

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

At a Meeting of the **Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee** held in the **Council Chamber, County Hall, Durham** on **Tuesday 18 January 2022** at **9.30 am**

Present:

Councillor B Coult in the Chair

Members of the Committee:

Councillors E Adam, P Atkinson, L Brown, J Charlton, L Fenwick, G Hutchinson, R Manchester, C Martin, D Nicholls, R Potts, J Purvis, J Quinn, T Stubbs and S Townsend.

Co-opted Members:

Mr T Bolton and Mrs P Holding

1 Apologies

Apologies were received from Councillors C Kay, B McAloon and I McLean.

2 Substitute Members

No substitute members were in attendance.

3 Minutes of the Meeting held on 24 November 2021

The minutes of the meeting held on 24 November 2021 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

4 Declarations of Interest

No declarations were made.

5 Any items from Co-opted Members or Interested Parties

There were no items from Co-opted Members or interested parties.

6 Neighbourhoods and Climate Change – Quarter 2: Forecast of Revenue and Capital Outturn 2021/22

The Committee received a report of the Corporate Director of Resources which provided details of the forecast outturn budget for Neighbourhoods and Climate Change, highlighting major variances in comparison with the budget, based on the position to the end of the second quarter of 2021/22 (for copy of report see file of minutes).

In presenting the report, the Finance Manager for Neighbourhoods and Climate Change reported a cash limit underspend of £101,000 against the revised budget of £108.492 million. He explained that the outturn takes account of £6.2 million of COVID-19 related costs treated as outside of the cash limit, including increased costs due to service disruption, agency fees relating to staff absences and increased waste disposal costs. The Finance Manager drew Members' attention to Appendix 3 of the report which provided details of variances at Head of Service level, information which had been requested by a member at the October meeting of the Committee.

The Finance Manager highlighted the forecast cash limit reserve position of £995,000 at 31 March 2022 which provided the service with some flexibility to deal with unbudgeted expenditure in the future. The outturn also took account of a contribution to and from reserves of £786,000.

The Committee noted the capital budget of £62.231 million, with expenditure during the first six months amounting to £20.853 million. Key areas of spend during the period included highways and bridges and environmental and crematoria schemes.

The Chair thanked the Finance Manager for the report and invited questions from the Committee.

Councillor Adam referred the Finance Manager to Appendix 3 and requested an explanation of the £107,000 underspend on the fleet due to additional work required for extra vehicles. The Finance Manager explained that the County Council's fleet was maintained by Environmental Services which recharged when extra vehicles required maintenance over and above work budgeted for, this therefore was an over achievement on income, awaiting recharge from another service area.

Councillor Adam voiced concerns over the lack of progress made with regard to the purchase of electric vehicles. The Finance Manager replied that the variance referred to in Appendix 3 did not relate specifically to electric vehicles and confirmed that the service continues to purchase smaller electric vehicles.

The Finance Manager added that it is hoped that, as time progresses and technology advances, when it is necessary to purchase larger, more expensive vehicles such as gritters and refuse vehicles, technology will have advanced and costs will have reduced.

Councillor Adam then asked the Finance Manager to explain the reference in Appendix 3 of the report to the overspend on highways revenue maintenance work which included £700,000 of costs to be transferred capital and met from additional investment monies. The Finance Manager responded that the Highways Service undertook both revenue and capital works and this work had been charged to the service, however, it would be charged to capital in due course. The additional investment monies referred to were one-off investment monies which had been allocated over the past two years to deal with matters relating to highways and climate change, however they would not continue to be built into the budget and will be moved to capital. Councillor Adam asked if this was standard accounting practice and the Finance Manager responded that capital expenditure was funded through a variety of sources, and this was a revenue contribution.

Councillor Elmer referred to the Community Protection budget area detailed in Appendix 3 and the underspend on staffing. He expressed concern that there were vacant posts in this front line service and stated this should send an important message to the service regarding recruitment. The Finance Manager responded that there had been difficulties with filling posts over the previous two to three years, particularly in the areas of Community Protection and Trading Standards, however, the service had continued to operate effectively. Plans are in place to develop a revised workforce development strategy which aims to improve staff recruitment and retention, address the ageing workforce and provide succession planning, to ensure the service is well placed for the future.

Resolved:

That the report be noted.

