

## **DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL**

At a Meeting of **Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee** held in Committee Room 2, County Hall, Durham on **Monday 10 November 2014 at 9.30 am**

### **Present:**

**Councillor B Graham (Chairman)**

### **Members of the Committee:**

Councillors E Adam, J Armstrong, D Bell, E Bell, J Clare, J Gray, D Hall, G Holland, K Hopper, I Jewell, P May, O Milburn, S Morrison, P Stradling, L Taylor and S Zair

### **Co-opted Members:**

Mrs P Spurrell

### **Also Present:**

Councillors R Todd and M Wilkes

### **1 Apologies.**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor J Clark.

### **2 Substitute Members.**

There were no substitute Members in attendance.

### **3 Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting held on 2 October 2014 were approved subject to the following amendment to;

Item 8, Quarter 1 2014/15 Performance Management Report

Paragraph reads:

Councillor Clark raised a number of queries regarding; the collection of additional waste left next to the wheelie bin and the use of plastic bags in recycling bins. She further queried whether local supermarkets could be encouraged to use plastic carrier bags which were accepted for recycling by the local authority. It was noted that only clear bags would be accepted when left next to the wheelie bin and plastic carrier bags were currently not allowed to be placed within the recycling bin.

Paragraph amended to read:

Councillor Clark raised a number of queries regarding; the collection of additional waste left next to the wheelie bin and the use of plastic bags in recycling bins. She further queried

whether local supermarkets could be encouraged to stock and put clear bin bags in a more visually accessible location on their shelves, rather than focusing displays on black bin bags which would not be collected for recycling. In addition, she highlighted that carrier bags were not to be placed in the recycling bin.

#### **4 Declarations of Interest, if any**

There were no declarations of interest.

#### **5 Any items from Co-opted Members or interested parties.**

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

#### **6 Media Relations - Updates on Press Coverage**

The Committee received a presentation from the Overview and Scrutiny Officer on recent press articles relating to the remit of Environment and Sustainable Communities.

- Ending landfill an 'extraordinary achievement', says council leader - figures showed that the percentage of the County's waste going to landfill had fallen from 37.5% to 6.3%.
- Flood Defences will be improved this week- Work was commencing in Stanhope along the river wear to improve flood prevention, the work would be carried out by the Environment Agency.
- Right Results for Bin it Right – Recycling Assistants had knocked on almost 3000 doors and given advice to residents in relation to recycling which had resulted in fewer contaminates being placed in the recycling bin.
- Durham and Sedgefield handed Gold Gilt Awards as part of Britain in Bloom.

#### **7 Community Action Team and use of targeted interventions**

The Committee considered a report of the Corporate Director, Neighbourhood Services which provided Members with an overview of the work of the council's Community Action Team (CAT) and the use of targeted interventions (for copy see file of minutes).

In February 2013 the CAT began a two year work programme visiting ten communities across County Durham, undertaking an 8-10 week programme of work, tackling local housing environmental issues. Within the 10 locations housing and removing rubbish accumulations were identified as priority issues. The key findings of the summer review found that in the five areas revisited the number of housing and environmental issues had reduced, however rubbish accumulations was still an issue. Residents had highlighted that the CAT had made a difference in some areas.

In relation to next steps the CAT had drafted a programme for 2015-16 which included revisits to three previous project areas. The team also intended to build upon relationships developed with various partners such as Groundwork North East and Cumbria.

Councillor Adam requested clarification as to whether the ten communities to be visited by the CAT as part of the 2015/6 work programme had been identified. In response to a query from Councillor Adam, the Senior Environmental Health Officer queried why the report did

not confirm which areas were to be visited as part of that the work programme for 2015-16. The Senior Environmental Health Officer confirmed that the work programme was still in its draft format and was therefore still subject to change. Once final adjustments had been made and the programme for 2015-16 had been agreed, Members would be informed of the final ten areas.

