

ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE

WEDNESDAY 3RD SEPTEMBER 2025

Minutes of the meeting of the **ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE** held in the Council Chamber, Council Offices, School Aycliffe Lane, Newton Aycliffe, on **WEDNESDAY, 3RD SEPTEMBER 2025 at 7.00pm.**

PRESENT

Councillor Martin Ashcroft (Chairman) and:

Councillors: Tunde Akinsanya, Lindsey Aston, Dorothy Bowman, Arun M. Chandran, Neil Collinson, Luke Ellis, Jordan Gill, George Gray, Brian Haigh, Andy Hill, John Moore, Carl Robinson, Kyle Robinson, Ken Robson, Brian Sowerby, Michael Stead, Tracey Williams, Anne Woodward and John Woodward.

OFFICERS

Mr Dan Austin (Town Clerk)
Mr Steve Cooper (Works and Environment Manager)
Miss Amanda Donald (Corporate and Policy Officer)
Mr Lee Williams (Grounds Maintenance Services Co-ordinator)
Mrs Vikki Anderson (Corporate Assistant)

IN ATTENDANCE

Seven members of the public were in attendance.
Gary Wallace (Area Environment Manager, Environment Agency)
Paul Whitehill (Waste Team Leader, Environment Agency)
Kirsten Tranter (Nuisance Action Team Leader, Environmental Health, Durham County Council)

29. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Jaci Beddard, Tony Beddard, Lisa Conners, Phil Hawkins, Richard Hutchinson, Sandra Kirby and Jacqui McFadden.

30. MEMBERS' DISPENSATIONS

No applications for dispensations had been received.

31. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of interest were received.

32. GUEST SPEAKER – ENVIRONMENT AGENCY

Gary Wallace (Area Environment Manager) and Paul Whitehill (Waste Team Leader) from the Environment Agency provided a presentation on the actions taken to address the nuisance and noxious smells in Newton Aycliffe and to answer questions from councillors and public. A representative from Durham County Council Environmental Health was also in attendance.

It was explained how the Environment Agency regulate odours, the conditions within permits that aim to minimise the impact on the environment, appropriate measures and how measurements are taken and managed.

Two case studies were presented relating to Aycliffe Quarry (Ashcourt) and Emerald Biogas, while the issue of land spreading by farmers was also covered.

Aycliffe Quarry Landfill

Previously a quarry, this site has been a landfill site since the 1970s. It was explained that the landfill area is divided into cells for filling. When space in cell 4 became short, the covers were removed from earlier cells, leaving the flanks of the cells, and therefore the waste, exposed. Landfill waste should be covered.

An enforcement notice was served highlighting landfill permit breaches and the actions required to remedy these. These were carried out, although it took longer than expected. Machines are used to measure the gases omitted and low levels of landfill gases were recorded, but higher than background levels.

A fixed monitoring unit was installed in June 2024 at Brafferton Village Hall. Measurement levels showed that, although residents would be able to smell the gases, they were not at a level to cause any concerns. Complaints have decreased significantly since the works were completed and the readings will continue to be monitored.

Councillor Carl Robinson commented that very few residents have raised concerns recently and it is reassuring to hear that the site has improved.

Councillor Tracey Williams asked about the containment of gases and how they were managed.

The Area Environment Manager explained that the gases are controlled two ways; they are concealed with plastic, with pipework and a large fan to draw the gases out.

Councillor Luke Ellis referred to the fact that the quarry took a while to become compliant, asking what action would be taken if a site did not comply.

The Area Environment Manager advised that the enforcement notice also can include a suspension notice suspending site activities and their permit could be revoked if the issues continue.

Councillor Arun M Chandran recalled that, many years ago, flies were an issue and asked if they posed a risk for any disease issues to local residents.

The Area Environment Manager advised that the Environment Agency does receive complaints about flies, but they haven't had any this year. This shouldn't present a health risk any more than usual flies around the house in the summer, but he would need to research this further.

Councillor Brian Sowerby raised that there are 12 diseases that flies transmit through food so questioned this.

The Area Environment Manager reiterated that he would need to research this.

Councillor Michael Stead thanked the Environment Agency for the work done and the significant improvements made. He asked how often the site would be inspected going forward.

The Area Environment Manager confirmed inspections would be carried out monthly but they attended much more frequently when they have received many complaints. This would reduce if the site continued to be managed as it is.

Councillor Andy Hill said he understood that Brafferton is the central area for monitoring, but queried if these readings are also indicative for Aycliffe Village.

The Area Environment Manager explained that the Environment Agency only has a small number of monitoring units nationally and it was only possible to obtain one. He confirmed that the readings taken in Brafferton, being close to the site, would indicate maximum readings for local areas.

Councillor Ken Robson asked about the waste situation in Brafferton and if the levels of waste and decomposition would unsettle the coverings.

