

ENVIRONMENT SCRUTINY PANEL

A meeting of the Environment Scrutiny Panel was held on 13 November 2023.

PRESENT: Councillor Branson (Vice Chair in the Chair); Councillors: Ewan, Grainge, Nugent and S Platt.

OFFICERS: C Coverdale, J Dixon, G Field, G Fisher and A Mace.

PRESENT AS OBSERVERS: E Imai – Boro Doughnut
Councillor Kabuye – Newport Ward Councillor
N Corrigan – Evening Gazette

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE were submitted on behalf of Councillors Banks, Morrish and Ryles.

**** DECLARATIONS OF MEMBERS' INTERESTS**

There were no Declarations of Interest made by Members at this point in the meeting.

MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING OF THE ENVIRONMENT SCRUTINY PANEL HELD ON 9 OCTOBER 2023

The minutes of the previous meeting of the Environment Scrutiny Panel held on 9 October 2023 were submitted and approved as a correct record, subject to references to weight tonnages being amended and the word 'ceased' amended to 'seized' (page 6).

In response to a query raised at the previous meeting by a Panel Member in relation to clarification over the use of opaque plastic bags for recycling collection from homes without wheeled bins, it was confirmed that only clear bags should be used so that operatives could fully view the contents of the bag to check for contamination.

WASTE MANAGEMENT – FURTHER EVIDENCE

Officers from Environment and Community Services were in attendance at the meeting, as follows: G Field, Director of Environment and Community Services; A Mace, Head of Environment; C Coverdale, Environment Services Manager; and G Fisher, Waste Disposal Manager, to provide further evidence in relation to the Panel's current scrutiny topic of Waste Management.

Information had been circulated to the Panel prior to the meeting in relation to amounts of recycling and green waste collected in Middlesbrough; types of recyclable materials collected; comparative information for previous years and in relation to other North East Councils; and disposal costs.

A Panel Member requested whether it would be possible to provide this information in relation to local authorities within the Cipfa family.

The data showed that most local authorities had struggled with post-Covid recycling rates. Middlesbrough's recycling rates were around the regional average, however, all North East local authorities were not meeting current government targets and a significant level of work had been undertaken regionally to try to increase recycling rates.

Household waste sent for reuse, recycling or composting (from waste data flow), showed that Middlesbrough had sent an average of 18,657.98 tonnes between 2018 and 2023. This equated to 29.3%. The regional average for the same period was 24,268.18 tonnes, equating to 32.3%.

It was highlighted that it was much cheaper to send waste for reuse, recycling or composting than to the incinerator and that this cost was set to increase further.

It was queried whether there was any reason why the recycling figures for Middlesbrough had declined from 19,169.47 tonnes in 2021/22 to 14,989.51 tonnes in 2022/23. The Panel was advised that a new recycling contractor had taken over and that issues had now been resolved. Redcar and Cleveland Council used the same contractor as Middlesbrough and, similarly, Redcar's recycling figures had reduced from 22,076.91 tonnes in 2021/22 to 16,265.53 in 2022/23.

It could be seen from the figures for the first quarter of 2023/24 that Middlesbrough's recycling rate was 5,572.15 tonnes and Redcar's figure was 5,646.91 tonnes for the same period. This equated to 31.5% and 35.5% respectively.

In a national context, recycling targets set by Government were to achieve 50% by 2020 and 65% by 2035. In 2020, the national 'waste from households' recycling rate was 44% meaning that the 50% target was missed nationally. The national 44% recycling rate had also reduced from the previous year (2019) when it was 45.5%.

In terms of residual household waste (the waste not sent for recycling), Middlesbrough's average for the period 2018-2023 was 63,771.58 tonnes. This was below the regional average of 75,820.50 tonnes.

Data specific to Middlesbrough's kerbside recycling tonnages was provided by breakdown of materials, from 2018-19 to 2022-23. The materials collected in the scheme were: glass, paper, mixed paper and card, mixed plastic bottles, steel cans and aluminium cans. A category of 'non-target recycle' was also included and it was explained that these were materials not included in the recycling contract, in other words not on the specified list of recyclable materials for residents to recycle at the kerbside, but that residents had put into their recycling bins, for example electrical items, which the Council must then try to have recycled by the contractor. This accounted for around 1 or 2% of Middlesbrough's kerbside recycling tonnages each year.