Councillor May suggested that some areas were continually revisited by the CAT and may benefit from a different approach may be required. He continued by asking for clarification as to what a 'notice' is. The Senior Environmental Health Officer agreed that some areas within the County were more likely to need frequent support as the turnover of tenants was a continuing issue. A legal notice was a document which required the landlord or tenant to undertake work. A notice in relation to food waste would usually be served on the tenant who would be given 24 hours to comply. A notice for defective drainage would be served on both the tenant and the landlord and they could be given a period of 9-21 days to comply, depending on the circumstances of the case. If the notice was not complied with in the given period, the council could carry out the work by default and any work would be charged to the landlord, however it would be cheaper for them to have the work done privately.

In response to a query from Councillor Jewell, the Senior Environmental Health Officer confirmed that the purpose of the walkabouts over a 8-10 week period was to identify those who repeatedly offended and progress was being made. In areas where the turnover of tenants had been identified as a particular problem, the CAT were working with landlords and agents. However, some issues were complex and 8 weeks was not a long enough period of time to eliminate the more complex problems and it was therefore imperative that areas were revisited so that those individuals who had a history of non-compliance could be dealt with accordingly.

In response to a number of queries from Members, the Senior Environmental Officer confirmed that the private landlords targeted were identified by liaising with local police and neighbourhood wardens. The information was then recorded on to a database and in addition, walkabouts were usually undertaken in conjunction with both police and neighbourhood wardens, which helped to identify problem tenants. Those residents who suffered from mental health issues would be dealt with in conjunction with Family Link or by liaising with Social Workers.

Councillor Clare referred to Warm Up North and queried whether properties had been assessed for their eligibility in relation to energy saving schemes. The Senior Environmental Health Officer confirmed that properties had been assessed and in relation to the CAT was linking in with the providers of such schemes.. Councillor Armstrong queried whether members were consulted in relation to the work of the CAT within their localities and the Senior Environmental Health Officer confirmed that Members were invited to attend meetings and walkabouts.

In response to concerns raised by Councillor Stradling regarding interventions by the CAT causing residents to fly tip in other areas within the same locality, the Senior Environmental Health Officer confirmed that although focus areas were restricted to approximately 500-600 properties, should residents from other areas report any concerns, they would be investigated. It was noted that in general, tenants tended to move rubbish from their own properties to other uninhabited properties in close proximity. In response to a further query

regarding whether it would be functional to employ permanent neighbourhood wardens where areas had recurrent problems, the Environment Protection Manager confirmed that the CAT permanently worked in conjunction with neighbourhood wardens and therefore all reported issues were picked up.

In response to a query from Councillor Holland the Senior Environmental Health Officer confirmed that the majority of the notices served were for household waste, however those who may struggle to pay the cost of removing bulky items could distribute it amongst more than one tenant or landlord. The policy had been agreed by council and therefore it was not possible to offer this service for free.

Councillor Wilkes raised queries with regards to whether Durham could operate a Registered Landlord Scheme and the Corporate Director, Neighbourhood Services, confirmed that Durham endorsed a voluntary scheme for landlords, referring to guidance available for all of those signed up to it and confirmed that the council could progress this scheme in the future.

Councillor Wilkes queried whether landlords had been approached directly with regards to paying the newly implemented charge for the collection of garden waste and suggested that those who were keen to ensure their properties were well maintained may be prepared to assist with the cost on behalf of tenants. The Corporate Director, Neighbourhood Services confirmed that social landlords had been approached and provided with details of the garden waste scheme and the scheme had received a positive response, with 11500 occupiers having already signed up. Councillor Brian Stephens, Cabinet Portfolio holder for Neighbourhoods confirmed that should any private landlords elect to pay for the garden waste collection scheme, this could be reflected in the cost of the rent for the property.

With regards to fly-tipping, the Corporate Director, Neighbourhood Services, confirmed that 75% was domestic waste and there was a number of contributing social issues that needed to be addressed. He reassured Members that an extensive amount of work was continuing to be undertaken within the service to reduce fly-tipping.

## **RESOLVED**

That the report be noted.

