

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

At a **Special Meeting** of the **Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee** held in **Committee Room 2, County Hall, Durham** on **Friday 24 February 2023** at **9.30 am**

Present:

Councillor B Coult (Chair)

Members of the Committee:

Councillors J Elmer (Vice-Chair), E Adam, J Charlton, G Hutchinson, R Manchester, D Nicholls, R Potts, J Purvis, J Quinn, A Simpson (substitute for Councillor L Brown), D Sutton-Lloyd and S Townsend.

Co-opted Members:

Mr T Cramond

Also present:

Councillor M Wilkes, Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Neighbourhoods and Climate Change

1 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors L Brown, L Fenwick, C Kay, I McLean, C Martin, T Stubbs and Mr P Walton.

2 Substitute Members

Councillor A Simpson substituted for Councillor L Brown.

3 Declarations of Interest

Councillor Charlton declared an interest in respect of Item 5, as a member of Mountsett Crematorium Joint Committee.

4 Items from Co-opted Members or Interested Parties

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

5 Bereavement Services – Update

The Committee considered a report and presentation of the Corporate Director of Neighbourhoods and Climate Change which provided information relating to the work of Bereavement Services (for copy of report and presentation see file of minutes).

The Chair welcomed Ian Hault, Neighbourhood Protection Manager and Graham Harrison, Bereavement Services Manager to the meeting.

The Neighbourhood Protection Manager introduced the presentation which provided an update on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, funeral poverty, burial space, the carbon agenda and future developments. Information was provided on the remit of the bereavement service which is responsible for two crematoria, Mountsett Crematorium located at Dipton and Durham Crematorium in central Durham. The service is also responsible for 46 open cemeteries, 98 closed churchyards and a woodland burial site. Following a review of the service in 2014, elements of the service transferred to the Clean and Green team and Business Support. Clean and Green undertake all grounds maintenance operations associated with the service whilst Business Support deal with aspects such as funeral arrangements, headstone installation and customer services.

In line with the Council's statutory duty to make arrangements for the funerals of people who die or are found dead and no funeral arrangements have been made, the service also carries out public health funerals. To address the growing issue of funeral poverty, the crematoria have introduced reduced cost timeslots and there is also an option for direct cremation.

Members heard that the service implemented a national standard for all new headstones which provides greater foundations and improved stability and the measure is supported by regular testing. The Neighbourhood Protection Manager recalled a question raised by a member of the public at a scrutiny meeting in 2020 regarding the use of weedkiller around headstones and whether this was a cause of headstone instability. Following the meeting, the Council reviewed its approach, resulting in areas within cemeteries being identified for strimming as an alternative to spraying. The Neighbourhood Protection Manager pointed out that strimming has also led to complaints regarding detritus being strewn across memorials and headstones. It was clarified that headstones may be affected by a range of factors, including ground maintenance regimes, animals and tree roots, however, the future will see the potential to install more concrete rafts which provide a stable base for headstones. In the future, the service will also continue to adjust its approach to maintenance within cemeteries to reflect climate and ecological commitments.

The Committee noted that woodland burials have become a popular alternative to traditional burials and an area of land close to Durham crematorium is a dedicated woodland burial site. Several existing cemeteries are now full and for most sites there are alternatives within 4 miles. The Council continues to investigate areas which could be extended to create new burial grounds, however, this is subject to Environment Agency approval in respect of groundwater pollution.

The Neighbourhood Protection Manager explained the crematoria have joint committee arrangements managed through Durham County Council, Central Durham being a partnership with Spennymoor Town Council and Mountsett a partnership with Gateshead Borough Council. The crematoria provide a variety of services including webcasting, memorialisation and recycling of metals. Both sites have solar panels, EV charging points and heat generated from the cremation process is used to heat the buildings. The Committee received information on the recycling of metals resulting from cremation which is carried out with the consent of bereaved families. The proceeds from this had resulted in almost £300,000 being raised for local death related charities.

