

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

Special Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee

At a **Special meeting** of the **Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee** held in **Committee Room 2, County Hall, Durham** on **Friday 23 February 2024** at **9.30 am**

Present:

Councillor B Coult (Chair)

Members of the Committee:

Councillors J Elmer (Vice-Chair), E Adam, L Brown, R Crute, I McLean, D Nicholls, D Oliver, J Purvis, A Simpson and D Sutton-Lloyd

1 Apologies

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors P Atkinson, C Kay, C Lines, A Reed, T Stubbs, S Townsend and Co-opted Member, Mr P Walton.

2 Substitute Members

There were no substitute members in attendance.

3 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

4 Items from Co-opted Members and Interested Parties

No items were reported.

5 Community Protection Service Profile and Scope

The Committee considered a report and presentation of the Corporate Director of Neighbourhoods and Climate Change which provided an overview of the profile and scope of the Community Protection Service (for copy of report and presentation see file of minutes).

Joanne Waller, Head of Community Protection, was welcomed to the meeting to deliver the presentation. The Head of Community Protection explained that the service aims to improve the health, safety and environment of the community. The service, which had recently undergone a restructure, comprises of three teams; Safer Places, Strategic Regulation and Business Compliance. The teams work in partnership with other council services and organisations such as the Environment Agency, Durham Constabulary and County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Service.

The Head of Community Protection outlined the range of services delivered, many of which are regulatory services, including a proactive inspection programme to monitor food hygiene and standards, pollution, weights and measures and health and safety. The work also includes responding to emergencies and it was highlighted that the service was at the forefront during the Covid-19 pandemic. Intelligence-led activities are also undertaken, covering a wide range of environmental and health related issues, in response to complaints or requests for service. In respect of work to protect environmental health, the Head of Community Protection highlighted the service regulates private sector housing standards and houses in multiple occupation. Approximately 3,500 noise nuisance complaints are received per year and this figure continues to increase.

The Head of Community Protection commented on the work done by the Community Action Scheme which established a small team, the Community Action Team, to work within designated communities, for an eleven week period, to identify issues and carry out improvements on a multi-agency basis. This targeted work has proved successful however there is more work to be done to ensure that the resulting positive impact of the team continues beyond the project period. The Horden Together initiative has provided a more permanent solution, through a place-based team situated in the village, working with partner organisations to focus on support in the community, to effect change and build trust and resilience.

The Chair thanked the Head of Community Protection for the presentation and invited comments and questions from the Committee.

Councillor Nicholls referred to the work of the Community Action Team and asked what more could be done to maintain the good work following the team's exit from a location. The Head of Community Protection explained that as the project is an eleven week project, only a limited number of communities can be assisted throughout the year. Each project is reviewed approximately 6-12 months on completion of the programme, to identify ongoing issues. The service continues to work with Groundwork North East to carry out sustainability work at the end of each project, to encourage the community to maintain the progress. The Horden Together initiative has built on the work of the Community Action Team in Horden, for a more permanent presence, using the MEAM (Make Every Adult Matter) framework, with partners working together as a team in high risk, high demand areas. It was confirmed that this initiative has been extended for a further three years and that it is hoped that this initiative will be extended to a larger geographical area in the future.

In response to a question from Councillor Nicholls as to how the service provided by the Community Action Team could be requested by members, the Head of Community Protection explained that project locations are selected according to specific public health compliant data including levels of deprivation, the number of empty homes and antisocial behaviour data.

Councillor Nicholls referred to the delays within the court system following the Covid-19 pandemic and asked whether the delays had impacted upon the service and whether there was a need for stricter legislation. The Head of Community Protection was of the view that the enforcement powers available are sufficient. Alternative action to court proceedings is used, when it is appropriate to do so, including civil sanctions such as fixed penalty notices and improvement notices. More serious offences may lead to court proceedings which can be lengthy and complex in nature. It was highlighted that court proceedings are the last resort and the service, together with partners, considers how existing powers can be used to best effect.

Councillor Adam commended the work of the Community Action Team and he commented that, in his experience of similar work in the Newton Aycliffe West Ward area, whilst some residents were keen to engage, encouraging a large number of residents to become involved was difficult to achieve and he asked whether the offer of incentives had been considered, to encourage participation. The Head of Community Protection replied that the Horden Together project had benefited from the work of a Community Engagement Officer and that fear of reprisals may lead residents to refrain from reporting issues. She added that keys to engagement included gaining trust, promoting strength in numbers and creating a reciprocal relationship. In terms of incentives, in Horden, community engagement had led to the development of an apprenticeship scheme for community volunteers, to learn skills and increase their employment opportunities.

Councillor McLean, local member for the Horden division referred to the serious problems embedded in the community in Horden including organised crime. He spoke of the multi-agency approach taken by the Horden Together initiative in order to disrupt the behaviour and how the MEAM framework brought all agencies together to provide coordinated support. Councillor McLean praised the project which had driven interventions for positive change, with residents engaging in the project and he added that he would like to see similar projects throughout the county.

Referring to the work to improve air quality, Councillor Elmer noted that tackling the number of excess deaths linked to nitrogen dioxide from road traffic emissions requires a reduction in the number of cars. He added that whilst the strategic direction of government is to reprioritise road space, decisions on how to reduce private car use are difficult. Councillor Elmer referred to the Air Quality Management Plan and provided his view that it lacked action to reprioritise road space. The Head of Community Protection commented that the approach to air quality is linked to the work of Sustainable Transport, with regard to the plans for active travel and the promotion of sustainable modes of transport. The Head of Community Protection acknowledged there is more work to be done to provide alternative transport and influence the public, to encourage a step-change in behaviour from private car ownership.

