

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 16 January 2025** at **9.30 am**

Present:

Councillor B Coult (in the Chair)

Members of the Committee:

Councillors J Elmer (Vice Chair), E Adam, C Lines, D Nicholls, J Purvis, A Simpson, T Stubbs and D Sutton-Lloyd.

Co-opted Members:

Mr B McArdle and Ms K Monahan.

1 Apologies

Apologies were noted from Councillors P Atkinson, L Brown and S Townsend.

2 Substitute Members

No substitute members were present.

3 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 22 November 2024 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

No matters were reported.

6 Public Perceptions of Greenspace Management Amongst County Durham Residents

The Committee welcomed Jack Hughes PhD and Michael Lengieza PhD from Durham University's Department of Psychology to present empirical evidence on public perceptions of greenspace management amongst County Durham residents (for copy of summary, full report and presentation, see file of minutes).

Dr Hughes explained the concept of the research was born from his interest in his neighbours' views on the maintenance of an area of greenspace in the neighbourhood. This led him to consider undertaking research into public perceptions with regard to mowing practices. Recognising that Durham County Council mowed a great deal of land, contact was made with the Council which agreed to collaborate with the study.

The Committee noted that the demographics of the research sample mirrored the general population of County Durham. The majority of participants were recruited in response to Durham County Council's media communications and a small number of participants came from the University's communication channels. The research was designed to include a reasonable range of opinions.

Dr Hughes provided a summary of the key findings and recommendations of the research. These included that, on average, County Durham residents were slightly supportive of reduced mowing and there was a strong desire amongst residents for more wild spaces. Aesthetic appeal, environmental impact and social desirability were important factors when considering mowing. Mowing was deemed important only for graveyards, parks, sports pitches and footpath borders, otherwise, mowing was seen as 'neither important or unimportant'. Those surveyed were supportive of more ecologically conscious land management practices and the Council would likely be supported in, at least, partially reducing mowing practices, especially for specific locations. For areas such as unused space, roundabouts, road borders, council grounds and open spaces, reductions in mowing may avoid significant opposition as, on average, mowing was not seen as particularly important for those areas.

The two most important predictors of support were concerns and perceptions regarding environmental impact and neatness. Furthermore, neatness and visual appeal were reported to be more important to perceptions of whether an area should be mown, than environmental impact. Therefore, changing perceptions of neatness or reducing neatness concerns were more likely to effect change. In addition, interventions which highlighted the improved beauty of a less mown area, may have more support than interventions that highlight the environmental impact.

The Chair thanked Drs Hughes and Lengieza for presenting their research. Comments and questions were invited.

Councillor Sutton-Lloyd thanked Drs Hughes and Lengieza for sharing their findings which highlighted key areas of focus for further investigation, at a local level.

Councillor Sutton-Lloyd continued by highlighting that he was surprised at some of the findings as elected members tended to receive many complaints in relation to the current grass cutting policy.

Councillor Stubbs questioned the level of ambivalence and he gave the view that respondents were more likely to be ambivalent about areas of land that were of no particular relevance to them and they were likely to have stronger opinions about areas of greenspace that were significant to them, for example land which was in close proximity to their home. Drs Hughes and Lengieza responded that land types were chosen to maintain a similar level of abstractness and there was insufficient difference in the terminology used to describe the land types, to account for the divergence of opinions.

Councillor Lines commended the research and, speaking from experience, he gave the view that whilst the role of elected members was to represent all those in their electoral division, members tended to be contacted by a minority of residents who held strong opinions, one way or another, and they may never hear from the silent majority of residents. Councillor Lines highlighted that one of the key findings related to changing perceptions around neatness and environmental impact and therefore it was important for the Council to be proactive when engaging with the public. Dr Hughes agreed that human nature was such that people were more likely to offer opinions when they felt strongly opposed to, or, in favour of, an issue, therefore. It should be noted that feedback from public consultations may not be representative of all those who could be affected by a change. Councillor Lines continued by highlighting that if the Council was to consider reducing mowing and increasing wilding, it should undertake bespoke consultation with local communities regarding the proposed changes, explaining why practices were changing and to ensure that local communities were engaged throughout the process.

Councillor Nicholls commented that he was pleased to see that the Council was working in partnership with the University to use research to help to inform actions. He agreed with previous comments that the majority of members of the public did not voice opinions unless they held strong opinions and he asked what more could be done to engage the public. In a further question, Councillor Nicholls asked whether other local authorities had carried out similar research and whether there were any case studies available.