## **8 Winter Maintenance Plan Update**

The Committee considered a joint report of the Assistant Chief Executive and Corporate Director, Neighbourhood Services and a joint presentation from the Head of Technical Services and the Policy and Asset Manager which provided Members with information regarding the Winter Maintenance Plan (for copies see file of minutes).

In addition to the slides the Head of Technical Services confirmed that the Councils Winter Maintenance Policy had been significantly overhauled in 2014 and the Council had invested additional resources over the past 12 months. Section 41 (1A) of the Highways Act 1980 stated that the Highways Authority had a statutory responsibility for ensuring the safety of the Highways during winter however, it did not specify a level of winter maintenance required. It was not possible for the Council to treat all 3773 kilometres of

carriageway, however a policy had been implemented which prioritised highway routes within the County.

The Policy and Asset Manager confirmed that Priority 1 routes had been identified by the Highways Authority and were pre-salted and post-treated throughout the period of severe weather. Priority 2 routes were also post-treated and snow clearance was carried out on carriageways when required. In addition footways and cycleways were cleared and during extreme winters which had been experienced within the last few years a Minimum Winter Network had been devised to ensure clearance following treatment of priority routes. Priority 1 and 2 routes were identified on a map located on the Council's website and could be viewed by members of the public.

Durham had a particularly large area of carriageways treated at 45%, in comparison to some counties of a similar network size which treated only 20% of their carriageway. Specialist winter weather forecasts were received from one of only 3 national companies, however weather could not be predicted any longer than 15 days in advance.

Many priority 2 routes were treated by local farmers in the Dales who were contracted by the Council. They were only treated during prolonged severe weather and if resources were available. Following heavy snowfall, Priority 1 routes were cleared with a plough, however routes had a maximum clearance time of 2.5 hours and were cleared in order of priority.

In addition, the treatment of footways was a priority for the Council and usually carried out by Streetscene. Footpaths were categorised as 1 and 1a (town centres), public transport interchanges, hospitals, surgeries and category 2 was small village shops, sheltered accommodation and care homes. The Council were also responsible for over 2000 salt bins which could be requested however there was an allocation criteria to be considered in order to grant a salt bin as filling them was resource intensive..

Councillor May queried the criteria for the provision of salt-bins and advised that even the slightest of inclines prevented people from getting vehicles off their estates and attending work. The Head of Technical Services confirmed that salt-bins were provided following a scoring assessment against criteria such as gradients, bends, whether the route was a priority route, a bus route, whether it was used by pedestrians, whether there was a medical centre, a chemist, or shop etc. There was unlimited demand for salt-bins however since the average yearly cost of servicing a salt-bin was approximately £100, those who did not meet the criteria were encouraged to use alternative services such as requesting a one tonne dumpy bag of salt which could be delivered for a total charge of £100. The Policy and Asset Manager confirmed that 50 requests had already been considered this year.

In response to a query from Councillor Wilkes regarding the additional cost of a tonne dumpy bag in comparison to the cost the Council paid per tonne of salt, the Head of Technical Services explained that the salt was mixed with grit and the additional costs were for labour and distribution.

The Head of Technical Services confirmed that the Council had 42,700 tonnes of salt stored and during a mild winter such as last year, 18,000 tonnes was used. In comparison

the year before, which was a severe winter, the Head of Technical Services confirmed the use of 48000 tonnes.

In response to a question from Councillor Jewell regarding the difficulties which snow clearance vehicles may have due to parked vehicles on priority routes, the Head of Technical Services confirmed that they did not cause an obstruction or prevent routes from being treated. There had been some complaints following the use of the plough as snow was heaped at the side of the road and in some cases driveways may be blocked, however the majority of residents acknowledged that this as a minor inconvenience. In response to a further question from Councillor Jewell the Policy and Asset Manager confirmed that the public were encouraged to clear outside of their own home and were reassured that they were not liable for any accidents that occurred as a result of any snow clearance.

In response to a query from Councillor Bell regarding the impact on carrying out refuse collections in severe weather, the Head of Technical Services confirmed that the Highways Authority liaised with the refuse and recycling service in order to carry out collections and would prioritise routes accordingly where possible.

