

**12<sup>th</sup> November 2018**

## **Phasing Out Avoidable Single Use Plastics**

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### **Report of Oliver Sherratt, Head of Direct Services and Chair of the County Durham Environment Partnership**

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#### **Purpose of the Report**

- 1 To respond to a County Council resolution that calls for a report on phasing out of unnecessary single use plastics across Council activities and assets as well as influencing partners and stakeholders to make similar commitments.

#### **Background**

- 2 In 1950 the world produced only 2 million tonnes of plastics a year. By 2015 this is expected to have risen to 381 million tonnes a year. Whilst this cheap and versatile material has been of immense benefit, there is also a growing realisation of the harm that it brings, especially to our marine environment, where television programmes such as Blue Planet II bring into living rooms vivid images of wildlife or fishermen struggling in a “plastic soup”.
- 3 Of particular concern and wastefulness of Single Use Plastics (SUPs). These are items such as drinking straws, cotton buds, tooth picks, stirrers, wetwipes, cups and bottles that are deliberately designed for one use only to be then thrown away. If they are not disposed of correctly they can persist for hundreds of years.
- 4 Whilst much of the marine pollution arises from countries with inadequate waste management practices, the Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) Strategy “Our Green Future” recognises the role that all countries including our own can play as it still makes environmental (and financial) sense to avoid single use plastic items in the first place, thereby avoiding the costs of the item being recycled, the wastefulness of it being sent for disposal, or worse still ending up as a discarded pollutant either by incorrect disposal down the toilet, litter or by fly tipping.
- 5 On 24<sup>th</sup> January 2018 a County Council resolution was passed as follows:

*Request that a report be brought to Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Management Board on the options for bringing an end to the use of unnecessary Single Use Plastics (SUP) in County Durham, taking account of the following measures to:*

- a) *enable Durham County Council to become a full signatory of the ‘Plastic Free Pledge’, by phasing out the use of unnecessary SUPs in all County*

*Council buildings, and working with commissioning partners to end the purchase and procurement of SUPs through the DCC supply chain;*

- b) *encourage the County's businesses, organizations and residents to go 'plastic free,' working with best practice partners across the County to explore the creation of a 'plastic free network,' that could provide business support, practical guidelines and advice to help local businesses transition from SUPs to sustainable alternatives;*
- c) *to incentivize traders on Council land to sell re-usable or non-plastic biodegradable containers and invite customers to bring their own, with the aim of phasing out SUPs; including investigating the possibility of requiring food and drink vendors to avoid SUPs as a condition of their event permission, strengthening DCC's existing guidance for exhibitors and traders.*

- 6 Accordingly on 14<sup>th</sup> February 2018 the County Councils Overview and Scrutiny met to determine how they would respond to the resolution. Following this they invited the County Durham Environment Partnership to develop a report for consideration, involving not just the Council but those of Partners where possible.

## **Approach**

- 7 In response to the request the Environment Partnership established a Task Group to consider all aspect of the County Council resolution. It involved not just those Council services that use or buy single use plastics but also a range of Partners too, as parts b) and c) of the resolution refers to influencing of wider stakeholders. The group has met monthly since April 2018 and comprises the following:
- Durham County Council – Head of Direct Services (Chair)
  - Durham County Council – Strategic Waste
  - Durham County Council - Procurement
  - Durham County Council – Education
  - Durham County Council – Trading Standards
  - Durham County Council - Events
  - Durham County Council - Catering and Facilities Management
  - Durham Heritage Coast Partnership
  - Durham University – Procurement
  - Durham University – Catering and Facilities Management
  - Environment Agency
  - Durham Business Improvement District
  - Northumbrian Water
  - North East Nature Partnership

- 8 The inaugural meeting was attended by the Chair of the Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee, Councillor Eddy Adam who set out the requirements and gave a clear steer that there was an interest in "early wins" in advance of consideration to any pledge. This action orientated approach was further supported by Cllr Brian Stephens Portfolio Holder for Neighbourhoods and Local Partnerships.

## **Activities**

- 9 The Task Group followed the format of the Council resolution and have developed a report attached as **Appendix 2**. In summary it involved:
- a) What the Council is and can do to achieve substantial reductions in Single Use Plastics.**

Under this section of the resolution the Task Group undertook an audit to assess current levels of usage, a survey of suppliers and through this process identified a wide range of “quick wins” now implemented from removal of a number of SUPs from catering, provision of reusable cups, and ceasing using plastic confetti at pantomimes. Opportunity was taken to showcase innovation through highway services incorporating 6.5 tonnes of unrecyclable plastic into a 1 mile road scheme.