It was noted that in 2022-23 contaminated recycling was at a five-year high, with 3,726.503 tonnes (37%) being contaminated, compared with 2,011.430 tonnes (20%) in 2019-20 – the lowest contamination figure during the five-year period 2018-19 to 2022-23. Examples of frequent contaminants included: food, textiles/clothing, nappies, WEEE (eg electrical equipment, vapes) and bagged household waste.

In terms of what happened to the recyclable materials once collected at the kerbside, the Recycling Wagon returned to the recycling facility to deposit the load. The materials were then passed through a Materials Recycling Facility (MRF). The MRF comprised a manual sorting/picking of the material where any contaminated materials were removed. The materials were then passed through several automated sorting machines which separated the co-mingled materials into the major recyclates - such as paper, card, steel cans, aluminium cans and plastics.

Once the materials had been separated, Cumbrian Waste Management then entered the commodities market, where the materials were returned back in to manufacturing. In response to a query regarding disposal costs for recyclable materials, the Panel was advised that the Council paid a net rate to the contractor who then sold the materials on for reuse in manufacturing.

With regard to barriers to recycling, it was highlighted that residents may choose not to recycle for a number of reasons including: general uncertainty around what could and could not be recycled, possible lack of information in languages other than English, current weekly collection of residual waste and side waste, possible limited enforcement.

Members were advised that Environment Services had a targeted approach to address areas where high levels of contaminated recycling existed. Usual practice would be for the contaminated bin not to be emptied and reported by the Refuse Team Leader to the environmental enforcement team and to place a sticker on the bin stating that it would not be emptied due to being contaminated. The Senior Education and Enforcement Officer would then usually contact the owner to explain why the bin had not been emptied and the surrounding area would be letter dropped to educate residents in relation to recycling.

It was acknowledged that, in general, recycling rates across the country had reduced with practice slipping during Covid, however, standards were starting to improve once more and it was planned to have an educational push in Middlesbrough over the coming months. It was also highlighted that the Teams in Middlesbrough had done a brilliant job during Covid measures and that things had lagged behind during covid recovery.

During discussion in relation to the data provided, the following issues were raised:-

- In response to a query from a Panel Member regarding 'gate fees', it was explained that gate fees for waste disposal were charged by the tonne, as deposited. At the energy from waste plant, where all residual waste was disposed of, vehicles were weighed on the weighbridge upon entering the site. Middlesbrough currently ran the contract on behalf of the Tees Valley local authorities. There was a secondary charge in relation to recycling, for any contaminated waste. Any contaminated waste recovered from the recycling facility was returned to the energy from waste plant.
- It was highlighted that the Council did not generate any income from its waste or recycling disposal but the disposal fees for recycling were cheaper than those for residual waste sent to the incinerator. Middlesbrough's collection arrangements aimed to deliver as much clean recycling material as possible to the recycling company and the people of Middlesbrough were best placed to achieve this by sorting their waste into green waste, recyclable waste, then residual waste (ie waste that could not be recycled or placed in green waste) as a last resort. It was acknowledged that this could be more difficult in back alley areas. In summary, improving recycling rates and reducing contamination, would result in saving money on waste disposal that could be better spent on other things.
- A Member highlighted that, with the exception of Stockton, Middlesbrough produced the most household waste out of the five Tees Valley local authorities, and queried whether there was a reason for this. In response, the Panel was informed that there was no obvious reason for this other than, perhaps, only Middlesbrough and Stockton currently still operated a weekly refuse collection service.
- It was queried whether there was any correlation between areas of deprivation and increased levels of residual waste. Again, there was no obvious correlation, however, it may be that in more deprived areas, individuals may purchase lower quality items which needed to be replaced more frequently or were more readily disposable.
- Reference was made to Middlesbrough's recycling contamination rate of 37% in 2022/23 and it was stated that both Middlesbrough and Redcar had similar outcomes with the same contractor. The issues were being investigated and resolved.
- A Panel Member highlighted the uncertainty many people had regarding items that could or could not be recycled, for example, 'glass cookware' should not be recycled and it was queried what constituted as glass cookware. It was clarified that this generally referred to 'Pyrex' as it could not be processed due to the very high temperatures it could withstand.
- In terms of what could and could not be recycled, it was highlighted that this formed part of the Government's Environment Bill as it had been identified as a national issue. Middlesbrough's co-mingled collection arrangements made it easier for residents to recycle as everything could be placed into a single bin.
- In response to a query regarding food waste collections, it was confirmed that this was to be made compulsory nationally. Consideration was currently being given as to how this might best be implemented in Middlesbrough with an anticipated start in 2026, however, timescales from Government were not yet clear.
- A Member of the Panel referred to some recent research which suggested that there should be

