

## **DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL**

At a meeting of the **Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee** held in **Committee Room 2, County Hall, Durham** on **Thursday 6 October 2022** at **9.30 am**

**Present:**

**Councillor B Coult (Chair)**

### **Members of the Committee:**

Councillors J Elmer (Vice-Chair), E Adam, L Brown, J Charlton, L Fenwick, G Hutchinson, I McLean, R Manchester, D Nicholls, J Purvis, J Quinn and T Stubbs

### **1 Apologies**

Apologies were received from Councillors P Atkinson, C Kay, C Martin and S Townsend and from Co-opted Members T Cramond and P Walton.

### **2 Substitute Members**

Councillors B Kellett and K Rooney substituted for Councillors S Townsend and C Martin respectively.

### **3 Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting held on 22 July 2022 were agreed 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**

It was noted that Co-opted Members, Mr Cramond and Mr Walton who were unable to attend the meeting had emailed the Overview and Scrutiny Officer prior to the meeting and submitted questions in relation to items 6a and 6b. Mr Cramond and Mr Walton had confirmed they were happy for written responses to be provided following the meeting. The questions and responses once available would be circulated to all Members of the Committee for their information.

## 6 Strategic Waste

The Committee considered reports of the Corporate Director of Neighbourhoods and Climate Change which provided updates on resources and waste management services in County Durham and single use plastics (for copies of reports and presentation see file of minutes).

Jo Blackie, Contracts Team Manager for Neighbourhoods and Climate Change, attended the meeting to deliver the presentation which encompassed both reports and included an evaluation of performance following the Covid-19 pandemic. Noting the increase in the amount of waste generated both during and after the pandemic, the Contracts Team Manager referred to the council's role to educate the public to view waste as a resource and to be mindful that recycled products are required to be as high quality as possible, in order to return to the manufacturing process.

The Committee heard that Durham was the largest producer of waste in the north-east and, in the last year, it produced approximately 270,000 tonnes of waste. The next largest producer in the north-east was Northumberland which produced 176,000 tonnes, followed by Newcastle which produced 140,000 tonnes.

The report provided detail as to how the impact from the pandemic continued to affect areas of performance, with the recycling rate reducing from 42% to 38% for the first quarter of the year and a 10% increase in landfill since Covid. The Contracts Team Manager explained the lack of regional facilities to process residual waste and, with all neighbouring local authorities observing an increase in residual waste during the pandemic, the result had been a lack of capacity overall which contributed to the increase in landfill. With authorities competing against each other in order to secure processing capacity, in the future, an increased multi-agency approach is expected to be adopted and the Committee received information on the Tees Valley Energy Recovery Facility Procurement partnership exercise to procure a 450,000 tonne residual waste treatment facility.

A further impact of the pandemic was the increase in kerbside residual waste due to national lockdowns which saw an increase in consumption and more waste generated from households. The Contracts Team Manager remarked that a new baseline was emerging with the transition to home and hybrid working.

On a more positive note, the Contracts Team Manager highlighted the increase in the collection of kerbside garden waste and a decrease in the amount of garden waste taken to Household Waste Recycling Centres. However, it was noted that financial pressures may lead to a decline in the number of people signing-up for the garden waste service in the future.

The Contracts Team Manager informed the Committee that garden waste was delivered to the council's composting facility located at Coxhoe and it was available for resale to businesses and the general public. The officer suggested that the Committee may wish to visit the facility in the future.

In terms of the increase in kerbside recycling in relation to both dry mixed recycling and glass during the pandemic, the Contracts Team Manager informed the Committee that there was evidence that dry mixed recycling was returning to pre-Covid levels however the increase in glass recycling continued. Durham was one of the highest producers of household waste sent for reuse, recycling and composting and was performing better than Northumberland and Newcastle.

The Committee was provided with information on publicity campaigns that have been reinstated following the pandemic, to encourage more awareness of 'what goes where' and waste reduction and reuse. Good progress was reported in terms of single use plastics which had enabled the objective of the campaign to change its focus to the life cycle of catering products.

The amount of contamination of recycling had increased during the pandemic and this had continued with the current contamination rate being approximately 38% and of that approximately 26% was waste including nappies and pet waste. The Committee heard of the campaigns to combat contamination with refreshed educational stickers being placed on bins and ongoing social media campaigns to promote public awareness.

The Contracts Team Manager outlined the targeted campaigns to encourage the student population of Durham to act responsibly in terms of recycling. Partnership work was also being carried out with charities with regard to furniture reuse schemes, with some of the recycled furniture being used to resettle refugees.