The Neighbourhood Protection Manager paid tribute to staff and highlighted that their ability to carry out their duties with sensitivity at all times is a skill which should not be underestimated.

The Committee noted an important future development as the service is part of a national working party to consider resomation, a water-based, carbon-friendly alternative to burial and cremation.

The Committee noted that key challenges for the future include the increase in the amount of people suffering from funeral poverty and the demand for burial space.

The Chair thanked officers for the informative presentation and requested comments and questions from the Committee.

In response to a question from Councillor Quinn on the number of woodland burial sites in the county, the Neighbourhood Protection Manager clarified there is one such site at present, however other sites may be suitable and he pointed out that woodland burial sites also require maintenance. Councillor Quinn requested further information on the resomation process and the Neighbourhood Protection Manager explained the body is placed in a water chamber with a water and alkali-based solution and this process changes the body to ash. Councillor Quinn also asked whether the reuse of burial plots had been considered. The Neighbourhood Protection Manager replied that legislation applies only to London burial authorities at the present time. The current approach Durham is taking to address the increasing demand for burial space includes investigating whether it is possible to extend sites, however, strict Environment Agency regulations regarding the suitability of land must be met.

Councillor Adam pointed out that some town and parish councils also provide cemeteries and he asked whether their provision could be utilised. The Neighbourhood Protection Manager replied that customer choice is a factor and he added that some town and parish councils provide only accommodate those living within their boundary.

Councillor Adam stated that it was his understanding that some parish councils will provide a service to those who live outside the parish boundary, for a slightly higher fee and he gave the view that collaboration could lead to solutions in the future. Referring to resomation, Councillor Adam asked what environmental concerns related to the process. The Neighbourhood Protection Manager explained that the fluid is subject to a water treatment process and energy is required in order to heat the water used. Resomation is a comparatively slow process, therefore fewer resomations can be carried out on a daily basis. He clarified that resomation is not available at this point, however it is an important development for the Council to consider in future.

Councillor Adam commented on the maintenance of memorials and headstones recalling previous public concern regarding the erosion of soil. He suggested the solution may be to cease strimming and using herbicides and revert to families tending gravesides. He asked whether this had been considered. The Neighbourhood Protection Manager responded that it would prove difficult as individuals have different views on how gravesides should be maintained. However, the issue of stability of memorials and headstones was being addressed through the implementation of national standards and the installation of rafts to improve stability.

Councillor Charlton asked whether liaison is carried out with funeral directors regarding the various rules which apply as to how cemeteries are cared for so that families are made aware of the arrangements prior to making a decision to purchase a burial plot. The Neighbourhood Protection Manager clarified that information is provided to families when they visit to select a plot and information is also provided in the deeds, when a plot is purchased. Councillor Charlton referred to a specific memorial garden and explained that when permission was granted for the garden, there was a condition that there was to be no marking of plots and she expressed disappointment this was not being adhered to and she questioned whether such conditions are communicated effectively. The Neighbourhood Protection Manager assured Members that information is disseminated, however, it was possible that the information may be overlooked given the difficult circumstances families are in at that time. He added that he would consider the comments to identify how communication may be improved.

In response to a question from Councillor Potts as to whether there are more woodland burial sites in the pipeline, the Neighbourhood Protection Manager replied that there are plans to liaise with the Corporate Property and Land service in this regard. Councillor Potts then asked whether the fluid from the resomation process could be used on land in woodland burial sites and the Neighbourhood Protection Manager responded that he would investigate the question, for a response to be provided to the Committee.

Councillor Elmer referred to carbon emissions resulting from cremations and he asked whether the service had considered requesting that families make a carbon offset payment, the proceeds from which could be used to plant trees.

The Neighbourhood Protection Manager responded that he was not aware that this suggestion had ever been considered.

In response to a question from Councillor Elmer regarding cemeteries in the county which are being weakened by coal mining subsidence, the Neighbourhood Protection Manager stated that he was aware of the issue at Brandon cemetery and he was not aware of any other cemeteries in the county where this was an issue.

