



Environment Awards Update

Report of the Alan Patrickson, Corporate Director of Neighbourhoods and Climate Change

Purpose of the Report

1. To provide members of Environment and Sustainable Communities Scrutiny Committee (ESCOSC) with an overview of the County Durham Environment Awards programme in advance of a presentation on the subject by the Environment and Design Manager, as attached at Appendix 2.

Executive Summary

2. The Environment Awards process (from here on referred to as 'the Awards') has been successfully promoting community-based good environmental practice across the county since its inception in 1990. The Awards are steered and overseen by the county's Environment and Climate Change Partnership (ECCP), with council officers having responsibility for their management and coordination.
3. As the environmental agenda has grown and broadened, several incremental changes have been introduced over time to enable the Awards to evolve and endure, including introducing Climate Change and Greener Business judging categories in the early two-thousands to a root and branch review in 2023. The outcome of this ECCP-led review along with a snapshot of entries and successes associated with the Awards process are set out in the report.

Recommendations

4. That Members of Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee:
 - i. Receive the overview of the achievements and evolution of the Awards as outlined in the report and
 - ii. Agree to further progress being presented at future meetings of the committee at regular intervals in future years going forward.

Background

5. The Awards process has been successfully promoting good environmental practice across County Durham since its inception in 1990; adapting and evolving to the extent of becoming recognised as a high-profile annual event in the county's civic calendar. The aim of the Awards is to be as inclusive as possible in celebrating all aspects of environmental excellence across the communities of the county, stated in its current mission statement as:

'Rewarding great design, environmental guardianship and community spirit in County Durham.'

6. The requirement is for all entries to be from within the county (or based in the county in relation to private sector applicants). As the Awards have evolved, its overall uptake has remained relatively stable although there have been variations across certain categories which are outlined in the table at paragraph 12.

Categories of Entry

7. The merits of each entry are assessed against agreed criteria per specialist category from which shortlisted nominations are selected by a panel of cross-sector independent judges. These comprise representatives from the ECCP board, elected members and a range of subject specialists, all volunteering their time and expertise on a no-fee basis. Recent efforts have been taken to ensure the judging panel is more diverse than earlier panels; being gender balanced with a youth element being introduced from the county's Youth Council.
8. The table below shows the twelve categories that nominations are invited to enter and any salient comments relating to them:

Category	Comment
Sustainable Built Environment	Longstanding topic, now revised to promote sustainability in design, incorporating Craftsmanship category since '22.
Responding to Climate Change	Developed to showcase innovation and response to issues around adaptation and mitigation
Nature in Places and Spaces	Combines promoting natural environment with rural and urban place activity, revised from 2022.

Environmental Community Action	Recognises entries that promote people's engagement in green space, recognises community campaigns.
Green Business; small scale	Supports entries from both small and social enterprises, who generally lack the resources of larger enterprises.
Green Business; large scale	Supports larger businesses who generally have more resources than SMEs.
Volunteer Group of the Year	Celebrates community participation: increasingly popular categories since being introduced in the mid-2000s.
Volunteer of the Year (-18 yrs)	Celebrates individual young volunteers.
Volunteer of the Year	Celebrates individual adult volunteers.
Schools and Colleges	Longstanding category, but some fluctuations in responses arise due to school resources.
Active Outdoors	Promotes access to nature, benefits to health and wellbeing (path-work, planting, promotion of).
Outstanding	Special award only issued on merit on an occasional basis.

The Ceremony

- The successful entries are invited to receive prizes at a prestigious ceremony evening hosted by the ECCP, where they are issued with trophies and certificates. Prizes range from a Winning Entry per category, to Highly Commended entries for any runners-up within each specialism. There is also potential for an Outstanding Award to be occasionally issued should an entry exceed in achieving the status of overall winner across more than one category.

10. Recent events have been successfully held at Hardwick Hall hotel and have included an emphasis on a sustainable menu for the dinner along with related lower carbon interventions including the running of a popular shuttle bus between the city and venue, paper-free judging sessions and the discontinuation of in person site visits to shortlisted entries unless judges deem this necessary.

Judging Criteria

11. Any winning entry must satisfy established judging criteria. The criteria was revised for the 2023 season, which amongst other updates, introduced a reference to both the ecological and climate emergencies as scoring criteria for every category, including the provision of weblinks to key council source documents for user reference.
12. The criteria was also updated to refer to the importance of health and wellbeing. Therefore, entries are now being encouraged to recognise how their schemes may be able to promote better community health, active transport, and increasing physical activity in green spaces.