The Committee thanked the Contracts Team Manager for the detailed presentation and Members made comments and asked questions as follows.

Councillor Adam asked for information as to what measures were in place to deal with non-kerbside waste. The Contracts Team Manager explained that a reprocessing plant at Birtley was used for the processing of street sweepings and the plant was one of only two in the north-east. In terms of litter, trials of on-street recycling had been carried out which found a high contamination rate. The Contracts Team Manager commented that it is hoped that government legislation may introduce a deposit return scheme in the future. The Committee noted that a full recycling service was offered for commercial waste and trade waste collection statistics had increased during the first quarter of the year. Other projects included work with the Clean and Green team to segregate and recycle fly-tipping as far as possible.

Councillor Adam expressed concern that the amount of landfill was not reducing and the Contracts Team Manager responded that there was an increased impetus to raise public awareness and the service continued to work with contractors and use the best available technology, however it was clear that government legislation was required for a step-change.

Councillor Adam commented on the significant amount of good work undertaken to reduce the use of single use plastics and urged the council to do more to reduce their use at council events such as food festivals. The Contracts Team Manager agreed to pass the comment to the Waste Strategy Team.

Councillor Nicholls referred to the contamination of recycling which he had observed on the site visit and he expressed concern that members of the public did not appreciate that contaminated products are removed, by hand, by staff at the sorting facilities and he asked what more could be done to deal with those who refuse to recycle. Councillor Nicholls further asked whether more could be done to recycle as much material as possible from community litter picks and he also enquired about the latest position in relation to food waste.

The Contracts Team Manager explained the council operated an education rather than enforcement approach which allowed crews to check bins for contamination. The refreshed stickers on bins were designed to educate the public as to the correct disposal of waste and there was a move towards rejecting more bins at the kerbside. A notice placed on a rejected bin would be logged by the in-cab technology in order that when a resident complained that their bin had not been emptied, they would be informed as to the reason why and what they were required to do to rectify the situation.

In response to the question on waste produced from litter-picks, the Contracts Team Manager informed the Committee that Biffa employees had carried out a trial pre-Covid and that it was the intention of the team to pick this up again. With regard to food waste, the officer explained the service is anticipating future changes within the detail of the Environment Act 2021. Preparatory work had been carried out on a costing exercise for a separate food waste collection system. The Contracts Team Manager also highlighted that a new primary school catering contract was in place with all food waste being deposited into one food waste plant.

In response to a question from Councillor Charlton, the Contracts Team Manager clarified that the council had no active landfill sites operating in County Durham and the site at Coxhoe was a closed site.

Councillor Stubbs referred to kerbside recycling and asked about its composition. The Contracts Team Manager clarified that the 38% contamination figure included 26% waste and the remainder was non-target recyclable material.

Referring to the 2021/22 figure, the Contracts Team Manager explained that of the 49,039 tonnes, approximately 9,000 tonnes was glass and approximately 40,000 was material placed in recycling bins and it was 38% of the 40,000 tonnes that was contaminated. The Contracts Team Manager agreed to provide a detailed breakdown of kerbside recycling.

Councillor Quinn referred to the improper disposal of lithium batteries and vapes and suggested that the current practice of using plastic collection boxes was not suitable due to the hazardous nature of these materials. He expressed the view that a safe and convenient way for residents to dispose of these items was required. The Contracts Team Manager agreed to feedback Councillor Quinn's comments and added that the issue was a national issue and a topic for discussion at the National Recycling Conference.

Councillors Elmer and McLean commented on the carbon capture scheme process which involves compression of gaseous CO<sub>2</sub> into a liquid form, and the piping of this liquid into voids beneath the North Sea, noting that the work will be delivered by BP and other contract partners. Members requested assurances from BP that the liquified CO<sub>2</sub> will not itself be used to pressurise voids to enable the further extraction of natural gas and oil. They requested further information as to the level of energy usage and carbon emissions associated with the carbon capture scheme process. Members also asked whether the carbon capture scheme operations are regulated and inspected, and if so which body is responsible for oversight of operations in order that the council might gain assurances that the scheme activities are conducted in accordance with contractual obligations. The Contracts Team Manager agreed to follow up these questions for a response to be provided.

Councillor Charlton emphasised the importance that publicity materials use plain English and are relatable and she also pointed out that the report referenced that a number of small electrical recycling points were situated throughout the county and requested that the locations of these recycling points be highlighted in publicity campaigns. The Contracts Team Manager agreed to feedback the comment and informed members that the service was in the process of creating a toolkit for Members to share on their social media feeds.

