## Activities

20 The Task Group followed the format of the Council resolution and have developed a report attached as **Appendix 3**. In summary it involved:

**a) What the Council is and can do to achieve substantial reductions in unnecessary single-use plastics.**

Under this section of the resolution the Task Group undertook an audit to assess current levels of usage, a survey of suppliers and through this process identified a wide range of “quick wins” now implemented from removal of a number of SUPs from catering, provision of reusable cups, and ceasing using plastic confetti at pantomimes. Opportunity was taken to showcase innovation through highway services incorporating 6.5 tonnes of unrecyclable plastic into a 1 mile road scheme.

**b) What partners are and can be doing to achieve substantial reductions in single-use plastics.**

Examples of good practice already underway range from Schools such as Sacriston Primary achieving “Plastic Free Status, to the University using reusable containers in Van Mildert Hall of Residence. Northumbrian Water have also been undertaking promotion of their refill scheme (thereby avoiding the need for bottle purchase) and the Durham City Bid have been engaging with a number of businesses who are keen to make a contribution.

The above is just seen as a start, and the report recommends a Single Use Plastics Network (in line with the Council resolution) to foster more information sharing and actions across a wider range of partners

**c) Using the Council influence at events and for licencing activity**

Here the report incorporates some early wins such a provision of recycle bins and collection of plastic bottles after the Durham City run. It also highlights how the approach can be extended to wider events and opportunities for reviewing licencing policy.

## Options

21 The Council resolution seeks enablement of signing a “Plastic Free Pledge”. This has its origin in a national campaign to eliminate plastic drinking straws, and whilst its scope has since extended, its take up is largely from catering establishments. Furthermore, it is felt that the term

“plastic free” may be a misnomer, as the work to date in County Durham is focused only on unnecessary single-use plastics.

- 22 For the above reasons, the Task Group also considered a wide range of other pledges. Some are currently not open to local authorities (such as the Waste and Resources Action Plan “UK Plastics Pact”), others are focused on the marine environment (eg Greenpeace, Surfers Against Sewage). Whilst all are important causes, it was felt most appropriate that a local pledge be developed.
- 23 On Monday 17 December 2018, the UK government released ‘Our waste, our resources: a strategy for England’. It contains no new requirements on Councils relating to single use plastics, however there are a range of measures complementary to the pledge such as extended producer responsibility, deposit return schemes, increasing recycled content of plastics, improved packaging and clearer labelling which should help to reduce the amount of plastics produced and increase recycling rates.

## **Overview and Scrutiny Assessment**

- 24 The report of the County Durham Environment Partnership ‘Phasing Out Unnecessary Single Use Plastics’ together with the Single Use Plastics (SUPs) Action Plan was considered at a special meeting of the ESC OSC on 12 November 2018. The report identifies a range of ‘quick wins’ now implemented, a future bespoke local pledge, key future actions for Durham County Council (DCC) and actions to encourage wider involvement.
- 25 At the Special meeting of ESC OSC Members commented on both the report and the SUPs action plan, with those comments captured to form the following committee response:
- The committee acknowledges the significant work undertaken by DCC and partners in a short period of time in both assessing and reducing the use of SUPs.
  - The ESC OSC welcomes and commends DCC and partners for the implementation of the ‘quick wins’ as identified in the report.
  - In relation to future actions, the committee supports and agrees those actions and timescales identified in the report and in the SUPs action plan.
  - The ESC OSC supports the introduction of a bespoke local pledge for County Durham to combat the use of unnecessary SUPs, designed not only with the Council in mind but also partners.
  - The ESC OSC recommends that the following additional areas are included within the report and/or action plan going forward:

- That DCC and partners develop a communications plan which includes the use of Durham County News to:
  - Ensure that residents are informed of both why and when alternatives to SUPs are being used.
  - Ensure that clear information on the different types of plastic, identifying what can and cannot be recycled is provided to residents
  - Provide residents with an opportunity to identify how SUPs usage can be reduced.
- That DCC and partners continue to offer reward schemes for the use of alternatives to SUPs.
- That DCC and partners reconsider handing out SUP 'free gifts' at future promotional events.