Councillor Quinn asked how cost effective resomation will be and the Neighbourhood Protection Manager explained that the cost of a resomator is approximately the same as the cost of a cremator and resomator running costs are lower. However, fewer resomations can be completed on a daily basis as the resomation process takes more time than cremation. In terms of a future business case, other factors needed to be considered including location and the implications of attracting more business into crematoria which are already dealing with a busy workload. Councillor Quinn spoke of advances in technology and he asked if there were any other alternative methods to cremation and resomation on the horizon. The Neighbourhood Protection Manager highlighted the development of electric cremation and he added that technology will undoubtedly continue to develop in this field.

Councillor Adam observed that last year's figures relating to burial and cremation fees were included in the report and he asked for up-to-date information. The Neighbourhood Protection Manager pointed out that cremation fees are set by the joint committees and burial fees are set through the Council's budget setting process. Fees consider market pressures and how best to support residents and this had led to initiatives such as discounted rates and direct cremation. The Neighbourhood Protection Manager agreed to provide up-to-date figures.

Councillor Charlton asked whether the crematoria have the facilities to offer both cremations and resomations and the Neighbourhood Protection Manager confirmed that both locations have sufficient space, however, the challenges of increasing workloads must be considered.

In response to a question from Councillor Elmer on how the Council approaches the funeral rites of minority religions, officers informed the Committee that the site at South Road, Durham caters for Islamic burials and at present Durham has no dedicated facility for the Sikh faith.

Councillor Coult referred to the rafts at Moorside cemetery and asked whether rafts are installed in other cemeteries. The Bereavement Services Manager explained that rafts are installed in sections and Sacriston and Stanley cemeteries have sections with rafts.

Resolved:

That the report be received.

6. Management of DCC Land for Biodiversity – Overview

The Committee considered a report of the Corporate Director of Neighbourhoods and Climate Change which provided information on the role of the Parks and Countryside team, together with colleagues within the Clean and Green team, to deliver management of nature reserves and green spaces across Durham County Council owned land (for copy of report and presentation see file of minutes).

The Committee welcomed Geoff Knight, Technical and Service Development Manager and Darryl Cox, Principal Parks and Countryside Ranger, to the meeting. Introducing the presentation, the Principal Parks and Countryside Ranger outlined the three main objectives of the team which are access for all, the maintenance and conservation of landscape, wildlife and historical features and the strengthening of community links and participation.

The Committee heard that the estate comprises of 63 sites including two major parks, Hardwick Park and Wharton Park and includes 75 miles of railway path network. A team of countryside rangers are responsible for the parks whilst assistant rangers deliver activities. All sites have a management plan and some of the sites benefit from Defra stewardship schemes and receive financial support.

Following the Covid-19 pandemic a comprehensive volunteering programme had been re-established and work is undertaken with private companies to support them to fulfil their corporate social responsibilities. Engagement with schools is carried out and other activities include volunteering, guided walks, community engagement and partnership projects. Partnerships with agencies such as the Bright Water Landscape Partnership and the Seascapes and Heritage Coast are key in order to share good practice on regional and national developments. In addition, engagement work is also undertaken with multi-agency partnerships relating to matters such as accessibility and public health.

Outlining recent challenges for the service, the Principal Parks and Countryside Ranger commented on the impact of austerity measures and how this had forced a refocus within the service. More recent challenges included shifting government priorities and issues arising from Brexit. Natural capital accounting requires the Council to consider how the value of its assets is measured, and as survey monitoring requires intensive resources, a phased approach is being undertaken as part of the Ecological Emergency Action Plan and the initial focus is on local wildlife sites. Condition assessments will be commissioned in due course.

Opportunities for the future include the use of satellite technology which it is hoped will assist to identify long-term trends. Public engagement is becoming increasingly important and Bioblitz events encourage public participation to identify and record different species and this is being extended across the estate. Whilst the pandemic highlighted the importance of nature and outdoor space to health and wellbeing, the recent cost of living crisis was having an impact on income streams. Recent investment in staff had enabled a refocus of activity to help to address the climate and ecological emergency declarations. Biodiversity net gain, which requires developers to contribute to biodiversity as part of the planning process, provides new opportunities and work is underway to identify appropriate land.