7 Quarter Two, 2021/22 Performance Management Report

The Committee received a report of the Corporate Director of Resources which presented an overview of progress, in and to the end of quarter two, (July to September 2021), towards achieving the key outcomes of the Council's corporate performance framework and highlighted key messages to inform strategic priorities and work programmes (for copy of report see file of minutes).

The Corporate Scrutiny and Strategy Manager presented progress under the four ambitions as set out within the Council Plan, highlighting specific areas of performance. He advised that some information contained within the report, particularly that from external agencies and government departments, was subject to time-lags.

Referring to the 'More and Better Jobs' ambition, the Corporate Scrutiny and Strategy Manager highlighted County Durham's success at being named as one of the eight locations shortlisted in the UK City of Culture 2025 competition, with the winner due to be announced in May. The Committee noted that at their meeting in September, Cabinet approved a further feasibility study on options for the former Durham Light Infantry Museum and Art Gallery, with the findings expected to be reported in the near future. A number of festivals and events were held during the quarter, providing a welcome boost to the economy following the pandemic. Details of visitor numbers would be reported to the Committee when available. Heritage open days had returned during the quarter, however, fewer settings participated in 2021 compared to those taking part in 2019. The Corporate Scrutiny and Strategy Manager then referred to visitor numbers to parks and indicated that this figure had fallen compared with the previous year. It was explained that the same period last year coincided with the partial relaxing of COVID-19 restrictions and, with socialising in open spaces permitted, many people had taken advantage of this.

In relation to the 'Long and Independent Lives' ambition, the Corporate Scrutiny and Strategy Manager informed the Committee that recent carbon emission results released for 2019 showed a reduction across the county of 54% from the 1990 baseline, with the greatest source of emissions being heat, with domestic heating being the highest sub-category. Emissions from electricity saw the greatest reduction, mainly due to the decarbonisation of the national grid. The Corporate Scrutiny and Strategy Manager referred to a number of projects which are underway to reduce carbon emissions throughout the county.

The Committee noted that the percentage of waste diverted from landfill had decreased on the previous year which was due to a number of factors including an increase in the volume of waste collected. The current recycling rate had also decreased on the previous year, however, recent months had seen improvement. The Corporate Scrutiny and Strategy Manager referred to a question from the Chair at a previous meeting as to whether the content of bags of litter collected at litter picks was separated into residual waste and recyclable waste. The Corporate Scrutiny and Strategy Manager stated he had requested that the service provide clarification on this and once a response is provided by the service it will be circulated to the Committee.

The Corporate Scrutiny and Strategy Manager referred to the increase in contamination rates of household recycling which stood at 35.8%, driving down the recycling rate. He informed the Committee of a number of campaigns underway to improve the rate of recycling, including the small electrical recycling project which was shortlisted for a national award. In response to a question from the Committee at a previous meeting as to whether there are plans to expand the small electricals recycling project to include larger electrical appliances, information from the service indicates that the public make use of household waste recycling centres for larger electrical appliances.

Moving to the 'Connected Communities' ambition, the Corporate Scrutiny and Strategy Manager reported a 0.4% drop in fly-tipping incidents during the 12 months ending September 2021. The Corporate Scrutiny and Strategy Manager referred to observations of an increase in litter following Storm Arwen which led to a question raised at a previous meeting as to whether increased litter picking is carried out during the winter months. He informed the Committee that this question had been forwarded to the service for a response to be provided in due course.

In relation to the performance ambition to be an excellent council, the Corporate Scrutiny and Strategy Manager outlined the continued efforts to reduce emissions through actions set out in the Climate Emergency Response Plan, highlighting the work undertaken at the Morrison Busty Zero Carbon Depot. The Corporate Scrutiny and Strategy Manager suggested that the Committee may wish to visit the depot to view the improvements when COVID-19 restrictions are fully lifted.

The Corporate Scrutiny and Strategy Manager referred to matters raised in a previous briefing as to how public transport is being used to contribute to carbon reduction and the suggestion that public transport usage be included in the basket of performance indicators. He confirmed that data was available and this information will be included in future reports, when the most appropriate performance measurement indicator had been identified.

Members heard that a focused session is planned for all Overview and Scrutiny Committees in order to review the performance indicators, to ensure correct performance indicators are being used and that data is being presented to Members in a meaningful way. The focused session would be used to gather Members' views as to whether they would like to see other indicators included and how they would like to see the information reported. Representatives from within the services would be invited to the session to answer Members' questions.