Dr Hughes responded that Durham County Council was the first local authority to carry out this particular type of research. Referring to public engagement, the research found that the most influential concerns were neatness and the impact on the environment and support existed for ecologically conscious land management with attractiveness being an important driver for change.

The Technical and Service Development Manager, Geoff Knight, informed the Committee that the research had been submitted for scientific publication and, following that, the research would be shared with other local authorities.

Co-opted Member, Mr McArdle thanked Drs Hughes and Lengieza for providing scientific evidence of the support for reducing mowing and ecologically conscious land management practices. Mr McArdle asked when the survey had been undertaken and whether the survey included the views of non-residents. Dr Lengieza clarified that the survey was undertaken during spring 2024. Whilst the report presented to the Committee was limited to residents of County Durham, the academic publication surveyed a further 200 people who were non-residents, however, the conclusions remained broadly the same. Dr Lengieza pointed out that the number of non-residents surveyed was relatively small, compared to the number of residents surveyed.

Councillor Elmer remarked that the study provided valuable information, given that feedback to the Council was often distorted by minority views. He added that the study highlighted that those surveyed felt that aesthetics were important and the Council had tools at its disposal in order to engage with the public and inform them as to why a particular approach was being taken. Councillor Elmer concluded that the study should provide the Council with the confidence to implement changes and he added that he would like to see action being taken, in light of the Council's declaration of an ecological emergency.

Councillor Sutton-Lloyd provided the view that, armed with this information, the Council could now carry out further work to promote positive messaging in respect of ecologically conscious land management practices.

The Chair thanked Drs Hughes and Lengieza for sharing their work, adding that the Committee would welcome updates on progress, in the future.

Resolved:

That the information detailed within the research findings be noted.

7. Management of DCC Land for Biodiversity - 2024-25 Update

The Committee considered a report of the Corporate Director of Neighbourhoods and Climate Change which provided an overview of the progress of the Parks and Countryside team together with Clean and Green, in managing nature reserves and other green spaces for biodiversity across Durham County Council owned land (for copy of report see file of minutes).

Darryl Cox, Principal Parks and Countryside Manager, introduced the report by highlighting that the work of the Parks and Countryside Service supported several of the Council's key visions and priorities in terms of the environment and climate change, health and wellbeing and the economy, through a range of activities including the management of nature reserves, education projects and open space management.

The Principal Parks and Countryside Manager provided an update on progress since his previous presentation to the Committee. The team had continued to deliver effective management for biodiversity across the estate including sites of special scientific interest, nature reserves, local wildlife sites and destination parks.

Delivery of engagement opportunities had continued and it was expected that over 7,000 school pupils would have been engaged by the end of the financial year. The Volunteer Programme Co-ordinator had supported 336 volunteers since recruitment to the post.

The service continued to access funding streams and opportunities to diversify and the team continued to have input into wider projects and initiatives such as the National Trust led Durham City Green Corridor Project and the Coastal Grasslands Reconnected Project, being led by Durham Heritage Coast. The Principal Parks and Countryside Manager gave examples of capital projects which were underway including investment for access improvements at the Tees Valley Railway and improved signage at Hardwick Park.

The Committee noted that additional staffing had increased capacity which had helped to secure external funding. Temporary programming staff roles had been extended until 31 March 2026 and the posts had played a central role in the delivery of engagement opportunities. The ongoing temporary nature of the roles remained a challenge for the future. The recruitment of two new Ranger/Nature Reserve Officer posts as part of the 2022/23 Medium Term Financial Plan had been of great benefit to the service in delivering its objectives. However, as part of Medium Term Financial Plan 15, there were proposals to lose one full time Ranger post.

Opportunities for the future included the potential for a natural history GCSE, to encourage young people to engage with outdoor spaces. A review of volunteering programmes would aim to develop opportunities, including working with corporate groups. Looking ahead, key challenges included the potential loss of staff and revenue pressures.

Geoff Knight, Technical and Service Development Manager, then presented an overview of the work of the wider Clean and Green team.

The Committee heard that the work covered a variety of services including grounds maintenance of parks and open spaces, school grounds, cemeteries and closed churchyards.

The Technical and Service Development Manager explained that Durham County Council's biodiversity strategy had been paused to align with the work relating to biodiversity net gain and the Local Nature Recovery Strategy. Clean and Green maintained 45 areas of meadow and wildflowers across the county, however, no new areas were planned until the biodiversity strategy was in place. This would enable a strategic approach to the selection of new sites. Ecology Manager, Stuart Priestley, highlighted that it was expected that the Local Nature Recovery Strategy would be published in autumn 2025.

