

NORTHUMBERLAND COUNTY COUNCIL

COMMUNITIES AND PLACE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

At a meeting of the **Communities and Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee** held at County Hall, Morpeth on Wednesday, 31 May 2023 at 2.00 p.m.

PRESENT

Councillor N. Oliver
(Chair, in the Chair)

MEMBERS

Dale, A.	Lang, J.
Gallacher, B.	Morphet, N.
Mather, M.	Reid, J.

CABINET MEMBERS

C. Horncastle	Looking After Our Environment
G. Stewart	Looking After Our Communities

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE

R. Clow	Area Manager, Fire and Rescue Services
H. Davison	Assistant Project Manager, Climate Change
D. Groves	Commercial and Contracts Manager
P Jones	Director of Environment and Transport
J. McNeil	Assistant Chief Fire Officer
S. Nicholson	Scrutiny Co-Ordinator
N. Turnbull	Democratic Services Officer

ALSO PRESENT

1 member of the press.

1. MEMBERSHIP AND TERMS OF REFERENCE

The Membership and Terms of Reference, as agreed by Council at the meeting on 17 May 2023, had been circulated for information.

RESOLVED that the Communities & Place OSC's membership and terms of reference, as agreed by Council on 17 May 2023, be noted.

2. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Colin Curtis and Councillors Cartie and Castle.

3. MINUTES

It was requested that any actions identified within the minutes be followed up.

RESOLVED that the minutes of the following meetings of the Communities and Place OSC, as circulated, be confirmed as a true record and signed by the Chair:

- 1) 5 April 2023
- 2) 26 April 2023

4. FORWARD PLAN OF CABINET DECISIONS

The Committee considered the Forward Plan of key decisions (June to September 2023). (Schedule enclosed with the signed minutes).

The Scrutiny Co-Ordinator reported that the Portfolio Holders and Senior Officers were to be invited to the next few meetings of the committee to outline forthcoming issues that members may wish to consider including in the work programme.

In answer to a question regarding how matters scheduled for Cabinet were to be included within the work programme in the future, the Scrutiny Co-Ordinator suggested that he or the Scrutiny Officer circulate all draft Cabinet minutes. Any requests from members that they felt should be scrutinised be made to the Chair / Vice-Chair / himself for possible inclusion at an appropriate point in the future following implementation of a decision.

It was noted that a part confidential report was due to be considered by Cabinet on 13 June 2023 on the 'Ashington Regeneration Programme Establishment – Strategic Sites Acquisition'. The Chair suggested that local members who wanted more information should contact Councillor Ploszaj, the responsible Portfolio Holder, to request a meeting to find out more about the proposals and provide feedback.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

5. OVERVIEW

5.1 Firefighter's Decontamination

The Committee received a presentation from James McNeil, Assistant Chief Fire Officer and Robin Clow, Area Manager, on the risk of contaminants from fires and the measures that could be put in place to reduce the risk of these impacting on the health and safety of firefighters. (A copy of the presentation is enclosed with the signed minutes.)

The Assistant Chief Fire Officer (ACFO) stated that firefighters were 7 times more likely to have cancer than the general public and were also diagnosed earlier in their 40s and 50s.

Robin Clow explained that fires produced a cocktail of chemicals including carcinogenic materials. Personal protective equipment (PPE) protected firefighters' skin and respiratory systems, but wind conditions could also mean that those outside were also impacted by smoke and air borne fibres which may or may not be visible or easily wiped off. They caused both acute toxicity and / or chronic toxicity which impacted on the body's internal organs.

They hoped to work with Professor Anna Stec at the University of Central Lancashire (UCLAN) who was researching the assessment of toxic irritant hazards of fires and the source of much of the information and recommendations.

Examples of the PPE were demonstrated including new breathing apparatus, helmet and coat and comparison made with a dirty helmet enclosed in a protective bag. The latter in the past had been seen as a badge of honour by experienced firefighters.

He described how firefighters previously would sit in fire appliances after a fire covered in the products of combustion which would be inhaled, ingested or absorbed through the skin. In the past, fire stations may have smelled of smoke but, following the introduction of new procedures, this was no longer the case. If there was a smell of smoke, this could lead to cross-contamination by visitors including members of the public and children.

Steps being introduced to reduce contamination included:

- Wearing of respiratory protective equipment during firefighting, salvage and venting of buildings, including fire investigation, and for this to be the last piece of PPE to be removed.
- Equipment suspected of contamination should be removed and placed in air-tight containers with a 'clean cab' policy and on-scene use of hero wipes to remove contaminants from any exposed skin.
- Avoiding eating and drinking, changing clothes, showering within an hour, regular health screening.
- A rigorous cleaning and inspection regime for PPE.
- Creation of designated zones:
 - Red / dirty - operational areas such as appliance bays, equipment storage, briefing rooms.
 - Amber – transitional areas for the removal and cleaning of PPE.