The Chair thanked the Corporate Scrutiny and Strategy Manager for the comprehensive report and invited questions and comments from the Committee.

Mr Bolton referred to the feasibility study being undertaken on the options to bring the former Durham Light Infantry Museum and Art Gallery (DLI) back into use as a wider cultural attraction. He commented that he had been a regular visitor to the exhibitions, and he suggested that, should the museum be brought back into use, the County Council's collection of artwork could be displayed at the Museum and Art Gallery for the public to enjoy. Mr Bolton further observed that some of the exhibitions held at the former museum in later years did not have mass market appeal and that consideration should be given as to how to attract a wider audience. Mr Bolton also highlighted the tranquil location of the former DLI Museum, with its proximity to the Aykley Heads wildlife reserve adding that it is ideally located for school visits as pupils could explore the biodiversity of the surrounding area. Mr Bolton requested that his comments be passed to the Member/Officer Working Group for their consideration.

Agreeing to pass Mr Bolton's comments to the Working Group, the Corporate Scrutiny and Strategy Manager responded that it was recognised that the city of Durham lacks exhibition space and the Council holds an impressive art collection which should be displayed. He referred to the Special Meeting of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Management Board which focused on the DLI Museum and Art Gallery, at which Members suggested there should be a space for contemplation, with the location being used to its fullest extent.

Councillor Adam raised concern at details in the report on the percentage of 'A' roads where maintenance is recommended. Noting the data provided in the report was from 2019, he asked if more recent data was available. The Corporate Scrutiny and Strategy Manager replied that further information will be available following the publication of the Transport Asset Management Plan. He explained that the performance data and transport figures may be slightly out of sync in the report and he added he would liaise with the service in order to receive updated data to share with the Committee.

Referring to contamination in recycling, Councillor Nicholls expressed concern at the contamination rate of 35.8%. He added that it would be useful to have information on the financial penalties incurred by the Council as this could be a factor when considering how much money to invest to tackle the current contamination levels. Councillor Nicholls asked if the Council had the capacity to check every bin for signs of contamination.

The Corporate Scrutiny and Strategy Manager responded that the Council endeavours to educate the public and may use enforcement powers on those who repeatedly place contaminants in their recycling bin. He added that a small amount of contaminated waste may lead to the rejection of an entire load and this may account for the high contamination rate.

The Corporate Scrutiny and Strategy Manager suggested that the Committee may wish to focus on this issue in more detail in the future, when they have completed their current review activity.

Councillor Nicholls praised the targeted work of the Community Action Team and asked how the service selects areas for targeted intervention as it was clear to him from feedback from residents that these are extremely important issues which require a targeted approach and that many areas would benefit from similar targeted work being undertaken. The Corporate Scrutiny and Strategy Manager responded that the Community Action Team identify areas for targeted work through data and intelligence and that these were often areas that the team had visited on several previous occasions. He added that areas which have a large transient population are often targeted as problems may occur where there is a high turnover of tenants. The Corporate Scrutiny and Strategy Manager reminded the Committee that routine services also operate across the county, including the work of the Clean and Green Team.

Councillor Elmer referred to the increase in municipal household waste and the reduction in recycling and expressed concern that good habits should not be allowed to wane, commenting that it was important to take urgent action in this regard. Referring to measures to educate the public, Councillor Elmer recognised the Council had carried out good work in the past, however, he questioned whether the Council had provided recycling information to residents recently. He queried whether this was due to a lack of capacity. The Corporate Scrutiny and Strategy Manager responded that increased household waste was a national problem and he agreed that a cost-benefit analysis exercise may be useful to investigate the cost of a public awareness campaign to reduce the contamination rate, against the cost of the financial penalties incurred when waste is rejected due to contamination. The Corporate Scrutiny and Strategy Manager stated that he would refer these comments to the service who could investigate whether there are more effective ways of increasing awareness, for example the use of social media.

In relation to visits to cultural assets, Councillor Elmer commented that the impact of the pandemic must not be underestimated and it was important to establish whether visitor numbers to attractions such as heritage open days and parks had increased since the pandemic. The Corporate Scrutiny and Strategy Manager acknowledged that the two years during the pandemic were largely non-representative, and the quarter three report will include data over the last ten years in order to obtain a longer-term picture of visitor numbers to identify trends.

