

## **BACKGROUND BRIEFING NOTE FOR SCRUTINY MEMBERS**

### Introduction

- 1.1 At the meeting of the Chairs and Vice Chairs of Scrutiny Committees across Cumbria in July of this year, a decision was reached to establish a Cumbria Scrutiny Member network, with two members from each authority, to share expertise and experience and to commission some joint working.
- 1.2 At their first meeting on October 6<sup>th</sup>, they asked for a scrutiny working group to be established with one specialist Scrutiny Member from each authority to consider waste management in Cumbria.
- 1.3 It was decided that, initially, the working panel should look at the recent interim report from the Audit Commission on waste management, ask follow up questions of the Cumbria Strategic Waste Partnership, and then reflect on how to take their work forward from there.
- 1.4 Some suggestions emerging from the October 6<sup>th</sup> meeting on a possible way forward included shadowing of the Partnership, comparisons with 'excellent' authorities, and a review of the Cumbria Strategic Waste Partnership to establish whether it was the most effective mechanism for achieving the waste management agenda.
- 1.5 It was also flagged up that Cumbria County Council's Environment Panel has begun work on education programmes in Cumbrian schools.

### Issues

- 2.1 The issues and challenges are outlined in some detail in the attached report from the Audit Commission, 'Waste Management – Follow Up; Cumbrian Local Authorities; Audit 2005/06'.
- 2.2 The main issue emerging from this report is the risk that Cumbria will not meet the statutory landfill diversion targets for 2005/06 and will incur fines for a failure to do so.
- 2.3 In August 2005, Cumbria County Council predicted the following penalties based on current trends:

2005/06:	approx £500,000
2006/07:	approx £3.4 million
2008/09:	approx £10 million
- 2.4 It is made clear in the report that these penalties do not wholly figure in the County Council's medium-term financial plan, and, therefore, it is unclear what impact there will be on the taxpayer of such penalties being incurred. It might reasonably be assumed, however, that the

possibility is a rise in Council Tax or a reduction in other service provision to offset the cost.

- 2.5 While the County Council may have to pay the penalty, the report clearly highlights that there are issues to be addressed by all authorities in Cumbria if landfill diversion targets are to be reached. The strengths and weaknesses of each authority are laid out clearly.
- 2.6 The report talks of unchallenging targets, or no targets at all for certain issues. While it points to increased co-operation between authorities, it also alludes to barriers in achieving speedier progress.

### Conclusions

- 3.1 In the conclusions of the Audit Report (page 18), there is an acknowledgement of a greater, combined commitment to taking the waste agenda forward in Cumbria than one year ago.
- 3.2 The conclusions also highlight, however, a lack of tangible progress. It is suggested that in addition to any specific questions that the Scrutiny working group might have of the Cumbria Strategic Waste Partnership, that Members concentrate on fully understanding what the barriers are to speedier progress and even better joint working and what the barriers might be to implementing the recommendations in the conclusions of the report.
- 3.3 This is suggested as, if the report acknowledges that there is better joint working, then, applying reason to the equation, why has there not been greater progress when the Cumbria Strategic Waste Partnership is a professional group of waste management specialists fully aware of the implications of not moving faster. Time? Resources? Unrealistic or unreasonable expectations? A difference of officer and/or political opinion?
- 3.4 The report alludes to some of the reasons why, but this is not clearly spelled out. It is suggested to Members that this is not about apportioning blame in any way, but to understand the challenges this group faces in order to stand back, look at the bigger picture, and ultimately make recommendations which add value to the process (rather than going over the same ground that the Cumbria Strategic Waste Partnership has already covered or is covering).
- 3.5 This approach does not exclude, of course, any of the suggestions made at para 1.4.