

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

ENVIRONMENT AND SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

At a meeting of the **Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee** held in **Committee Room 2, County Hall, Durham** on **Wednesday 24 July 2024** at **9.30 am**

Present:

Councillor J Elmer in the Chair

Members of the Committee:

Councillors E Adam, L Brown, R Crute, L Fenwick, C Kay, C Lines, I MacLean, J Purvis, S Robinson, A Simpson, T Stubbs, D Sutton-Lloyd and C Varty.

1 Apologies for Absence

Apologies were noted from Councillors P Atkinson, B Coult, D Nicholls and S Townsend.

2 Substitute Members

Councillors L Fenwick and C Varty attended for Councillors S Townsend and D Nicholls, respectively.

3 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 10 May 2024 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

4 Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were made.

5 Items from Co-opted Members or Interested parties

No items were raised by Co-opted Members or interested parties.

6 Strategic Overview and Update of Resources and Waste Management Services in County Durham

The Committee considered a report of the Corporate Director of Neighbourhoods and Climate Change which provided an update on resources and waste management services in County Durham (for copy of report and presentation, see file of minutes).

Jo Blackie, Strategic Waste Manager, introduced the presentation by providing details of the scale of waste service operations within County Durham, with 86 refuse and recycling vehicles, 12 household waste recycling centres, 4 waste transfer stations, a composting facility, energy from waste contracts and a material recycling facility. Details were provided on performance following the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and the Committee noted that the current verified statistics were those for 2022-23. The key trends showed a reduced recycling rate during the Covid-19 pandemic that had remained at approximately 37%, reflecting the national trend. The landfill diversion rate had improved since the pandemic however, the high level of kerbside residual waste continued to be a legacy of the pandemic. The amount of kerbside recycling had declined following the pandemic and possible factors for the decline were cited as cost of living pressures and the increase in the number of manufacturers who were reducing the amount of packaging used. Positive news was reported with an increase in garden waste collection subscriptions and the tonnage of garden waste collected.

A comparison of Durham's performance with that regionally showed Durham's 37% rate in respect of waste sent for reuse, recycling and composting was the highest in the North East. Waste to landfill at 9.6% was on par with that of Northumberland County Council being a similar-sized, largely rural authority.

An update on the progress of waste reduction campaigns including campaigns to encourage the use of real nappies and the 'Love Food, Hate Waste' campaign was provided. It was reported that the Single Use Plastic Project, to encourage the use of sustainable products, was regaining momentum following the pandemic. Information was also provided on activities to encourage reuse, including the success of the reuse shop located at Stainton Grove Household Waste Recycling Centre. The Strategic Waste Manager informed the Committee of plans to increase the reuse offer across the household waste recycling centre network, with the potential to open a further reuse shop.

Communication campaigns were continuing to educate the public on correct recycling methods which had resulted in a reduction in the contamination rate to 32%. However, a one-third contamination rate in recycle meant this remained a key area of focus.

The Strategic Waste Manager referred to the success of the Waste Electronic and Electrical Equipment (WEEE) Project which had seen 160 WEEE collection points and 70 vape collection points installed in the county. The project had been successful in gaining further external funding for 2024 to expand the project.

Repair Cafés at which volunteers offered a check and repair service on electrical items was another successful initiative and the Committee noted that three, volunteer-led repair cafes were being supported by the Council.

The Strategic Waste Manager explained that the Teesside Energy from Waste Facility project, to procure a new waste treatment facility, had suffered delays due to issues with the grid connection offer, however, following government lobbying, the grid connection had been secured and the procurement process had recommenced. Final tenders were due to be submitted by late 2024, with a view to commercial operations commencing in late 2029. The Chair highlighted that the link included within the presentation slide, which provided further details on the Teesside Energy from Waste Facility, would be circulated to the Committee, following the meeting.

The Strategic Waste Manager explained that Durham's recent bid into the government's carbon capture and storage (CCS) funding round was shortlisted but was ultimately unsuccessful. Further funding opportunities would be considered in the future.

The Committee noted that the Environment Act which became law in 2021 brought new statutory duties. Simpler Recycling Reforms would lead to all people across England recycling the same materials, ending the confusion over what could and could not be recycled in different parts of the country. The Strategic Waste Manager spoke of the impact to the Council as, in the future, weekly food waste collections would be mandatory and there was also the potential for changes in the way recycling was collected from households and an extension of the garden waste collection service. The Strategic Waste Manager commented on the work underway to prepare for the changes, including modelling and costing exercises, details of which would feature in a future report to Cabinet.