The Area Environment Manager confirmed that, due to the waste decomposing, there is a need to wait around six months to allow the levels to settle, which may be up to 10-15 centimetres, before being capped. When capped they often need to be reshaped.

Emerald Biogas

This is an anaerobic digestion plant and has been operating since 2013 to treat food waste. The purpose is to treat commercial and industrial food waste to produce biogas and a natural fertiliser.

Complaints have been received throughout the life of the site and works have been carried out throughout, to try to minimise the odour impact.

The foul air is extracted from the buildings and storage tanks through an abatement system and a large chimney, which is much easier to monitor than a landfill site. The system has been expanded and upgraded over the years, both voluntarily and due to requests from the Environment Agency, who are confident it is working well at the moment. A new, larger waste reception building should manage the odour issues more easily, with doors being closed most of the time. It will continue to be closely monitored and was audited recently with only a few issues to resolve.

Councillor Andy Hill asked if the Environment Agency is able to monitor what has been disposed of and at what times etc.

The Area Environment Manager confirmed that checks are carried out on what comes in and if it is as described. Clear bags are used so that contents checks can be carried out. The site also issues waste notices quarterly which are publicly available.

Councillor Ken Robson highlighted the high number of waste processors in the Newton Aycliffe area that produce smells and asked if this is due to government policy.

The Area Environment Manager explained that location policy is dealt with in the planning process through the Planning Department, and not something the Environment Agency deals with. He suggested reasons for Newton Aycliffe being favourable could be that there are lots of industries here on a large business park. There is also a lot of agriculture land in the area, which uses some of the products. There is no directive from the Environment Agency's perspective.

Councillor Michael Stead asked if, when issuing permits to this type of plant, cumulative issues from nearby sites are considered.

The Area Environment Manager confirmed that sites are looked at in isolation. It would be the Planning Department's role to possibly look at the wider area.

Councillor Michael Stead added his concern that the gases from all local sites add up and cumulatively affect the air quality.

Land Spreading

Spreading activities do cause odour complaints, but usually because the residents think it is from the Biogas factory or landfill.

Smells from land spreading should dissipate within days.

Sometimes those who land spread do inform the Environment Agency, but they are not required to do so.

The Nuisance Action Team Leader at Durham County Council Environmental Health explained that Environmental Health does work with the Environment Agency and land spreading complaints are often difficult to pinpoint due to the transient nature of it, but they are responsive to land spreading complaints and, farmers do not have an obligation to advise before spreading. Newton Aycliffe is surrounded by agricultural and farmland so it is likely local residents may experience odours at the relevant times of the year.

Councillor Andy Hill agreed that in an agricultural area residents accept that there are some smells, but do not accept them coming from factories or landfill sites and this does need to be monitored, which it seems to be.

Councillor Ken Robson asked if the digestate is a solid, liquid or gas. The Area Environment Manager confirmed that Biogas produces a liquid. Northumbrian Water sewage waste cake is solid, but still has an odour.

Councillor Tracey Williams asked how it is ensured that plastics are removed from digestates.

The Area Environment Manager explained that a packaging hopper is used which strips the waste of any plastic, but doesn't get it all, so the fertilizer is pressed at the other end which removes any micro-plastics so the digestate that goes to land should be as plastic free as possible and is measured to ensure it meets requirements.

Councillor Tunde Akinsanya asked why land holders and farms are not required to advise of land spreading and if the Environment Agency can request this.

The Area Environment Manager explained that, as it is not classed as a waste, there is no requirement to inform the Environment Agency.

The Nuisance Action Team Leader further explained that when it is classed as a waste they are required to inform, but manure or natural fertilizer can be spread and are not required by the Government to notify. She added that they do rely on local intelligence from complaints and have a good relationship with local farmers in the area, so can usually pinpoint any odours from land spreading quite easily in general.

Councillor Lindsey Aston commented that, because Aycliffe has had so many smell issues from different sites during recent years, often the public do not know what the odour is.

The public would understand if they knew it was land spreading but because it no longer smells like manure, they assume it is coming from the landfill or Biogas site.

The Area Environment Manager advised that any residents should contact the Environment Agency with any smell concerns and there is now an online form available to log any issues so these can be monitored.

The Waste Team Leader added that the Environment Agency has asked for data about spreading so that they can identify points when spreading is carried out and when odours are caused by land spreading and inform complainants. Filling tankers on site does also cause a bubble from a pipe so they are looking at ways to extract the odour from this.

33. PUBLIC QUESTIONS

The Chairman opened the meeting up to public questions for the guest speakers.

A member of the public commented that the smells have improved over the last year or so and thanked the Environment Agency.

A member of the public asked if the system looks at each permit in isolation and asked why, as the odours experienced by residents are from all of these sites, the full picture is not being considered.

The Area Environment Manager explained that permits are restricted to the legislation, which does only look at individual sites. Further restrictions could not be applied to Emerald Biogas due to there being a landfill nearby, for example.