Councillor Elmer pointed out that whilst these decisions are difficult, there is a statutory requirement for the Council to reduce levels of nitrogen dioxide and it has leverage in its statutory duty.

In response to a question from Councillor Oliver on the process for air quality monitoring outside Durham City, the Head of Community Protection explained that air quality monitoring is carried out across areas throughout the county, based on specific criteria. Where spikes are observed during monitoring, further investigations are made and, if an air quality objective is breached, the Council will declare the area an Air Quality Management Area (AQMA). The Head of Community Protection asked any members with a particular concern regarding air quality, to contact the Environment Protection Team.

Councillor Brown queried when the last public participation event on air quality had taken place. The Head of Community Protection replied that she understood that a public event on the Air Quality Action Plan took place at end of October 2023 and she agreed to check the details and confirm with Councillor Brown.

Councillor Sutton-Lloyd asked whether the service shared learning with other local authorities who have carried out similar projects to the Community Action Scheme, in relation to promoting community engagement and sustainability of the work. The Head of Community Protection confirmed that a network of place-based teams exist throughout the country and learning is shared. Durham is very much at the forefront of the MEAM approach and the Horden Together initiative has led other authorities to consider replicating the approach in their area. She added that the Horden Together initiative was shortlisted for a Local Government Chronicle award in the community involvement category.

Councillor Purvis praised the recent work carried out by the Community Action Team at Deneside. He spoke of how the team delivered the project in such a way that it encouraged residents to become part of the project, to identify their needs and it provided reassurance to hard-to-reach residents. He added that the momentum had been maintained with help from Clean and Green and the Groundwork Trust.

Resolved:

The members of the Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted the information contained within the report and presentation and commented accordingly.

Councillor Nicholls left the meeting.

6 Bereavement Services

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

The Chair welcomed Ian Hoult, Neighbourhood Protection Manager and Graham Harrison, Bereavement Services Manager to the meeting to deliver a presentation. The Neighbourhood Protection Manager outlined the statutory requirement that burial authorities are authorised, but not required, to provide burial grounds. In addition, the Council has a statutory duty to make arrangements for the funerals of people who die without funeral arrangements, known as public health funerals.

The Neighbourhood Protection Manager spoke of how the functions of the bereavement service link to the ambitions set out in the themes of the Council Plan, in relation to communities, the environment and the economy. The Committee noted the changing customer demand, with a higher number of people being cremated than buried. The number of public health funerals continues to increase, mainly due to funeral poverty and the Neighbourhood Protection Manager described the work carried out by a small team of staff responsible for investigating whether the deceased person had assets, next of kin, a valid will and whether the person had any wishes for their funeral.

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 wide variety of services including webcasting, memorialisation and recycling of metals. The proceeds from the recycling of metals are donated to local death related charities.

The Committee noted that Durham's fees for cremation and burial are currently below the national average and one of the key challenges for the future is the increase in the amount of people suffering from funeral poverty. In response, the service has introduced discounted time slots and a lower cost, direct cremation option. The Council is also responsible for 46 open cemeteries and 98 closed churchyards are maintained. Although the number of full burials has reduced, an increasing number of people wish to inter cremated ashes. Demand for burial space is a key challenge and work is ongoing with regard to the provision of future burial space.

Whilst cremation has an initial carbon footprint, it has less environmental impact over the long-term than burial, due to the ongoing maintenance of cemeteries. Technology is continuing to develop alternatives to burial and flame cremation, including resomation and natural organic reduction and it is expected that the demand for alternative methods will increase in the future.

The officers were thanked for the presentation and questions and comments were invited.

Councillor Adam commented that the increasing number of public health funerals will inevitably impact on staff time and resources in the future. The Neighbourhood Protection Manager acknowledged that arranging public health funerals can be labour intensive and he clarified that the local authority may recover costs from the estate of a deceased person or from the Crown, when a person dies without a will and no relatives are found. The Bereavement Services Manager confirmed that five public health funerals were being dealt with during that week.

Councillor Adam asked whether the Council linked with neighbouring authorities to address issues such as future burial space and alternative methods of burial and cremation. The Neighbourhood Protection Manager highlighted that joint working exists currently, as Durham's two crematoria are managed via joint arrangements. However, one of the main considerations is that the majority of people opt to use facilities which are close to their home and therefore Durham's plans for the future will consider existing provision at key locations, the use of plots with exclusive rights and alternative approaches to interment. Other local authorities are, currently, not as progressive as Durham in relation to alternative approaches and the Bereavement Services Manager is involved with the national working groups.

In response to a question from Councillor Elmer, the Neighbourhood Protection Manager observed that the information showing comparative carbon emissions associated with the different approaches did not recognise that each site will be different. Councillor Elmer highlighted the opportunity to generate income from biodiversity net gain through the creation of natural burial sites. The Neighbourhood Protection Manager confirmed that discussions were taking place with the Ecology team and this will be considered within the wider work being undertaken on cemetery space.

In response to a question from the Chair for clarification as to the definition of plot sizes, the Bereavement Services Manager clarified that half plots and full plots are 4 feet and 9 feet respectively. Replying to a further question from the Chair, the Bereavement Services Manager explained that consent of the bereaved family is required for the removal of metals for recycling and a small number of families per year request that metals are returned to the family.

Resolved:

The members of the Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted the information contained within the report and presentation and commented accordingly.