- Green / clean areas including public entrances, offices, recreational and meeting rooms.
- A new contract with a company in Durham provided a much faster turnaround for the cleaning of asbestos contaminated PPE.
- Working with Occupational Health, inspection of shower facilities and testing for contaminants by external companies.

The ACFO thanked his colleagues for the work that they had undertaken recently on policies and procedures to mitigate the risk of firefighter contamination. He also expressed his gratitude to the current and former portfolio holders for their support.

Members held the fire and rescue service in high regard and were saddened to learn of the additional hazards faced by firefighters and supported the work that was taking place to protect them.

Councillor Stewart, Portfolio Holder for Looking After Our Communities commented that the fire and rescue services most important resource was its people and that the Council needed to do everything it could to ensure their safety.

In answer to questions, it was explained that:

- The watch manager assessed conditions on site and dependent on wind direction and other factors, created a safe zone with a cordon between members of the public and an incident. If the wind speed or direction changed, the distance would be increased to reduce the potential risk of contamination for members of the public. Generally, bigger and better burning fires were less of a risk than those which smoldered.
- Fire damaged buildings were not handed back to owners or landlords until they had been properly ventilated and were clear of smoke.
- Forensic investigation teams were now provided with breathing apparatus.
- The work on contaminants was in the early stages including identification of contaminants and exposure, the prevalence, and types of cancers and differences between male and female firefighters. The work would in due course involve retired firefighters as well as the current workforce. Decontamination had not existed for former firefighters.
- It was not yet known how application of the measures recommended in the UCLAN report would impact on the likelihood of illness. Some measures were relatively easy to implement such as the removal of dirty PPE and prompt showering. The next stage of the research involved taking blood samples which Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service (NFRS) hoped to be involved in.
- Individuals were responsible for cleaning and inspecting their own PPE to ensure that it was in an adequate condition. It was also inspected by a shift supervisor on a set frequency following a 30-point checklist provided by equipment manufacturer. A further inspection was undertaken annually by a third party who also cleaned and reapplied water repellent properties.
- A decontamination and de-robing process for asbestos and other chemicals had been in place for many years and was now utilised for other

contaminants. The last stage involved the removal of gloves and the breathing apparatus mask with equipment bagged and placed in lockers on the fire engine.

- Hero wipes were used to clean any exposed skin on wrists and necks and were effective. Bags with dissolvable seams enabled dirty clothing to be placed in washing machines without needing to be handled.
- The procedure for decontamination had been implemented at the end of 2022.
- Ordinarily, fire personnel would be issued with 2 sets of fire kit, and this was sufficient unless there was a particularly busy shift with back to back fires.
- The turnaround time for heavily contaminated kit had been reduced from 2 weeks to 48 hours by changing to a nearer company in Durham. The majority of kit was cleaned at the fire station and would be properly dry in 24 hours. Rural fire stations had smaller industrial washing machines.
- Individuals did not currently record potential exposures from incidents. Arrangements were being put in place with Northumbria Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust for enhanced health surveillance as well as self-assessment of urine samples before and after an exposure to fire to establish base line data and monitor levels.
- Medical examinations of firefighters were undertaken every three years which increased to an annual basis for personnel aged 50 and over.

Councillor Horncastle, as former Chair of the Fire and Rescue Authority, thanked the senior officers NFRS for their prompt action progressing the issue of decontamination following the publication of the UCLAN report, to protect not only front-line staff, but also other staff, visitors and families.

It was proposed that the committee make the following recommendation to Cabinet that financial support for the recommendations made by the fire and rescue service be provided to ensure that Northumberland was leading reduce the risk of contamination and supporting fire and rescue personnel.

The Chair agreed with a suggestion that there should be surplus kit to ensure that it could be rotated adequately. He thanked officers for their informative presentation.

RESOLVED that Cabinet be recommended to agree that financial support for the recommendations made by the fire and rescue service be provided to ensure that Northumberland was leading to reduce the risk of contamination and supporting fire and rescue personnel.

5.2 Food Waste Recycling Pilot Update

The Committee received a presentation from Paul Jones, Director of Environment and Transport, David Groves, Commercial and Contracts Manager and Hannah Davison, Assistant Project Manager, Climate Change Team, to consider the outcomes of the Food Waste Recycling Pilot and next steps. (A copy of the presentation is enclosed with the signed minutes.)