26 In addition to the above response, Members agreed that the ESC OSC would receive a further report and presentation detailing progress made against the key actions identified in a revised action plan incorporating those areas included in the Overview and Scrutiny response. It was also agreed that the Overview and Scrutiny response will be included in the resulting Cabinet report.

27 At its meeting on 17 December 2018 COSMB noted the response of the ESC OSC and considered the report of the County Durham Environment Partnership task group and revised action plan incorporating those actions identified by ESC OSC. The COSMB suggested that the task group may want to include in the SUPs action plan to consider development of a scheme to collect empty crisp packet for recycling.

## **Main implications**

28 The local pledge that has been developed is contained in the report in **Appendix 2**. It commits all signatories to working towards and eventually eliminating single use plastics. Furthermore, where opportunity arises it also seeks an advocacy role across customers and communities the organisations deliver to.

29 There are no specific deadlines for elimination of single-use plastics, as each committing organisation will have varying degrees of change required, depending on their activity. An action plan has however been developed, to maintain progress, and there will be a need for periodic audits to confirm adherence on the ground. Scrutiny have requested an update in 6 months' time.



## Conclusion

- 30 Plastic materials are an essential everyday component from the computer on which this report is written, to the pens for which pledges are signed. It is however a finite resource, and therefore wasteful to design for single use only, even if it is recycled afterwards. Furthermore its durable nature means that it persists in the environment when discarded, and we are all familiar with the scenes of pollution that it can cause, particularly on our marine environment.
- 31 Councils and partners are now alert to the issues associated with unnecessary single-use plastics. This report describes a range of “early wins” accomplished to reduce it, and invites the County Council, as a partner in the County Durham Partnership to consider a pledge, supported by an action plan to make further reductions, leading to elimination.
- 32 The COSMB and ESC OSC recognise that SUPs are a major issue and that DCC and partners need to undertake measures which will significantly reduce SUPs usage across their operations. Overview and Scrutiny consider the partnership report and the action plan to be key documents in ensuring that DCC and partners significantly reduce their use of unnecessary SUPs in the future.
- 33 Overview and Scrutiny acknowledges and commends both DCC and partners for the significant work they have undertaken in a short period of time in assessing and reducing the use of SUPs in County Durham and in implementing ‘quick wins’ where possible. In addition, Overview and Scrutiny support the introduction of a bespoke local pledge for County Durham.
- 34 ESC OSC will continue to monitor the progress made in relation to the key actions identified in the SUPs action plan.

## Background papers

- ‘Phasing Out Unnecessary Single Use Plastics’ - Report of the County Durham Environment Partnership
- SUPs action plan – County Durham Environment Partnership
- Defra (2018) A Green Future: Our 25 Year Plan to Improve the Environment
- Defra (2018) ‘Our waste, our resources: a strategy for England’

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## **Appendix 1: Implications**

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### **Legal Implications**

The Government has recently completed consultation on proposals to ban the distribution and/or sale of plastic straws, plastic-stemmed cotton buds and plastic drink stirrers in England. It may well come into legislation at some time in the future, although the recent waste strategy for England does not commit to this.

### **Finance**

Recyclable/compostable alternatives to single use plastic may have a higher marginal cost although these will not significantly affect budgets. For trading areas, there may be potential for price increases, although this is not anticipated to be significant.

### **Consultation**

Subject to approval of this report, organisations in the County Durham Partnership would be invited to commit to a pledge to reduce unnecessary single use plastics.

### **Equality and Diversity / Public Sector Equality Duty**

Not applicable.

### **Human Rights**

Not applicable.

### **Crime and Disorder**

Not applicable.

### **Staffing**

Not applicable.

### **Accommodation**

Not applicable.

### **Risk**

No significant risks.

## **Procurement**

The report in **Appendix 3** includes a survey of current suppliers and their usage of unnecessary single use plastics. Furthermore the action plan outlines key measures for increasing engagement to ensure an increased readiness to develop alternatives.

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**Appendix 2 - Proposed Local Pledge**

**Appendix 3 – Report of County Durham Environment Partnership  
(Task Group) – Phasing Out Unnecessary Single Use Plastics  
(SUPs)**

**Appendix 4 - SUPs action plan**

**Appendix 5 - LARAC response**

**Appendix 6 - Surveys**

**Appendix 7 - Plastic pledges**

**Appendix 8 - Brighton and Hove pledge**

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