The Committee noted that under the new legislation, the Extended Producer Responsibility for packaging would require producers to compensate local authorities for the cost of managing household packaging waste. The Deposit Return Scheme, due to launch in 2027, would require a small deposit to be placed on single use drinks containers.

Concluding the presentation, the Strategic Waste Manager highlighted that the changes over the coming years meant the service would be required to undertake a substantial amount of change management. The changes, however, also provided opportunities to shape the waste management service of the future.

The Chair thanked the Strategic Waste Manager for the comprehensive presentation and he invited questions and comments from the Committee.

Councillor Sutton-Lloyd commented that he was pleased to see the continuation of funding for the WEEE project and he added that his local community centre participated in the scheme. He had been surprised at the number of items which had been brought in for recycling which were, in fact, in perfectly good working order and that action was required to tackle the throwaway culture.

Councillor Stubbs referred to the performance data which showed that the municipal waste tonnage in 2022-23 was almost identical to that for 2019-20, however, the amount of municipal waste sent to landfill in 2022-23 was 9.6% compared to 2.2% for 2019-2020 and he expressed concern that the percentage of waste sent to landfill had increased by approximately 7%. Councillor Stubbs also drew attention to the percentage rates for household reuse and recycling which were 41% in 2019-20 compared to 37% in 2022-23. The Strategic Waste Manager referred to behaviour change during and after the pandemic, which saw an increase in household waste with an increase in the amount of people working from home. The Strategic Waste Manager also pointed out that the majority of the local authorities in the North East used the waste facility at Teesside and the scale of the increase in waste during the pandemic caused capacity issues at the facility, therefore the amount of landfill increased. The increased pressure during the pandemic also led to planned maintenance being suspended, causing further issues. The issues had resolved and it was expected that improvements in performance in respect of landfill diversion would be apparent in future data.

In reply to a question from Councillor Stubbs on when data for 2023-2024 would be available, Gemma Wilkinson, Strategy Team Leader, explained that quarterly performance data was subject to a three-month lag therefore data covering the period April 2023-March 2024 would be detailed in the quarter one report. The Strategic Waste Manager added that annual data used by the service for benchmarking purposes was subject to a nine-month lag.

Councillor MacLean referred to the introduction of food waste collections and he asked whether areas of the country which had already introduced food waste collections had reported suffering an increase in vermin / pest infestations. The Strategic Waste Manager commented that similar concerns were raised when the Council introduced the composting facility however those concerns had not prevailed. She added that rigorous trials were being carried out on food waste containers, to ensure they would be fit for purpose.

Councillor Lines spoke in support of the initiatives to encourage reuse, such as the Repair Cafes and Friendly Fixers. Referring to trials of the use of plastic in road surfacing, Councillor Lines questioned its durability in respect of electric vehicles which tended to be heavier than petrol vehicles.

The Strategic Waste Manager responded that further information on the trial, would be required to be provided by Highways colleagues.

Councillor Lines asked what use was made of the compost from the garden waste collection service. The Strategic Waste Manager replied that the compost was used by the Clean and Green team as a soil improver and sold to farmers and Allotment Associations. Give-away events had been considered but the lack of a bagging facility meant that was not a cost-effective option. The Strategic Waste Manager added that Durham University was carrying out research into its use as a natural growing medium.

Councillor Robinson expressed his view that food waste collections would increase vermin infestations, resulting in increased pressure on environmental health services. Councillor Robinson also commented on incineration and the view expressed by Greenpeace UK which estimated that two-thirds of incinerated material could be recycled and he asked whether that had been considered by the Council. The Strategic Waste Manager highlighted that all actions were focused around the waste strategy and the Council strived to encourage the public to change their behaviour and to promote reuse and repair.

In response to a question from Councillor Robinson regarding the future of carbon capture and storage, the Strategic Waste Manager commented that whilst Durham was unsuccessful in the initial funding round, it provided the opportunity to learn from the initial projects and to consider future developments in the technology.

Councillor Robinson expressed his support for the WEEE project, commenting that he was involved in a charity which ran a similar project to recycle small electrical products and which now employed a number of people.