The purpose of the food waste kerbside collection trial was to confirm modelled assumptions on household kerbside food waste collections and explore the feasibility of using home compost bins as an alternative for rural households where collection services would be resource intensive. The presentation included:

- Details of the areas, collection dates, disposal and set out rates to date. The average set out rate of 47.2% compared favorably with WRAP national figures.
- Key findings from the trial.
- Impact on residual waste collections.
- Data analysis of residents who had opted out of the food waste collection trial.
- Future options and next steps:
 - A user satisfaction survey was to be carried out to assess any issues raised by users.
 - Further consideration of bag liners and research of alternative liners, containers and vehicles.
 - DEFRA commitment that regulations and guidance will soon be issued that will require food waste collections be provided by local authorities in England from April 2025. Northumberland had made an application to DEFRA for transitional arrangements that would require food waste collections to be delivered in Northumberland from April 2026 due to the added complexity of implementing food waste collections in the county which require negotiation of changes to our long term Waste PFI Contract arrangements.
 - It was expected that the Government would meet the cost of providing food waste collections through 'New Burdens' funding.
 - Data from the trial was helping to inform how many collection rounds, vehicles and employees and containers would be needed.
 - A Technical Environmental and Economically Practicable (TEEP) assessment of services would determine the extent of the roll-out of the kerbside food waste collection service to households across the county. It was likely that provision of home composting equipment would be a more practical, cost effective and sustainable solution in some very rural communities.
- Home compost bins had been offered to residents in Gilsland, Elsdon and Chatton with 40 households currently participating.
- The autumn period had not been the best time to commence the home compost bin trial as temperatures in the hot compost bin of between 40-60c were required to process dairy and meat products.
- An analysis of the contents of residential bins be undertaken to obtain information on residents understanding and attitude to waste.

The following information was provided in response to questions from members:

- It was confirmed that the polythene liners were extracted from the food waste and sent to energy from waste for incineration.

- The 23 litre food waste containers were a similar in size to a knee-high bucket with a secure lid.
- The home compost bins were 200 litres and modular which enabled compost to be pulled out from the bottom with a small rake. The turnaround for compost was 90 days, although it was recommended that the first batch be recycled and put back in the compost bin.
- Whilst the home composting units being used in the pilot scheme could safely take cooked food waste, dairy or meat products as they achieve high temperatures via a 'hot composting' process, it was highlighted that households should not place these types of waste into standard types of home-compost bins (which are cold composters) as this could attract vermin and pests.
- Removal of food waste from residual waste had an impact on the calorific value and was being monitored as part of the trial and discussions held with the contractor. Food waste recovery to anaerobic digestion was significantly better for the environment than going to an energy from waste facility as per the waste hierarchy. The former created biomethane and could be used as part of gas supplies and organic substrate to improve soil which was a better use of the material.
- The Government wanted all Local Authorities in England to commence food waste collections from 2025. Northumberland had been recognised as requiring transitional arrangements due to the complexities of the PFI waste contract which would need to be renegotiated and had sought additional time with food collections starting from 2026. Residents did not have to use the additional recycling services although they would be encouraged as it would be better for the environment. Comparison was made with the uptake by Welsh residents of 40% participating in kerbside food recycling collections. In Northumberland the residual waste from anyone that opted out of participating in food waste recycling collections would be processed via Energy from Waste plants and not landfill.
- The refuse operatives counted how many bins were presented on each collection but were unable to monitor if the same residents put their food waste bins out every week. More information was to be sought via the feedback collection survey.
- It was expected that the food waste bins would be presented weekly, due to the nature of the material, odour and the possibility that the liners would not keep their integrity for a longer period.
- The theory was that food waste might be linked to affluence and was something to be captured in the feedback survey asking questions around household size etc.
- In addition to the food waste trials, there was also a kerbside glass collection trial across 5,000 properties. The basis of the trials was to capture actual data in Northumberland on presentation rates, yields, tonnages expected and number of collection vehicles required. Data from the trial was being assessed against modelling assumptions on how the services would be provided county wide across Northumberland and the cost. Until more detail was provided by the Government in the regulations and funding arrangements, it was unknown how far the services could be provided or how much the Council would need to contribute.