Councillor Quinn commented that the Community Action Team had carried out excellent work at Dean Bank, however, he was disappointed to see that only a short time after the work had been completed, the previous problems had recurred.

Councillor Quinn expressed the opinion that unfortunately he did not feel this was a sustainable solution. He added that Dean Bank had recently introduced the Selective Licensing scheme and he hoped this would lead to a reduction in the high turnover of tenants.

Referring to recycling, Councillor Quinn stated there was a need for education and simplification of the current system, as the public may not be aware that only a very small amount of food left on a cardboard box placed in a recycling bin can be a contaminate. He suggested that a solution may be bins with separate compartments, which could encourage the user to think about whether they are recycling correctly. He added that it would be useful to know exactly how much damage a relatively small amount of contamination can cause to a full load of recycling and asked whether the Council could do more work with recycling companies to alleviate the problem.

The Corporate Scrutiny and Strategy Manager agreed that the Selective Licensing scheme will help to investigate the correlation between a high turnover of tenants and problems relating to anti-social behaviour and untidy residential areas.

He stated that information from the Head of Environment at a previous meeting had indicated that the government's Waste and Resources Strategy is expected in the near future and this aims to introduce a standardised approach across the country to recycling, in order to simplify the process. The strategy may also introduce a food waste collection service which could reduce contamination in recycling. In response to the question regarding the level of contamination caused by a small amount of food left on a cardboard box, the Corporate Scrutiny and Strategy Manager responded that he could not provide an answer, however, he confirmed the Council works closely with contractors to drive down rejection levels and reduce 'fines' resulting from contamination. The Scrutiny and Strategy Manager agreed to seek further information on what constitutes contamination of a full load of waste and the costs to the Council in relation to contaminated recycling.

Councillor Brown informed the Committee that the City of Durham Parish Council is carrying out work with the Clean and Green Team in Durham city to educate students on recycling. She added that she would welcome a food waste recycling scheme, however, having spoken to the Portfolio Holder she was advised that such a scheme was prohibitively expensive.

Councillor Elmer referred to the figures for county-wide carbon emissions and acknowledged the Council does a lot of work to monitor the progress of road maintenance however there is more work to be done to improve public transport connectivity and to encourage walking and cycling.

The Corporate Scrutiny and Strategy Manager responded that strategic transport planning is to be the subject of a future joint Economy and Enterprise and Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny meeting. In addition, the focused session mentioned previously in the meeting to investigate performance indicators will be useful in this regard.

Referring to the comments made by Councillor Brown, Councillor Nicholls stated that it was his understanding that the government was intending to make it a legal requirement for all local authorities to collect and recycle food waste and he asked if the government's plans could be looked at in detail. He added that it may be useful to investigate how other local authorities carry out their recycling. The Corporate Scrutiny and Strategy Manager responded that the Waste and Resources Strategy was yet to be published, however, it was expected to mandate a food waste collection service on all local authorities. He added that, if the Waste and Resources Strategy imposes standardisation, then all authorities must adopt a uniform approach. Furthermore, the Head of Environment had advised that a free garden waste collection service is also expected to be included in the strategy and, if introduced, this would have cost implications for the Council which currently charges a fee for this service. The Finance Manager commented that there was an expectation that if a food waste collection service was mandated, there would be funding available from government, however, this was unlikely to cover the full cost and further details on the content of the Waste and Resources Strategy are awaited.

Councillor Fenwick spoke of how she had observed an increase in black sacks being placed next to bins, particularly after Christmas, which were not collected and this was leading to problems of littering and the attraction of vermin. Councillor Fenwick suggested that social media could be used to provide a polite reminder to residents that black sacks containing additional recycling would not be collected when left next to recycling bins. The Corporate Scrutiny and Strategy Manager agreed that social media posts may help to reach a wider audience.

The Chair asked if it was possible to obtain the annual cost to the Council for the removal of fly-tipping and suggested that the use of social media could be explored for the reporting of fly-tipping, such as Messenger or What's App. The Corporate Scrutiny and Strategy Manager agreed to contact the service for a response to be provided to the Committee in due course. With regard to the costs relating to fly-tipping, the Corporate Scrutiny and Strategy Manager informed the Committee these would be included in the Clean and Green Service area and that he would contact the service for the figures.

Resolved:

The report be noted.