The Committee noted that new legislation introduced in 2023 required that a consultation be undertaken before the removal of any tree on highway verges, with a trunk diameter of 8cm or more, with the exception of trees causing a hazard or which were deemed to be unsafe.

The Technical and Service Development Manager presented details of the meadow project at Bessemer Park. He explained that, ultimately, the project was a resounding success, however, during the consultation stage, owing to the weather and project delays, the sowing of the wildflower seed was late. The time-lag between the initial public consultation and the preparation of the ground caused consternation amongst residents. Lessons were learnt and future projects will ensure residents are provided with information at regular intervals. Future plans include the consideration of green hay sowing, to harvest the seeds to restore other sites.

The Technical and Service Development Manager informed the Committee of the successful herbicide reduction on green spaces around the county which had led to the consideration that the non-herbicide approach be taken throughout the county.

Concluding the presentation, the Technical and Service Development Manager provided information on the inspection of open spaces through the Local Audit Management System.

The Chair thanked the Technical and Service Development Manager and the Principal Parks and Countryside Manager for their presentation. Questions and comments were then invited.

Councillor Stubbs sought clarification regarding the consultation period for tree felling under the 2023 legislation. The Technical and Service Development Manager advised that clarification would be provided by email, in answer to Councillor Stubbs' question, for circulation to the full Committee.

Councillor Adam spoke highly of the project at Bessemer Park and he encouraged members to visit the park to see the work that had been carried out which had been of great benefit to the community. In response to a question from Councillor Adam as to whether there had been any incidents of anti-social behaviour, the Technical and Service Development Manager confirmed that some minor incidents had occurred, however, there had been a reduction in the number of off-road vehicles and traveller encampments.

Councillor Adam then referred to work to improve access, for example at the Tees Valley Railway and he commented that when fencing-off grazing land, provision should be made for safe walking routes. The Principal Parks and Countryside Manager referred to relatively new technology which created virtual boundaries for livestock through collars with built-in digital triggers which enabled livestock to roam safely, without the use of fences.

Ms K Monahan asked why it was necessary to fully re-seed wildflower meadows annually and whether perennials were included in the seed mix. The Technical and Service Development Manager responded that perennials were included in the seed mix, however, as it was difficult to grow flowers on the densely grassed areas, re-seeding was carried out as it was likely to produce a better outcome. The aim was to manage land, for aesthetic appeal in an ecologically friendly way. Ms Monahan referred to the new perennial movement method of planting and she asked if the Council had considered the approach. The Technical and Service Development Manager confirmed that the benefits of the naturalistic planting style were recognised, being beneficial to biodiversity and relatively low-maintenance. The Ecology Manager commented that a further method of increasing biodiversity was through the creation of landscape gardens on brownfield sites.

Councillor Lines thanked the officers for the interesting update. He was pleased to see the improvements to the walking and cycling links between Hardwick Park and Sedgfield and he highlighted the good collaborative working between officers and members, with monies from members' neighbourhood budgets contributing towards the work. Councillor Lines commented that events were an opportunity for parks to attract visitors, to generate income and link with other events and he acknowledged that there was a balance to be achieved to protect the environment. He spoke of his role in hosting a cross-country running event at Hardwick Park and he praised the staff at the event for their careful stewardship. The Principal Parks and Countryside Manager responded that it was necessary to carefully manage events so as not to conflict with land management processes and livestock grazing. He added that he would contact Visit County Durham for information on enquiries about future events.

Councillor Elmer commented that he would like to see a transition plan being established and he asked whether information was available on the cost of change. In response, the Technical and Service Development Manager said that informal analysis had been carried out and he pointed out that, for decades, the Council's aim was to cut grass and therefore equipment was fit for that purpose. A move towards longer grass would require the replacement of the Council's grasscutters which would come at a substantial cost. He added that a policy change would require a full audit, as well as public consultation. The current course of action was to continue to support the work identified through the Local Nature Recovery Strategy.

Mr McArdle expressed concern at the possibility that a full time Ranger post may be lost and he spoke of the excellent work they carried out, including the management of volunteer teams. The Chair recalled that, previously, a letter was sent to the Portfolio Holder for Neighbourhoods and Climate Change highlighting the significant benefits which had been delivered by three temporary posts and it requested that consideration be given to extending the contracts of the temporary staff. The Chair suggested that the Committee may wish to consider sending a letter in relation to the further extension of the contracts for the temporary posts and the potential loss of a full-time Ranger post.