The Technical and Service Development Manager, Geoff Knight, then provided information on the Clean and Green Service which is responsible for providing grounds maintenance in areas such as schools, cemeteries and parks and open spaces. In its approach, the service aims to balance the promotion of biodiversity whilst maintaining public amenities and the Manager spoke of the plans for future biodiversity interventions and the development of a strategy with the Ecology team for habitat and meadow creation which will follow national mapping of the commonly used pollinator corridors across the country.

The Committee heard that the Clean and Green team are seeking to change the management of currently mown grassed areas in order to encourage wildlife. In order to encourage biodiversity along highway verges, routine maintenance will change and all verges will be reduced to one cut per year, to a maximum depth of 15cm, however this will exclude sightlines in order that road safety is not compromised.

The Committee also received information on the review of the use of herbicides in public spaces and the consideration of alternatives to glyphosate and trials of pelargonic and acetic acids. The Committee noted the appendix to the report which was a study by Cardiff Council, found glyphosate was the most effective and cheapest option. The Technical and Service Development Manager also explained that the service is undertaking a mini-wilding approach and trialing the ceasing of herbicide use on green spaces around trees and hedges to allow natural species to grow.

The Chair thanked officers for the detailed presentation. The Committee made comments and asked questions as follows.

Councillor Elmer commended the work and thanked the Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Neighbourhoods and Climate Change, for his work in driving the actions forward. He welcomed the opportunity for biodiversity net gain and acknowledged that a full audit of land in Council ownership was required to understand the level of income that could be generated.

Councillor Elmer referred to the advantage that local authorities have in their power, to create local nature reserves and the value they bring, not only to biodiversity but also for health and wellbeing and public engagement opportunities. He added that he would like to see the return of a programme of local nature reserve declaration. The Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Neighbourhoods and Climate Change cautioned that the declaration of a local nature reserve can be a very lengthy and complicated process.

Councillor Elmer also commented that he was pleased to see the new plans for grass maintenance and he stressed the importance of engaging with the public to ensure they understand that the Council is not merely 'letting the grass grow'. Councillor Elmer stated that he would also like residents' feedback to be gathered to acquire a clear understanding of the amount of support and opposition. The Service Development Manager highlighted that a consultation process was in progress which will include the consideration of mail-drops and door-knocks within the immediate vicinities. Referring to biodiversity net gain, the service is working towards having survey sites identified by November, to align with the statutory requirements under the Environment Act 2021, for all planning permissions granted to deliver biodiversity net gain.

Councillor Townsend referred to recent correspondence from the service on the plans to increase the number of spaces which are allowed to grow wild and she asked what the next steps in the process will be. The Service Development Manager explained that local members will be engaged to agree actions and the actions will vary from site to site.

Councillor Sutton-Lloyd said he was encouraged by the work and the recent additional funding and he highlighted the importance of including the smaller towns and villages in the work. He added that he would like to see further joint working, particularly with schools. Councillor Sutton-Lloyd gave the view that the term ecological opportunity would be more appropriate than ecological emergency, as it was clear that the amount work involved in the process will take time.

Councillor Quinn asked what impact the recent capital investment and increase in the number of staff had on the service. The Service Development Manager responded that it will be of great benefit to support the delivery of the Ecological Emergency Action Plan.

At 11 am, attendees stood to observe a national minute's silence to mark the one year anniversary of the full scale Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Councillor Potts queried whether there was more work to be done to engage with parish and town councils and the farming community.

The Service Development Manager highlighted that service level agreements are in place with some local councils. The Principal Parks and Countryside Ranger added that the Low Carbon Team recently conducted an online seminar for parish and town councils on how to manage green spaces for biodiversity and he suggested that it may be useful to repeat the work.