**Resolved:**

That the report be received.

## **7 Quarter 4 Revenue and Capital Outturn 2021/22 and Quarter 1 Forecast of Revenue and Capital Outturn 2022/23**

The Committee considered joint reports of the Corporate Director of Resources and Corporate Director of Neighbourhoods and Climate Change on the revenue and capital outturn for the final quarter of 2021/22 and the forecast revenue and capital outturn for the first quarter of 2022/23 (for copy of reports see file of minutes).

Presenting the report for the final quarter of 2021/22, the Finance Manager, Phil Curran, informed the Committee that the final revenue position as at 31 March 2022 was an underspend of £0.563 million against a revised budget of £109.857 million. The outturn took account of approximately £5.5 million of Covid-19 related costs, including waste disposal, increasing agency worker costs and social distancing. The report provided details of the revenue position by Head of Service and an explanation of variances. The cash limit reserve of approximately £1.3 million provided the service with flexibility to deal with unforeseen issues that may require unbudgeted expenditure. The Committee also noted the outturn took account of a draw down from earmarked reserves of approximately £5.6 million.

The Finance Manager explained the capital budget was £45.5 million at the year end and with expenditure against the budget of just over £41 million, the underspend of approximately £4 million related to environmental services and delays in highways projects and it was noted the underspend will be carried forward to next year.

In relation to the capital underspend, Councillor Charlton queried whether increasing costs were likely to have an impact on projects which had been delayed. The Finance Manager responded that inflation was a concern and delays may lead to increased costs, therefore it was possible that some reprioritising of capital schemes may be required in the future.

Councillor Stubbs asked whether there was evidence that vacant posts were negatively impacting the service and where information on agency costs was reflected in the budget data. The Finance Manager explained that the council continued to ensure front-line services were safeguarded as far as possible. The officer clarified that employee underspends may be covered by agency costs and in some cases, vacancies were managed ahead of future savings. He added that there has been recruitment problems in relation to certain professions and the service together with Human Resources are working to address this issue.

In relation to agency costs, where they were reported varied as agency work provided by a company was classed as a service or supply.

Councillor Kellett referred to highly efficient street lighting at Broomside Lane to Low Pittington Road and asked whether similar lighting could be rolled out across the county. The Chair agreed to pass the question to the Street Lighting service for a response to be provided. The officer made reference to the Street Lighting Energy Efficiency Project however he could not confirm as to whether the area referred to was part of the project.

Councillor Charlton asked whether the council's agency refuse workers were on zero hour contracts. The Chair responded that the service would be requested to provide a response which would be shared with the Committee.

Presenting the forecast of revenue and capital outturn for the first quarter of 2022/23, the Finance Manager explained the overspend of £0.311 against a budget of £113.698 million. The Committee noted factors included inflationary pressures relating to energy and fuel and the anticipated staff pay award were likely to impact on the overspend. The report included a breakdown of the outturn position by Head of Service and the reasons for variances. The Finance Manager drew Members' attention to the reduction on the cash limit reserve which limited the level of flexibility within the service.

In relation to the capital budget, it was noted that whilst expenditure during the first three months was approximately £10 million, with the majority of capital budget expected to be spent during the latter part of the year, a significant underspend was not expected.

Councillor Adam raised concern at the additional agency cover due to high levels of sickness absence in refuse and recycling services and he questioned why there was a high level of sickness absence and whether there was any correlation between the number of complaints and the use of agency staff. The Finance Manager clarified that some of the agency cover was necessary as many staff had carried forward annual leave during the Covid-19 pandemic and he added that the council regularly used agency staff therefore a number of agency staff were familiar with the routes. Councillor Adam requested more detailed data on the nature of the complaints and the Chair agreed to the request for data on the key complaints regarding the waste collection service be brought back to the Committee.

Councillor Adam asked a further question relating to the overspend on bin purchases and he noted residents were charged £20 for a new bin, however the cost of a bin was only £17.90, and, as the cost of a new bin has increased resulting in an overspend of £100,000 on bin purchases, would this overspend be passed onto residents. Due to time constraints, the Chair replied that she would request further information from the service which would be shared with the Committee.

Councillor Elmer asked whether there was assurance that the energy price cap for domestic and businesses customers will also apply to the council for its purchase of energy to be discounted in the same way. The Finance Manager responded that it was likely it will apply and the Committee would be appraised of future assistance provided in relation to energy costs.

**Resolved:**

That the Quarter 4 Revenue and Capital Outturn for 2021/22 and the Quarter 1 Forecast of Revenue and Capital Outturn for 2022/23 be noted.