Resolved:

The Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee:

- a) Noted that continued effective management of nature reserves, other countryside sites, and green spaces across Durham County Council is contributing significantly to biodiversity protection and gain.
- b) Noted the progress made in delivering the linked objectives of the Parks and Countryside Service and Durham County Council's Ecological Emergency and Climate Emergency reports.
- c) Recognised the progress that had been made in the development of links between the Parks and Countryside Service and the delivery of a Local Nature Recovery Strategy for the county. In addition, work in this area will continue as the LNRS develops and the Services remain committed to supporting the effective development of this strategy and aiding its delivery.
- d) Recognised that the proposed impacts of MTFP 15 may require mitigation in terms of prioritisation of site management and programming outputs.
- e) As per (d) above, mechanisms for seeking additional resource to continue successful programmes will be investigated.

The Committee agreed the following additional recommendation:

- f) That the Chair of the Committee write to the Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Neighbourhoods and Climate Change to request that consideration is given to the further extension of contracts, beyond the 31 March 2026, of the temporary programming staff roles. In addition, a further request is included, that the Cabinet Portfolio Holder reconsiders the proposal to lose one full time Ranger post as part of the Medium Term Financial Plan 15 considerations.

8. Ecological Emergency Update

The Committee considered a report of the Corporate Director of Neighbourhoods and Climate Change which provided an update on the Ecological Emergency Action Plan (EEAP) (for copy of report and presentation, see file of minutes).

Steve Bhowmick, Environment and Design Manager recapped that a countywide ecological emergency was declared by the Council on 6 April 2022. In response, officers prepared and delivered an Ecological Emergency Action Plan (EEAP) which identified activities and outputs. The Committee requested that regular updates on the plan's progress be provided to consider progress in relation to the actions within the key themes of the plan. The report presented an overview of activity undertaken for year 2024/25 to date.

The Environment and Design Manager explained that no dedicated internal resource was allocated to the EEAP and therefore the focus was on action within current resources, external commitments, changing behaviours and awareness raising. He provided details of action taken under the four key themes of Land Management, Education, Awareness and Communication and Policies and Strategies. The Committee noted that one of the actions under the theme of Education, Awareness and Communication was to gain agreement to the inclusion of ecological implications in decision making reports, however, this had been delayed pending a wider review of all implications arising from strategic priorities. The Environment and Design Manager remarked that good progress had been made to date, with 14 areas of action being progressed across services and the work continued to contribute to the Local Nature Recovery Strategy.

The Chair thanked the Environment and Design Manager for the presentation and all those involved in the work achieved to date. Questions and Comments were invited.

Councillor Lines commented that it was remarkable that such an important piece of work lacked dedicated resources and its themes should be embedded across all functions of the Council.

Councillor Lines added that failing to tackle issues at present may lead to more significant financial implications in the future. He asked the Environment and Design Manager whether he faced any specific challenges and what more the Committee could do to support the work. The Environment and Design Manager referred to the pressures on services across the board, due to the current financial climate, however, there was evidence that the messages were being heard within services. The Ecology Manager added that more proactive support at a strategic level would assist to engage services. The Chair suggested the Committee should write to the Director of Legal and Democratic Services regarding the delay in implementing the inclusion of the ecological emergency within the Implications Appendix of the Council's report template.

Councillor Stubbs commented that whilst a number of councils had declared climate emergencies, a smaller number had declared ecological emergencies. Referring to the Brightwater partnership project which involved both Durham County Council and Darlington Borough Council, Councillor Stubbs asked whether Darlington Borough Council's lack of a declaration of an ecological emergency had impacted the project. In response, the Environment and Design Manager said that whilst Darlington Borough Council had not declared an ecological emergency, it recognised the benefits of the project and it had provided valuable resources and expertise. Much of the land mass within the project was within County Durham and he confirmed that Darlington Borough Council was fully engaged in their areas of interest.

Councillor Adam echoed Councillor Lines' comments regarding the lack of financial resources and he drew attention to the fact that the Council had declared a climate emergency, in addition to an ecological emergency, saying the two were intrinsically linked. Referring to the report, Councillor Adam noted the review dates were dated 2024 and there were no further milestones. The Environment and Design Manager replied that work was ongoing to review the approach to the EEAP as it evolved, in order to become more target driven and to include achievements. He added that future update reports would provide more information in that regard. The Ecology Manager clarified that the EEAP was used as the mechanism for reporting against the Environment Act which was a legal requirement and he reminded the Committee that the agreed drafts and measures incorporated within the Local Nature Recovery Strategy would identify measures to be incorporated into the EEAP.

Councillor Nicholls shared the frustration at the lack of funding and the delay in the inclusion of ecological emergency implications in decision making reports, adding that he would like to see more leadership in order to increase the momentum of the EEAP.