Councillor Brown remarked that she was doubtful that vermin-proof food waste containers could be created. Referring to the recent change in government, Councillor Brown asked the Strategic Waste Manager for her views on whether the reforms would come to fruition and whether the garden waste collection service would be free of charge in the future. The Strategic Waste Manager explained that the primary legislation was in place however it was possible that there may be nuances in the reforms. The Strategic Waste Manager explained the government's New Burdens doctrine which ensured that the relevant government department provided funding when a new burden was placed on a local authority and funding had been allocated in respect of the separate weekly food waste collections. Garden Waste was not considered to be a new burden however it may be classed as a new burden in the future, should the government change the service to create consistency across whole of England.

Councillor Kay asked if the aerobic digester in Easington remained in use. The Strategic Waste Manager clarified that the digester at Thornley closed a number of years ago and the facility became a waste transfer station.

The Strategic Waste Manager explained the difference between aerobic and anaerobic digesters, clarifying that the new facilities were anaerobic digesters and she suggested members may find it useful to visit one of the facilities in the future, such as the biogas plant at Newton Aycliffe. The Chair pointed out that anaerobic digestion also had a carbon impact and he stressed the importance of focusing on action to reduce food waste.

In response to a question from Councillor Kay, the Strategic Waste Manager confirmed that precious metals including gold, contained in electronic and electrical products, were recycled / reprocessed.

Councillor Kay raised concerns that residents had reported witnessing refuse crews tipping glass into the recycling vehicle with other materials and they questioned, if that was the case, why they were required to make the effort to separate glass. James Lee, Waste Operations Manager, explained that may have been a misconception as the public may not be aware that the vehicles had split compartments and glass was emptied into one compartment whilst the contents of the recycling bin were emptied into the other compartment. The Waste Operations Manager added that crews received regular briefings on correct and safe working practices and he requested any members with concerns, to report the issues for investigation.

Councillor Adam expressed that he would be concerned if the technology around carbon capture and storage was unfounded. Councillor Adam also noted that the report referred to the provision of a clinical waste collection service and he asked for further information on the service. He added that he was aware of plans for a clinical waste incinerator to be built at Newton Aycliffe, to serve County Durham. The Strategic Waste Manager informed the Committee that the clinical waste collection service comprised of offensive waste and clinical waste and the service was free of charge to residents. Referrals for the service were through medical practitioners and the Strategic Waste Manager confirmed that businesses were not eligible for the clinical waste collection service. The Strategic Waste Manager referred to methods of treating clinical waste, including incineration and autoclave treatment and she informed the Committee that Durham's clinical waste was sent to Leeds and Newcastle for processing. She requested that Councillor Adam provide her with details of the planned facility at Aycliffe, as she was not aware of the plans.

The Strategic Waste Manager commented that public perceptions seemed to focus on the environmental impact of incineration, however, all waste streams had an environmental impact, including recycling with its mechanical separation processes and mobile plant and the associated carbon footprint. The service aimed to use the most effective treatment, with the least amount of environmental impact for each waste stream.

Councillor Elmer spoke of his frustration that the Council was not required to measure carbon dioxide emissions from incineration and the Strategic Waste Manager highlighted that consultation by the Department for Energy, Security and Net Zero on an Emissions Trading Scheme sought to extend the scheme to include waste treatment facilities in the future and she added that she would consult with Councillor Elmer on the Council's response to the consultation.

In response to comments from Councillor Elmer on the desire to create a circular economy and how the waste service was planning for future pressures, the Strategic Waste Manager explained that the service was planning for the next decade, including using information gathered from Planning and through analysing population growth statistics supplied by the Office for National Statistics.

Resolved:

The Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee received the report and commented accordingly.

7 Quarter Four, 2023/24 Performance Management Report

The Committee considered the Quarter Four 2023/24 Performance Management report of the Chief Executive which outlined the progress towards achieving the strategic ambitions and objectives set out in the 2023-27 Council Plan. The report covered performance from January to March 2024 (for copy of report see file of minutes).

Gemma Wilkinson, Strategy Team Leader, presented the report highlighting themes pertinent to the remit of the Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee. With respect to the economy theme, it was reported that scheduled maintenance and operational issues had impacted on cinema occupancy and ticket sales at theatres.

In relation to the environment, the Strategy Team Leader referred to figures shared in the previous presentation and clarified that the figures contained in the performance report related to a different time period. The Strategy Team Leader reported that the amount of waste diverted from landfill had improved. In addition, contamination of recyclate waste had improved following education and enforcement activity. The Strategy Team Leader pointed out that the Office for Local Government (Oflog) had developed a new national contamination rate metric, which was based on different methodology to the current contamination rate measure and it was, therefore, not comparable. Discussions were taking place with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) to understand the calculation methodology. The Oflog measure for 2022/23 showed an improvement on the previous year but performance was worse than the regional average.