In response to a query from Councillor Todd regarding the partnership working that was undertaken with various Parish Councils, the Head of Technical Services confirmed that the work consisted of an agreement between the Council and the Parish Council, to ensure that salt was distributed in line with council policy. The Council were therefore able to ensure that footpaths were cleared immediately and in return, the Council provided the salt. The Highways Authority would liaise with any Town or Parish Council, however it was acknowledged that some Parish Councils did not have the resources to deliver the level of service required.

## **RESOLVED**

That the report be noted.

## **9 Warm Up North Update**

The Committee considered a report of the Corporate Director, Regeneration and Economic Development, which provided Members with an update on the development of Warm up North, a regional Green Deal Initiative (for copy see file of minutes).

The Head of Planning and Assets provided Members with an update on the figures since the report had been produced. Warm Up North had completed 2169 referrals, which was 1300 more than any other similar sized local authority and 1257 installations had been completed, which was 800 more than any other local authority in the region.

Councillor Jewell queried whether any complaints had been received regarding the installation process and the Head of Planning and Assets confirmed that the scheme had a 99% success rate. There were rigorous checks and all installations were re-checked three weeks later. Of the other 1% he confirmed that the majority of complaints were regarding the original contact with Warm Up North, which was improving, however the after-service was positively rated by customers.

In response to a comment from Councillor Bell regarding the quality of installations, the Head of Planning and Assets confirmed that the market was competitive and some companies were more quality controlled than others. With reference to an influx of low quality solar panels which had been imported and installed in the County, the Head of Planning and Assets confirmed that quality of equipment was improving, however he would investigate this issue further.

In response to a question from Councillor Adam regarding a more detailed breakdown of the 45 approved measures used to monitor installation, the Head of Planning and Assets confirmed that Members could be provided with a more detailed quarterly monitoring report which would contain details of how many complaints had been received.

In response to queries from the Vice-Chairman regarding the risk section of the report and in relation to public buildings and schools accessing the initiative, the Head of Planning and Assets confirmed that the take-up of Warm Up North interventions by householders had not been the success that the council had first hoped. This was partly due to the many changes that had been made to the initiative since it originated. There was not enough clarity for householders on how the Green Deal operated and the Council were still awaiting some guidance. The Council were providing advice on community buildings if contacted and schools had been a particular area of focus however, consideration could be given for a leaflet to be circulated giving information regarding what services could be offered.

Councillor Wilkes commented that he had reports of Warm Up North being contacted by householders, yet not returning calls and in comparison, other providers had allegedly been contacted and carried out the work within ten days at a lower cost. With regards to the variance in cost, other companies were carrying out work cheaper and he referred to the Home Improvement Fund which could provide £100m by December for homes in County Durham and suggested that people should be made aware of this by distribution of a leaflet. In response, the Head of Planning and Assets confirmed that following receipt of some guidance on how the money could be spent, the Home Improvement Fund would be promoted to householders.

The Vice-Chairman queried the delivery costs of Warm Up North and suggested that there may be a need to investigate the delivery partner to ensure that customers were receiving value for money. The Head of Planning and Assets confirmed that within the current monitoring process, details of unit costs could be provided.

The Chairman queried whether housing providers were aware of schemes available, referring to the recent regeneration of York Hill Estate in Spennymoor, the Head of Planning and Assets confirmed that the Social Housing Forum held regular meetings with the three social housing providers who were all aware of the scheme.

## **RESOLVED**

That the report be noted and a further update be provided to a future meeting of the Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

The Committee considered a report of the Corporate Director, Regeneration and Economic Development, which provided Members with an update on the development of the European Structural and Investment Fund (low carbon economy ) within County Durham (for copy see file of minutes).

Councillor E Bell made reference queried why underground coal gasification (UCG) which had not mentioned in the report. The Sustainability and Climate Change Team Leader confirmed that UCG was not directly related to Low Carbon Economy and therefore was not considered under the same strand of funding, however it may go forward under the innovation funding strand. She confirmed that this topic would be discussed in more depth at the next meeting on 25 November 2014.