On 22<sup>nd</sup> October 2018 the Government started consultation on proposals ban the distribution and/or sale of plastic straws, stirrers and plastic-stemmed cotton buds in England. This has already been largely achieved by the Council, for example use of plastic stirrers has ceased, and plastic straws no longer used, accept those provided with drink/juice cartons for which we are in discussion with suppliers. It is suggested that the Council may wish to support the ban.

- b) What Partners are and can be doing to achieve substantial reductions in single use plastics.**

Examples of good practice already underway range from Schools such as Sacriston Primary achieving “plastic Free Status, to the University using reusable containers in Van Mildert Hall of Residence. Northumbrian Water have also been undertaking promotion of their refill scheme (thereby avoiding the need for bottle purchase) and the Durham City Bid have been engaging with a number of businesses who are keen to make a contribution.

The above is just seen as a start, and the report recommends a Single Use Plastics Network (in line with the Council resolution) to foster more information sharing and actions across a wider range of partners

- c) Using the Council influence at events and for licencing activity**

Here the report incorporates some early wins such a provision of recycle bins and collection of plastic bottles after the Durham City run. It also highlights how the approach can be extended to wider events and opportunities for reviewing licencing policy.

- 10 As can be seen from the above, the Task Group have not waited for a pledge commitment to be signed, however as part of their work they have considered a range of available pledges.
- 11 The preferred pledge recommended by the Task Group would be a bespoke one for County Durham, used by the Council and its Partners. The reasons for the preference above the Plastic Free pledge is that the latter has its origins in reduction of plastic drinking straws, and is perhaps a misnomer to suggest “plastic free” when it is more about reductions in single use plastics.

12 A draft pledge is provided below, as the basis for consideration,

#### **County Durham Partnership Single Use Plastics Pledge (Draft)**

*We the undersigned, pledge to significantly reduce and work towards ultimately removing the use of unnecessary single use plastics from our operations, and will encourage and enable partners, schools, businesses and the residents of County Durham to do their part.*

Plastic pollution is an international scourge on our environment, and the scenes of harm it does to our beaches, oceans and wildlife bring a sense of collective shame. The consequences, are much more than visual as plastics enter the food chain and can eventually reach the whole ecosystem including us. The UK government estimates that there are currently more than 150m tonnes of plastic in the world's oceans, and that some 100,000 sea mammals and one million birds die from eating or becoming tangled in plastic waste each year.

We will work towards significantly reducing use of unnecessary single-use plastics across our own operations and services and work with partners to maximise the effectiveness of this approach throughout County Durham. We will also work to maximise the reuse and recycling of other plastics to conserve resources and minimise pollution.

To support this aim, partner organisations commit to:

- Work in our respective organisations to ensure that unnecessary single use plastics are eliminated across our offices and service buildings, and from activities (where provided) such as catering and events.
- Where opportunity arises, promote and support the activities of schools, communities and residents in their efforts to reduce single use plastics.
- Support the establishment of a Single Use Plastics network within the County, to disseminate good practice and ensure the good work and pledge commitments are maintained

### **Recommendations and Reasons**

- i) That the committee note the considerable work undertaken in the last 6 months towards reducing the use of Single Use Plastics by the County Council and its partners.
- ii) That Members of the Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee are requested to note the report and presentation and comment accordingly.
- iii) That the comments made by Members at the meeting form the Overview and Scrutiny response to the SUPs Task Group final report and that the committee's response is shared subsequently with both the COSMB and Cabinet accordingly.
- iv) That the Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny receive a further presentation and report detailing progress made against the future actions identified in the report at the meeting of the committee on 5<sup>th</sup> April 2019.

### **Background papers**

Defra (2018) A Green Future: Our 25 Year Plan to Improve the Environment

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## **Appendix 1: Implications**

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**Finance** - There may be financial implications relating to avoiding unnecessary single use plastics. These are however being addressed by managers on a case by case basis and will be within service budgets.

**Staffing** - There are no issues arising from this report

**Risk** - There are some financial risks associated with avoidance or alternatives to SUPs however these will be managed within services. Risks of failure to honour commitment in pledges (if signed) can be managed through an audit process

**Equality and Diversity / Public Sector Equality Duty** - No adverse impacts are anticipated.

**Accommodation** - None

**Crime and Disorder** - The report seeks to reduce plastic littering promoting reuse where possible.

**Human Rights** - None

**Consultation** - The report identifies some consultation with business has been undertaken (through Durham BID) with more to follow as the appetite for change is assessed.

**Procurement** - The report contains an action plan that includes engagement with suppliers, and where appropriate requests that they use alternatives to SUPs for products and services to the Council.

**Disability Issues** - None

**Legal Implications** - None although a forthcoming Waste and Resources Strategy (anticipated at the end of December 2018) may include requirements on Councils relating to usage of Single Use Plastics.