

# **NORTH DEVON COUNCIL**

**COUNCIL: 15 MARCH 2023**

## **REPORT BY LEAD MEMBER FOR THE ENVIRONMENT**

### **Update on Environmental Enhancement**

It has been a strange time to be Lead for the Environment. I was just starting to get to grips with how waste and recycling worked when the Head of Service left, which was shortly followed by the Covid lockdown in 2020.

There had been plans at that time to push ahead with replacing the baler, which was struggling to process the volume of recycling, and to improve the fleet: there had been too many breakdowns and because of the high demand, the workshop couldn't always fix them fast enough. Those plans were put on hold, whilst the crews kept on going through Covid and the managers did their best to run the show between them.

And it was tough. Years of insufficient investment in the workforce, the premises and equipment takes its toll so it is credit to the crews and officers that they did keep the show – mostly – on the road.

When the new Head of Service was appointed at the end of 2021 he had to review the structure and processes, identify what was working well and where the bottlenecks were, and produce and implement a strategy to improve the service to our residents. He also had to develop a strategy for managing a workforce which was suffering from a shortage of HGV drivers and continuing Covid infections.

So I thought now was a good time to report on the progress being made.

You received the litter working group report last month one result of which is that the procedures were formalised for requesting community litter pick collections and litter bins, incorporating an assessment of the appropriateness of each request and capacity for collection; I still believe that there is mileage in working more closely with parish councils to ensure that the right bins are in the right places.

One really good bit of news is that there is now a full complement of HGV drivers along with a few spares following a successful recruitment and in-house training drive. As vehicles are replaced the fleet is more reliable and this reduces stress on the service.

The old plastic baler with its dated processing system has been swapped for a new one which bales 3 times more material per bale. It's a temporary fix and the 2 old can balers and conveyors are still trundling along. The system will need to be modular to cater for any new materials that might be required following the Environment Act consultation.

The in cab system is constantly being reviewed and a number of areas have been identified where we can improve performance. The existing contract ends in November this year, so the teams are working hard to produce a new specification that reflects our current and future "in cab technology" needs, ready for re-tender. They are also making sure we have robust training systems in place so all of our drivers and loaders are comfortable using the system and have the necessary, reliable kit to enable its effective use.

Reorganisation within the department, a clearer understanding of roles and responsibilities, and streamlined processes for dealing with requests and complaints should result in a more effective service. More admin staff will be available in the portacabin who can speak to customers and resolve complaints.

The rounds are not optimal, not having changed to meet the increase in housing developments of the last few years. One officer is currently in the process of collecting data about the rounds in order to better inform a redesign which should be ready around Easter time. There are some interesting ideas that should reduce the likelihood of missed collections and I am glad to hear that the actual experiences of the teams on the road will be taken into account, e.g. where there is black bag collection it is not possible to identify and report when or if a bin has been missed. Photographs are to be used to record collections so that we can verify when bins were missed by the crews or weren't put out in time.

You have all seen the plans for the yard: the accommodation for staff certainly needs upgrading and vehicle movements can be made safer and more efficient.

Waste and recycling is, I would argue, the council's most important service for our residents and visitors. It is certainly the most visible, generates the most complaints when things go wrong, and has a major impact on the environment. It could – and should - be our flagship service. There is now a plan, a better organised department, improved and improving processes, and with the right investment and a Head of Service with a clear vision, the role of Environment Lead has more of a purpose.

But of course Environmental Enhancement isn't just about keeping the environment clear of waste, but also about promoting biodiversity, creating beautiful and recreational green spaces, and contributing through judicious planting to the reduction of atmospheric carbon dioxide.

The new land at Frankmarsh extending Yeo Valley woodland has been the focus of much community activity over the winter.

To date there have been 509 mainly primary age school children visit the site from 10 schools and they have planted 1800 trees. The parks team have run a further 8 general volunteering dates between early December and the end of January with around a further 200 volunteers planting 3000 trees. There are still a few groups booked in for February and a couple of general volunteer days over half term.

Yeo Valley woodland and Ilfracombe's Bicclescombe Park won both Green Flag status again thanks to the efforts of the green team and volunteers. The park was also chosen to receive one of the Queen's Canopy trees.

Having previously told me that No Mow May is embedded into the park's programme, they didn't promote 2 sites last year, but they did add 4 new sites to the meadow cutting programme, Tarka Trail at Ashford, Lower Cross Road, Bickington, Signal Terrace, Barnstaple and the Braunton BMX site.

No Mow May will continue this year and the wood pasture areas in the new woodland will also be added to the meadow programme (approx. 1ha)

Ash dieback is still present, and the team continue to monitor the ash trees each summer removing some each winter when they become too diseased. They either replant or allow natural regeneration to replace the lost trees.

Bringing management of our green spaces in-house has proved to be an excellent move with our gardeners taking much more care and consideration for the planting schemes and land management than we would expect from contractors.

Helping our environment to flourish is an ongoing challenge, especially with our changing climate. Working with partners on nature recovery is key, with the challenges of improving water quality,

reinstating lost habitats, managing flood risks, planting trees and meadows across a significant geographical area.

So that's my tale of two halves; both have their challenges but both also can make a massive difference to the sense of place we all share in North Devon.