Referring to the actions log appended to the report, Councillor Nicholls noted that it included an action to monitor funding opportunities, with a view to taking advantage of funding streams that become available in relation to children and young people and he asked whether an action in respect of funding in general, should be included. Councillor Nicholls commented that whilst there could be funding available from central government to support ecological action, at a local level, overstretched councils may not have the capacity to utilise those funds. Councillor Nicholls also suggested that legacy funding should be considered in the EEAP. He spoke of the good work through the SeaScapes Project and Durham Woodland Revival and he asked if there was more work to be done to ensure work continued when projects concluded.

The Environment and Design Manager agreed that it was timely to refresh the approach to funding within the plan and to consider including legacy funding as a feature within the plan. He added that the plan could explore in more detail how to utilise resources and to identify funding streams that could be accessed through working with interested parties and funding linked to the climate emergency. The Technical and Service Development Manager commented that the intrinsic value of nature should not be forgotten within the economic perspective.

Councillor Elmer remarked that when the Council declared an ecological emergency, the intention was to bring the Council together to consider the issue at a strategic level. He was therefore supportive of a letter being sent to the Director of Legal and Democratic Services, to reinforce the need to integrate the messaging across the Council, with a strategic leadership approach. Councillor Elmer noted that some local authorities had merged their climate and ecological emergency plans and he questioned whether Durham should consider that approach. Referring to the current lack of timescales within the plan, Councillor Elmer recognised the resource and capacity issues, however he was of the view that those issues should not thwart the Council's ambitions to achieve high targets.

Resolved:

Members of Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee:

- a) Received the overview of progress to date of the Ecological Emergency Response Action Plan outlined in the report to review its progress and,
- b) Agreed that a further progress update is presented to a future meeting of the committee as part of the 2025/26 work programme.

The following additional recommendation was agreed:

- c) That a letter be sent to the Director of Legal and Democratic Services regarding the delay in implementing the changes to the Implications Appendix to include ecological impact implications alongside those for climate and sustainability in Committee and Council reports.

9. Quarter Two: Forecast of Revenue and Capital Outturn 2024/25

The Committee considered a joint report of the Corporate Director of Resources and the Corporate Director of Neighbourhoods and Climate Change, presented by Philip Curran, Finance Manager, which provided details of the forecast outturn budget, highlighting major variances in comparison with the budget, based on the position to the end of quarter two (30 September 2024) (for copy of report, see file of minutes).

Councillor Adam referred to appendix 4 and noted overspends in relation to transport, specifically for maintenance and the additional hire of vehicles. The Finance Manager clarified that, over recent years, it had been difficult to acquire new vehicles in a timely manner which had led to vehicles being retained and hired for longer periods. As a result, vehicles required more maintenance and warranties were being extended for longer periods.

Councillor Nicholls noted that the underspend in respect of the Nuisance Action Team included staff costs and he raised concern that unfilled positions would lead to work not being carried out. The Finance Manager informed the Committee that the staff savings related to the early achievement of Medium Term Financial Plan savings and that agency staff may be utilised, on a temporary basis, to fill staff vacancies. Councillor Nicholls noted the cost of agency staff in respect of Refuse and Recycling and the Finance Manager clarified that the cost was mainly to cover sickness absence and holiday periods.

Councillor Stubbs expressed frustration at the overspend relating to unachieved theatre income, adding that there was scope for these good assets to achieve greater income. The Chair recalled that, at a recent meeting, the Committee posed the question as to how these assets could be utilised in more creative ways as part of future programme development.

Councillor Elmer requested clarification on unachieved parking income at Noses Point. The Finance Manager explained that during the year, there had been a Medium Term Financial Plan saving put forward, to introduce car parking charges at Noses Point and Crimdon Dene. However, there had been adverse publicity, and the introduction of the charges was delayed.

As a result, demand had been lower than expected and the position would be monitored over the coming months.

Resolved:

That the content of the report be noted.

10. Such other business

Members were provided with details of forthcoming additional informal information sessions and Special meetings. These included two informal information sessions, one to be held on the afternoon of the 20 January focusing on Durham County Council's land management arrangements and a further informal session would be held on the afternoon of 30 January at which the new place brand for County Durham would be shared. Both sessions would be held via Teams. A special joint meeting with the Economy and Enterprise Overview and Scrutiny Committee was scheduled for the 31 January, to provide an update on the visitor economy for County Durham. Finally, a Special meeting of the Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee would be held on 7 February, with updates on fly-tipping, CERP 3 and air quality management in County Durham.