Recent Shortlisted Entries; A Snapshot

CATEGORY	2024	2023	2022	2021	2020	2019	2018	2017
Built Env.	4	1	1	1	0	6	3	8
Climate Change	4	3	7	1	2	2	1	1
Comm'y Action	3	3	6	4	5	11	11	4
Craftsmanship	-	-	0	0	1	4	5	2
Greener B'ness	3	4	9	3	1	3	4	1
Natural Env't	8	2	4	0	3	3	4	2
Places/ Spaces	4	3	6	7	4	4	10	10
Schools/Coll's	3	4	7	3	3	9	6	5
Vol Gp of Year	6	3	10	11	6	12	12	6
Vol -over 18	9	4	4	7	0	5	4	7
Vol -under 18	2	3	2	1	0	2	2	2
Waste M'gmt	-	-	2	2	0	3	3	4
Active Outdoors	4	3						
Total	50	33	58	40	25	64	65	52

13. It can be seen that the event has attracted a healthy cross section of entries over the previous eight years, regularly recognising over 50 shortlisted entries, although experiencing some fluctuations; notably a dip over the Covid period of 2019, when the Awards proceeded as an on-line programme. The discontinuation of craftsmanship and waste categories can also be seen to have occurred in 2023 - following the 2022 category review: the former being incorporated into the built category and the latter becoming an element across all categories. Active Outdoors was also introduced as a new category, effective from 2023.

14. Examples of category winners from the current year have included : refurbishment of Barbour House by Durham University (Sustainable Built), Rewilding of grounds by Ushaw College (Active Outdoors), Make Frosterley Bloom (Volunteer Group), Motion for the Ocean by Seaham Town Council (Environmental Community Action).
15. It is a challenge to select some examples from previous Outstanding winning entries as all are of special merit, but a few that can be recalled as being of particular note include the entry from the current year, Lanchester Wines – in responding to climate change, the Schools Eat Smart Waste Warriors from 2023 for education and tackling waste, Auckland Tower by the Auckland Project from 2019 for sustainable built design.

Promotion

16. The Awards programme is promoted through a communications plan overseen by a lead officer in this area. As with many such discretionary activities, effective promotion is essential to the successful uptake of nominations. All partners and council leads, including elected members, are encouraged to seek and bring forward nominations. The use of social media is now maximised as well as a breadth of council and ECCP stakeholder networks such as the CDP Economic Partnership and Business Durham.
17. As the programme relates to calendar years; the Awards are open for nominations from late July with a further call focussed on schools upon commencement of the autumn term. The closing date for entries is usually mid-October, followed by judging sessions and a winner's ceremony held early in the following calendar year (e.g. the Awards 2024 was celebrated on 13th February this year).

Resourcing

18. The Awards cost in the region of £12,000 to cover outlay such as venue hire, trophies and all hospitality associated with the ceremony event; including dinner, staging and lighting and use of hotel banquet suite. Whilst the ECCP oversees the programme, the council provides a limited budget of £5000 as a contribution towards all running costs. This extends to staffing for all necessary management and coordination in running the programme from across a range of key services. This is reliant on cooperation and good will between them, as there are no provisions to further expand this commitment going forward.
19. However the majority of costs associated with the hosting of the Awards, notably the winners' ceremony, is primarily met through sponsorship arrangements from commercial and stakeholder donations.

20. Sponsorship levels have recently experienced an uptick and managed to remain at a steady state, with an anticipated small cash surplus being accrued from the current year to assist in meeting some costs going forward into next year. Given the current economic climate, the ECCP board have retained sponsorship deals at fixed rates from; 'Green' level of sponsorship at £2000, 'Silver' at £1000 and 'Bronze' at £500.
21. The higher ranked Green deal offers sponsors an opportunity to participate in judging and have a category of entry in their name. Other packages are of more limited benefits but all offer publicity and press opportunities and corporate attendance at the winners' ceremony.
22. Budget balances remain sufficient to meet current running costs assuming that sponsors continue to come forward, and that hosting costs remain stable. The council-based staffing resource is additional to daily responsibilities and its continuation is never fully guaranteed. Working engagement and input from representatives of the ECCP board is always encouraged.

Conclusion

23. The Awards have successfully evolved over their 35 year existence to an extensive and inclusive celebration of community action in the environment in response to the growth of the environmental agenda, both within the county and beyond. It manages to maintain a high profile programme because it has is recognised as being relevant and meaningful to communities and sectors who are engaged in delivering and promoting environmental activities across the county.
24. Although staffed and coordinated through council resource, the programme is out-with any one core service area and exists through good will and cooperation both internally and from external funding commitments. This reflects the importance of partnerships and key stakeholders in acknowledging their role in driving forward the county's environmental agenda and is a key priority of the County Durham Environment and Climate Change Partnership.

Background papers

n/a

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Appendix 1: Implications

Legal Implications

Not applicable

Finance

Some minimal core funding allocated annually from the service but the vast majority of costs are met from external /private sponsorships.

Consultation

Not applicable

Equality and Diversity / Public Sector Equality Duty

Follows an inclusive approach, encouraging interest from all abilities and needs.

Human Rights

Not applicable

Climate Change

Promotes climate action in the community.

Crime and Disorder

Not applicable

Staffing

Staffing is dependent on time from core work being allocated to deliver all aspects of the programme.

Accommodation

Not applicable

Risk

The programme would have to be discontinued should sponsorships not materialise.

Procurement

Not applicable.

Appendix 2: Environment Awards Presentation

Presentation under separate cover.