It was reported that Park and Ride patronage had improved compared to last year, driven by the removal, in January, of free off-street parking after 2pm.

The target originally set for tree planting had been amended to 85,000 trees due to a reduction in the amount of available land as some sites had been removed for a variety of reasons including development potential and additional land being required to meet associated biodiversity net gain requirements.

Response times to fix highway defects were better than or near target for all defect categories and highway conditions were better than all benchmarking comparators. Low levels of fly tipping continued, which followed the increase in fines introduced in May.

Industrial action by Go North East during October and November 2023 had impacted bus patronage and overall satisfaction with the service in County Durham was worse than benchmarks. Regional work continued on the Bus Service Improvement Plan.

The Chair thanked the Strategy Team Leader for the update and invited comments and questions from the Committee.

Councillor Stubbs thanked the officer for the response to the question raised at the previous meeting in relation to theatre yield and occupancy which clarified the calculation used, however, the question remained as to whether the original targets had been achievable. He was disappointed to see the dip in performance for cinemas and theatres due to repairs and maintenance, which, in his view, were within the Council's control. Councillor Stubbs praised the facilities and staff at the Gala Theatre, adding that it provided excellent value for money and he asked whether there was more to be done to market the asset. The Chair echoed Councillor Stubbs' comments in praise of the Gala Theatre and he informed the Committee that an item on the management of the Council's theatres was included in the future work programme. The Strategy Team Leader agreed to pass the comments to the service.

Councillor Adam referred to accessibility to employment sites and he asked for further information as to how the figures had been calculated. He noted that, of the three employment sites in Newton Aycliffe namely Merchant Park, Forest Park and Aycliffe Business Park, two of the sites exceeded the 2019 baseline and one of the sites performed worse than the baseline and he questioned why that was the case when public transport served all three sites. The Strategy Team Leader explained that the calculation took into account bus service times and the number of households which could reach the employment locations within an hour and by 8.30am. Changes would have occurred to bus services and household locations since 2019. Councillor Adam raised concern that the report stated that only 19% of passengers could reach Aycliffe Business Park by public transport, by 8.30am. The Strategy Team Leader responded that Councillor Adam's comments would be passed to colleagues involved in the Bus Service Improvement Plan.

Councillor Lines referred to the report in relation to the number of visitor attractions accessible by public transport and he highlighted that Hardwick Park now had an accessible path which was less than half a mile from the nearest bus stop. The bus service, however, was infrequent. The Strategy Team Leader replied that as the path was a newly created path, the details may not yet have appeared on the mapping system and she added that she would inform the relevant colleagues.

Councillor Elmer remarked that the removal of land for tree planting due to additional land being required to meet biodiversity net gain requirements seemed counter-intuitive and he requested that further information be sought on the issue.

Resolved:

The Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted the overall position and direction of travel in relation to quarter four performance (January to March), and the actions being taken to address areas of challenge.

8 Refresh of the Work Programme 2024/25 for Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee

The Committee considered a report of the Director of Legal and Democratic Services which provided the Committee with an updated draft work programme for 2024/25 (for copy of report see file of minutes).

Diane Close, Overview and Scrutiny Officer, stated the proposed work programme reflected the objectives and associated outcomes and actions identified within the Council Plan and the County Durham Vision 2035. The proposed work programme was designed to be flexible to accommodate emerging items and to accommodate changes in government policy. Flexibility was particularly important as the work programme was required to be delivered in a shorter timescale, from July 2024 to early March 2025, with local elections being held in May 2025.

Councillor Crute confirmed that the Regional and Local Transport Plan featured in the Economy and Enterprise Overview and Scrutiny work programme and Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee members would be invited to a joint meeting to consider that item.

Resolved:

The Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee

- a) Received and commented on the proposed draft work programme for 2024/25.

- b) Agreed the Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee work programme for 2024/25 and the flexibility it offers to respond to emerging issues.
- c) Considered identifying a topic for future light touch review activity.

9 Minutes of the Environment and Climate Change Partnership Executive Board

The Committee considered the minutes of the Environment and Climate Change Partnership Executive Board meeting held on 10 June 2024, for information (for copy, see file of minutes).

10 Such other business

Councillor Elmer, on behalf of himself and the Chair, thanked the Committee for their work throughout such a busy year. He also thanked the Overview and Scrutiny officers for their support to the Chair and Vice-Chair to ensure the successful delivery of the work programme.