The Planning Authority would possibly look at this in the planning stages across local areas.

A member of the public asked if a risk assessment at the quarry had been done regarding flies and what pest controls they have in place.

The Area Environment Manager confirmed that a risk assessment has to be provided upon application, which includes pest controls and the Environment Agency were satisfied with them.

The Waste Team Leader added that a pest management plan is required to identify flies and rodents etc, with appropriate measures and monitoring in place. The pest management team ensures this is managed and reduced. Daily checks or several checks per day would be carried out to monitor the pest management plan for flies etc, especially in warmer weather. If complaints are received then the monitoring sheets are requested and reduction measures carried out.

A member of the public thanked the Environment Agency for its efforts as complaints from local residents have dwindled considerably.

The guest speakers were thanked for their attendance and left the meeting.

Public questions on agenda items were then requested.

A member of the public asked about the garden competition and if, due to the lack of nominations for allotments, plot holders may be allowed to nominate their own plots and if judging had taken place yet and if not, when would this be.

The Grounds Maintenance Services Co-ordinator confirmed that an allotment tenant can nominate their own plot and this year three nominations had been received. Due to the low numbers of entries, officers have noted the best plots. The date for entries was extended, followed by recess so they have not been judged by the Chairman and Vice Chairman. Prize winners will be notified at the Annual General Meeting.

The Grounds Maintenance Services Co-ordinator has been approached by members of Great Aycliffe Garden Guild who would like to investigate the feasibility of managing the awards on the Council's behalf. This will be explored and a report brought to the next meeting.

34. MINUTES

It was proposed by Councillor Arun M Chandran, seconded by Councillor Ken Robson and:

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the meeting of the Environment Committee, held on 9th July 2025, be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

35. PLANNING SUB COMMITTEE MINUTES

Councillor Carl Robinson asked whether the Council's comments on the biogas expansion application have been considered by Durham County Council. The Corporate and Policy Officer agreed to investigate this.

It was proposed by Councillor Andy Hill, seconded by Councillor Ken Robson and:

RESOLVED – that the minutes of the meeting of the Planning Sub-Committee, held on 22nd July 2025, be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

36. ALLOTMENTS REPORT

Members considered an update report from the Grounds Maintenance Services Co-ordinator on issues relating to the allotments for the eight weeks ended the 24th August 2025.

Councillor Carl Robinson asked why plots 6 and 32 at St Oswald's site were not under offer.

The Grounds Maintenance Services Co-ordinator clarified that these have been offered and accepted since the report and will recirculate the updated information.

RESOLVED – that it be recommended that the report be received.

37. ENVIRONMENT REPORT

Members considered an update report from the Works and Environment Manager on items relating to the environment for the eight weeks ending the 24th August 2025.

The Works and Environment Manager provided a verbal update regarding the garden competition explaining that the initial request for nominations for the garden competition had gone out in June and at the July meeting it was agreed that as there had only been a few nominations, the deadline would be extended. Some councillors had submitted nominations, which is appreciated.

The Works and Environment Manager advised that he had undertaken a review of the nominations and circulated his recommendations to members ahead of the meeting.

No nominations for the Community Award had been received; however St Andrew's Close in Aycliffe Village has a row of bungalows and each property has flower displays so it is proposed that they should receive the community award.

It was proposed that the Best Hanging Baskets and Tubs Award be given to 10 Marshall Road and that the Best Overall Garden Award be given to 6 Burghley Close and that all nominations receive a Certificate of Recognition.

It was further proposed that a special letter of acknowledgement be sent to an elderly resident in Oakfield for her efforts in tending her garden.

Councillor Carl Robinson commented that it was prudent to include the Chairman and Vice Chairman in the judging process to ensure fairness.

Councillor Martin Ashcroft confirmed that he as Chairman and the Vice Chairman had both looked at the officer's suggestions and were happy with decisions made.

Councillor John Moore asked for an update regarding the issue at Woodham Way with the Golf Club trees.

The Town Clerk confirmed that a positive response had previously been received and that Durham County Council and the owners would be working together to resolve the issues.

Councillor Carl Robinson congratulated the works department for their work during the recent weather in managing damaged trees, keeping the community safe and having debris tidied up quickly, requesting that a letter of thanks be sent to the works staff team.

It was proposed by Councillor Arun Chandran, seconded by Councillor Carl Robinson and:

RESOLVED – that it be recommended that:

- i) The report be received.
- ii) The Garden and Allotment Competition judging by officers with review from the Chairman and Vice Chairman be approved.
- iii) The feasibility of deepening Aycliffe Nature pond be explored in the winter, removing some weed to slightly deepen parts of the pond to help retain water during dry summer weather.

38. CEMETERIES REPORT

Members considered an update report from the Grounds Maintenance Services Co-ordinator on items relating to the cemeteries for the eight weeks ended the 24th August 2025.

RESOLVED – that it be recommended that the report be received.

Chairman