one bin for all types of plastic, some of which was currently not collected as part of the kerbside recycling scheme, and it was queried whether this would be a viable option. It was stated that there was variation between recycling schemes offered by different local authorities and that to provide this particular option in Middlesbrough, there would need to be a reintroduction of segregating recycling materials by individuals prior to collection. With the current co-mingled system, all types of materials could be placed in a single bin making it easier for the individual.

- It was recognised that Wales generally tended to perform well in recycling compared to England. The Panel was informed that the Welsh government had taken a very strong stance on recycling with more stringent policies. Food waste collection was now standard practice in Wales and due to good food waste and recycling rates, some local authorities were moving to monthly residual waste collections.
- In response to a query it was noted that some local authorities in England that performed better on recycling had a higher rate of green waste collected which boosted their recycling rates and it was acknowledged that many households in Middlesbrough did not have gardens.

The Vice Chair thanked the Officers for their attendance and the information provided.

AGREED as follows:-

1. That the information provided be noted and considered in the context of the Panel's current scrutiny topic of 'Waste Management'.
2. That a site visit to Middlesbrough's recycling facility be arranged for Members of the Panel.

WASTE MANAGEMENT – DRAFT TERMS OF REFERENCE

Draft Terms of Reference for the Panel's review topic of 'Waste Management' had been circulated with the agenda.

AGREED that the proposed Terms of Reference for the review of Waste Management be approved as follows:-

1. To examine the current position regarding waste and recycling collection and disposal in Middlesbrough, including performance data and targets and how these compare locally and nationally.
2. To explore how Middlesbrough can increase its recycling rates, and reduce residual waste, to achieve national targets whilst minimising costs.
3. To gain an understanding of the legal and policy framework in which the Council must operate, in terms of all types of waste collections and associated enforcement activity.
4. To examine the current position in Middlesbrough regarding the collection and disposal of bulky waste (junk jobs) and fly-tipped waste, including performance data and targets and how these compare locally and nationally, and, if appropriate, how this can be improved.
5. To consider how Middlesbrough can prepare for, and comply with, compulsory food waste collections once introduced.
6. To identify best practice and ideas from other local authorities that have good recycling rates.

CRUSTACEAN DEATHS COLLABORATIVE WORKING GROUP – UPDATE

The Vice Chair provided the Panel with a verbal update in relation to the ongoing work of the Crustacean Deaths Collaborative Working Group, of which he was a member.

A recent presentation made by PD Ports, the Statutory Harbour Authority, had examined the issue of to what extent dredging was a factor in causing the mass morbidity of sea creatures. It was explained that two types of dredging took place – capital and maintenance. Capital dredging was when large amounts of earth were dug up, for example when extending the port, and maintenance dredging was an ongoing requirement in order to keep channels free.

Capital dredging had only commenced in September 2022 and the morbidity issues had started in April 2022, therefore, occurring prior to the commencement of capital dredging.

Other factors in the morbidity issues included pathogens that affected sea creatures and it had been highlighted in a report by Professor Cauldwell that even small amounts of Pyridine could be harmful to sealife. Pyridine was used in various manufacturing and chemical industries all of which were linked to the area.

The next meeting of the Working Group was scheduled for 7 December 2023.

NOTED

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD UPDATE

The Vice Chair provided a verbal update in relation to the business conducted at the Overview and Scrutiny Board meeting held on 18 October 2023, namely: -

- Executive Member Update – Executive Member for Children’s Services, Councillor Uddin.
- Middlesbrough Ward Boundary Review – The Democratic Services and Registration Manager presented the final draft of the Council’s submission to the Local Government Boundary Commission.
- Updated Work Programme for the Overview and Scrutiny Board – now to include the topic of Electoral Registration.
- Executive Forward Work Programme.
- Scrutiny Panels’ Chairs’ Updates.
- Next meeting of Overview and Scrutiny Board – Wednesday, 15th November at 4.30pm.

DATE AND TIME OF NEXT MEETING

The next meeting of the Environment Scrutiny Panel was scheduled to take place on Monday, 11 December at 10.00am.