Councillor Adam referred to biodiversity net gain and asked how much work had been done with the planning team thus far and what metric was being used. The Principal Parks and Countryside Ranger replied that some baseline surveys had been carried out and the metric is based on an agreed system whereby the land loss through development is measured, which must be replicated elsewhere in terms of biodiversity units gained.

Councillor Adam observed a focus on grass and wildflower meadows and he asked whether hedgerows were part of the process. He drew attention to paragraph 38 of the report which referred to the potential to deliver benefits through restoration and creation of wildlife habitats, if resources were allocated. He questioned whether there was a lack of resources available for hedgerows due to resources being targeted elsewhere. The Principal Parks and Countryside Ranger clarified that the comment in the report related to previous funding cuts. He added that there is not a great deal of traditional hedgerow within the county and that, where it does exist, it is managed to ensure it does not interfere with access. The Principal Parks and Countryside Ranger provided an example of traditional hedgerow management which is carried out at Aykley Heads where hedgerows are laid using a traditional technique to increase growth and offer protection for wildlife.

The Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Neighbourhoods and Climate Change highlighted that on 8 February, Cabinet considered the Developer Viability, Affordable Housing and Financial Contributions, Housing Needs, Design Code and Trees, Woodlands and Hedges Supplementary Planning Documents and suggested that Members may wish to feed into the consultation which runs until 11 April 2023. The Chair agreed to circulate the link to the consultation to all Overview and Scrutiny Members.

Councillor Charlton spoke of the benefit the additional countryside ranger had brought to the Causey Arch site. She referred to the site identified in her division for the wilding project and she gave her view that the marshland in the area would be a better location. Councillor Charlton also asked for more information on Bioblitz and engagement with schools. The Principal Parks and Countryside Ranger informed the Committee that the most recent Bioblitz event took place at Wharton Park where the public and experts carried out survey monitoring in a joint effort, to identify different species. He added that schools are engaged in activities mainly through the destination parks and whilst outreach work with schools is increasing following the Covid-19 pandemic, traditionally, secondary schools are more difficult to engage with.

Mr Cramond referred to biodiversity net gain and observed that the Environment Act suggests that net gain should be provided on site, whereas with a county wide perspective, it is likely that there will be more benefit for it to be outsourced beyond the site of the planning application. The Principal Parks and Countryside Ranger clarified that there will be a county wide approach. In a further question, Mr Cramond referred to the sites identified to date and the requirement that compensation is provided like for like and he asked whether there was a range of habitats available, such as aquatic habitats which are difficult for developers to secure. The Principal Parks and Countryside Ranger responded that whilst there will be potential for this in the future, at present, the majority of sites are grassland sites.

In response to a question from Councillor Elmer as to whether the Durham Hedge Grant, administered by Durham Hedgerow Partnership is still available, officers confirmed that it is available and the scheme provides financial assistance for the renovation and planting of hedges.

Councillor Nicholls thanked the officers for their work and he remarked on the amount of public interest that exists with regard to trees in residential areas. He asked whether local residents are consulted when tree planting occurs. The Service Development Manager clarified that existing trees are covered by a strict tree policy and the policy is due to be reviewed in the spring. A dedicated officer, Sue Mullinger, Landscape Delivery Manager, is responsible for overseeing the planting of new trees and he suggested the Committee may wish to request further information from the specific team. Members of the Committee echoed Councillor Nicholls' comments regarding the difficulties residents face with regard to trees which cause nuisance or damage to properties. The Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Neighbourhoods and Climate Change highlighted that, in the Cabinet report he previously referred to, there are plans for improvements. He also referred to the amount of good work done in the wake of Storm Arwen.

On behalf of the Committee, the Chair thanked all the staff for their good work, not forgetting the countryside rangers and volunteers.

The Committee **Resolved** that:

- a) the report and presentation be received;
- b) arrangements are made for the Committee to visit DCC parks and open spaces within the 2022/2023 work programme.

7. Such other business

The Chair reminded the Committee, that following a short meeting of the Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee on Monday 27 March 2023, a CERP workshop will be held to which all Overview and Scrutiny Members are welcome to attend.