- The new legislation placed an obligation on local authorities to provide collection services for the full range of materials from every household, unless excluded by a TEEP assessment. The latter would be robustly challenged by DEFRA as it was expected that services would be provided to the maximum number of residents possible.
- Plastic pots, tubs and trays were not currently collected in Northumberland as they were small items of mixed plastic polymers generally contaminated with food waste and would be mixed with paper products in the recycling bin. Sorting the material would be problematic, it had a very low-end value, limited use and had previously involved export abroad with concerns regarding the processing arrangements and would not likely be supported. Due to the aforementioned technical logistics and explanation, Northumberland had focused on high value plastic bottles with robust end markets in the UK and able to be sorted and separated from the fibre-based products by the technology utilised at the West Sleekburn processing plant.
- Feedback from residents on the containers would be important to inform decisions going forward and to ensure they were vermin proof and could not be accessed by other animals.
- The areas in the food waste trial were representative of the demographic of Northumberland as a whole. It was accepted there were different issues and concerns rolling out food waste collection services across rural and urban areas, including space for bins.
- Findings from trials elsewhere had made residents more conscious of what was being placed in their bins and influenced what they bought and cooked which led to tonnages collected reducing over time as less was being wasted.
- The kerbside collection of glass trial was taking place with the council's own vehicles on a Friday. A specialist vehicle had been hired for the food waste trial to ensure the material was entirely enclosed. The size and type of vehicle would also be assessed as part of the trial. It was expected that a fleet of specialist food waste vehicles would be acquired in the future and procured through the lowest cost to provide a permanent service in the long term.
- Food waste was the hardest recycling service to provide as it required the biggest input from households with the material being smelly and sloppy. The Council had followed WRAP guidelines and advice from other organisations which had found there was a better uptake when bin liners had been provided although many other local authorities had stopped using them.
- The cost of bin liners varied from 1p per bag for polyethene to 7/8p for a compostable bag. £5,000 had been budgeted for bin liners for the trial. The Council was considering what provided the best value for money given that the liners were removed when the material was being processed.
- It was expected that a food waste service would also be provided to commercial premises including takeaways, restaurants and cafes. The County Hall restaurant was participating in the food waste trial. This tended to be simpler in hospitality as staff were familiar with the separation of food waste.

- Meat and dairy products could be placed in the hot compost bins provided as part of the trial but were not suitable for traditional cold compost bins. Large quantities of liquids such as milk, oil and water or large bones were not recommended for the home hot compost bins.
- Community and other solutions needed to be investigated so that all residents could manage their waste more sustainably. Whilst some parish councils had expressed an interest in a community compost facility, it would need someone to manage the process, check for contamination and mix the contents. It was noted that Mid Ulster County Council in Northern Ireland collected food waste in two different streams; urban areas had a dedicated food waste collection with rural areas receiving a mixed food and garden waste collection service.
- Recycled plastic bags had not been included as an option within the procurement framework. The use of bin liners had been debated but refuse operatives elsewhere had found them useful for spillages and contamination etc. The issue would be considered further.
- There had been limited availability when sourcing containers for the food waste trial and officers were mindful there would be high demand for these and specialist vehicles for the roll out of services in 2025 and 2026.
- It was expected that the collection of a wider range of recycled materials, a monthly glass collection and weekly food waste collection would take the Council towards the Government's overall recycling target of 55%. Out of the remaining 45%, they hoped to maximise what could go to the Energy from Waste plant to reduce what was being sent to landfill.
- The Council currently received over £2 million per annum from the sale of recycled material as well as income from the Energy from Waste plant and these were factored into the Council's budget. The cost of collecting and dealing with the waste in Northumberland exceeded £20 million.
- It was expected that Councils would receive a significant increase in their revenue support grants from new burdens funding to provide the additional kerbside collection services and extended producer responsibility regulations would tax manufacturers and producers of plastic packaging which would help subsidise the cost of services.
- The environmental cost of the service would be considered as part of the project.

Members raised the following points:

- Soft plastics could be recycled at local supermarkets such as the Co-op.
- Some residents in urban areas continued to use plastic bags for their waste and were to be provided with communal bins.
- Additional provision was required for pest control in the county.
- The review of the containers was welcomed; it was suggested that weighted and rounded bins would be less likely to be knocked or blown over.
- Consideration needed to be given to the council's planning strategy to ensure there was enough room for bins when new properties were built.
- They were keen to be involved and find solutions that suited their own communities.

Councillor Horncastle, Portfolio Holder for Looking After Our Environment, commented that he had only recently taken responsibility for the service and would be meeting with officers in the near future. He thanked the officers and refuse operatives for facilitating the trials to enable data to be collected. The scale of providing the service could not be underestimated given that there were residential properties along 3,500 miles of roads within the county.

RESOLVED that the presentation be received and food waste trial results to date be noted.

6. REPORT OF THE SCRUTINY CO-ORDINATOR

Communities and Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee Monitoring Report

The Committee reviewed its work programme for the 2023/24 council year. (Report enclosed with the signed minutes).

The Scrutiny Co-ordinator reported that the Portfolio Holders would be invited to the next 2 meetings to highlight issues coming forward to enable the Committee to identify issues to be added to the work programme.

A member enquired about the Transport Asset Management Plan and whether the OSC should conduct an in-depth examination of safety on the highway and how it was managed across all areas. It was agreed that this would be discussed with the Portfolio Holder for Improving Our Roads and Highways when he makes his presentation at the next meeting.

In answer to a question, the Service Director for Environment and Transport suggested that there would be insufficient time to undertake a review of the Local Transport Plan Programme process for the next financial year as work was already underway and this should be considered for the future.

RESOLVED that the work programme be noted.

CHAIR _____

DATE _____