**8 Quarter One, 2022/23 Performance Management Report**

The Committee considered a report of the Corporate Director of Resources which detailed performance during the first quarter of 2022/23 (for copy of report see file of minutes).

Introducing the report, Tom Gorman, Corporate Policy and Performance Manager, commented that as the county continued to recover from the Covid-19 pandemic, it faced additional pressures caused by the cost of living crisis. High inflation exceeding wage increases would lead to a fall in income in real terms and as a result, the council was expecting to see an increase in demand for advice services such as those relating to fuel poverty, benefits and welfare assistance and a possible reduction in demand for discretionary services such as leisure centres, theatres and museums, as households face increased financial pressure.

The Corporate Policy and Performance Manager explained that the format of the performance report had changed in order to focus members' attention on those areas performing well and those requiring improvement. During the quarter, areas performing well included air quality, street cleanliness and fly-tipping. Areas requiring attention included the quantity of waste collected and the contamination of kerbside recycling.

On a positive note, the report highlighted that the Scaling on Street Charging Infrastructure Project won a national award for the Best Electric Vehicle Charging Project and the council's Selective Licensing scheme which aims to improve the management of privately rented properties had commenced. The number of photovoltaic installations in council buildings had increased and the work to convert Morrison Busty into a low carbon depot was progressing. The Corporate Policy and Performance Manager suggested the Committee may wish to visit the site to view the programme of work in the future.

Members made comments and asked questions as follows.

Councillor Nicholls referred to the cleanliness surveys and asked whether the data included private land as he was concerned at the amount of derelict land which suffered from fly-tipping and he asked whether the council could take enforcement action on these areas of land. The Corporate Policy and Performance Manager explained that the data contained in the report related to council owned land and the council was limited as to the enforcement action it could take on private land as landowners were responsible for the removal of fly-tipping on their land. Councillor Nicholls commented that he would like to see the council lobby for increased enforcement powers. Following up the question, Councillor Elmer remarked on fly-tipping on privately-owned, publicly accessible land such as industrial estates and he requested that further information be provided to the Committee in relation to the matter. The Corporate Policy and Performance Manager agreed to follow up the comments and enquire as to where the fly-tipping trouble spots were throughout the county.

Councillor Charlton expressed concern at the enforcement rate for fly-tipping at 49% and commented on the amount of fly-tipping she observed in her division which she pointed out is close to a Household Waste Recycling Centre, and she asked for information on how many cameras were in operation and where they were situated. The Chair informed the Committee that a report and presentation on fly-tipping would be considered at the next meeting of the Committee on 23 November 2022 and that the service would be contacted and asked to include this information in their report.

In response to a question from Councillor Charlton as to when the low carbon depot at Morrison Busty will be complete and whether the project had remained on budget, the Contracts Team Manager clarified the project consisted of several different phases and the Chair stated that a response to Councillor Charlton's request for an update on the project would be sought from the service.

Referring to the Selective Licensing target to achieve 100% of private rented sector properties covered by the scheme by 2027, Councillor Adam commented that the timescale was lengthy, given the increasing problems of anti-social behaviour reported by the public and he asked whether that target was achievable. The Corporate Policy and Performance Manager pointed out that this was a new indicator and he had posed a question to the service as to whether licences should be required at the outset. The response from the service would be shared with the Committee in due course.

**Resolved:**

That the report be noted.

## **9 Any other business**

The following additional items of business were reported.

The Chair referred to the site visit on 27 September 2022 to waste facilities at Thornley Waste Transfer Station, Biffa recycling at Hartlepool and Suez Energy from Waste facility at Haverton Hill, which was very well received and she thanked all the officers involved in the visit. Members remarked on how enlightening the visit had been which had highlighted the intricacies of the processes involved and the scale of the challenge, particularly in relation to the contamination of recycling. Presentation slides from the visit would be circulated to all Members and in order to reinforce the public messages, the Strategic Waste Management Team was compiling a library of materials for Members to use on their social media platforms.

The Vice-Chair informed the Committee of research taking place with Durham University on public perceptions of different types of grass cutting. This recognised the difficulties in gaining the true public opinion as the public are more likely to contact the council to provide negative feedback than they are to provide positive feedback. Therefore, to establish a clearer picture, survey methodology will be used to gather residents' views and the results of the research will be brought to the Committee in due course. Welcoming the work, Members highlighted other factors to consider with regard to less frequent grass cutting such as safety issues and the possible increase of littering and dog-fouling. The Vice-Chair agreed and added that the research would be used to inform the wider area of work.