Councillor Holland suggested that reducing the use of gas and fossil fuels was one of the prime directives of the emerging County Durham Plan as it was expensive to retrofit existing buildings, therefore he suggested that renewable energy systems should be fitted during the construction of all new buildings. The Sustainability and Climate Change Team Leader confirmed that the primary focus of the European Structural and Investment Funds was how to deal with existing buildings and as new builds were a small proportion of the total buildings in County Durham, this reinforced the importance of dealing with them. In response to a further query from Councillor Holland, the Sustainability and Climate Change Team Leader confirmed that with regards to the feasibility study which had been approved by DECC, all water sourced heat pumps would be considered. Mine water was of particular interest however whether it would be used would depend on whether it would be covered by funding.

Councillor Adam queried whether the council would focus on a smaller number of key areas as there was a significant amount of work required to develop the various schemes which would meet the funding criteria of European Structural and Investment Fund (ESIF). The Sustainability and Climate Change Team Leader confirmed that the council would be more likely to develop schemes which focused on energy efficiency, however a more detailed plan for County Durham would be confirmed following consultation with Durham Energy Institute (DEI).

Councillor Wilkes queried match funding arrangements with regard to ESIF and whether the Council would be required to meet the required costs for the funding to be granted. The Sustainability and Climate Change Team Leader confirmed that there was no suggestion that the council would need to assist with match funding as it was likely to be sourced from local businesses or the DEI, which may use funding from University fees or could access other grants to assist with the cost.

## **RESOLVED**

That the report be noted and that the Committee receive a progress update on the development of ESIF at a future meeting in 2015.

## **11 Limestone Landscape Programme Update**

The Committee considered a joint report of the Assistant Chief Executive and the Corporate Director, Regeneration and Economic Development, and a presentation from the



Limestone Landscapes Programme Manager, which provided Members with information regarding the Limestone Landscape Programme (for copies see file of minutes).

The Chairman referred to a number of informative site visits which had been undertaken by the Committee regarding the Limestone Landscape Programme and considered the restoration work that was being undertaken was outstanding. She acknowledged the hard work which had been done by the Limestone Landscape team and thanked them for the work they had done.

Councillor Clare queried whether a strategy was in place to maintain those structures which had been restored. The Limestone Landscape Programme Manager confirmed that any restoration which took place was subject to a maintenance plan, usually a minimum of ten years and in the case of Hetton Smithy, the Blacksmith was required to allow members of the public to visit no less than six times per year, which had already been exceeded as it had already been open to the public eleven times. The Limestone Landscape Manager added that Blackhall Rocks had been heavily vandalised following its improvement however the Countryside Ranger Service had responsibility for its restoration. There were legal contracts in place to ensure all projects had maintenance plans in place for at least ten years.

#### **RESOLVED**

That the report be noted.

#### **12 Management of the Woodland estate owned by Durham County Council - Scrutiny Review - terms of reference for the project**

The Overview and Scrutiny Officer referred to the scoping report and the draft terms of reference for the scrutiny review focusing on the management of the woodland estate owned by DCC and confirmed that a Special meeting had been arranged for the 17 November 2014. The meeting would provide an overview presentation by Ged Lawson, Principal Landscape Officer and Richard Pow from the Forestry Commission and in addition, Members would be invited to discuss the draft terms of reference and project plan. The terms of reference would be circulated to members and any comments from would be incorporated into the draft terms of reference for discussion and agreement at the meeting.

#### **RESOLVED**

That the report be noted and that the draft terms of reference be further discussed at the meeting on the 17 November 2014.

#### **13 Minutes of the County Durham Environment Partnership Board**

The minutes of the County Durham Environment Partnership Board held on 15 July 2014 were noted by the Committee.

#### **14 Minutes of the Durham Strategic Flood Prevention Group and draft minutes of the Northumbria Regional Flood and Coastal Committee**

The Minutes of the Durham Strategic Flood Prevention Group held on 20 August 2014 and draft minutes of the Northumbria Regional Flood and Coastal Committee held on 10 October 2014 were noted by the Committee.