

Scrutiny Review of Planters in Residential Streets (Task and Finish)

Executive Summary

The aim of the review was to investigate the options for retaining, maintaining or removing planters in residential streets. The review examined if anti-social behaviour would be reduced and savings would be made if planters were removed or whether planters could be given a new lease of life by seeking third party or community involvement.

The Select Committee's key findings were as follows:

- Community planter projects can have a positive impact on areas by improving them visually as well as improving the mental and social wellbeing of residents.
- There are 94 brick planters in the Borough of Stockton-on-Tees. Of these, 86 are owned by Stockton Borough Council, 7 are owned by Thirteen Housing Group, and 1 is owned by a Town Council.
- Some wards have a larger number of brick planters than other wards.
- There are variations in planter size and location. Some planters are relatively small and are located on terraced streets. Larger planters are also present in some residential streets as well as on public highways and at shopping parades.
- The condition of planters also varies across the Borough. There is evidence of some community maintenance of certain planters. Other planters are overgrown and contain thorny bushes which are unattractive and have attracted anti-social behaviour.
- The maintenance regime for planters, carried out by SBC, includes an assessment of the condition of planters and annual pruning. Additional pruning in the summer has been carried out upon request and to prevent obstruction or overhanging on the highway. Street cleansing teams also collect litter found in planters as part of their regular regime.
- Several complaints about planters, and requests by residents to remove planters, have been received by SBC in recent years.
- A number of brick planters have been previously removed. External funding was secured to assist with financing the cost of these removals.
- The cost to remove planters varies depending on the size of planter, the location, paving type, and replacement options.
- There can be negative environmental and social impacts of removing planters.
- A Borough-wide community/residents project, or several smaller projects, were considered as a means of maintaining planters in the future.
- Previous community projects to improve residential areas had been successful in engaging residents in taking ownership over transforming their area. Most notably, the SBC led *Alleyways Project*.

- Lessons learned from previous community projects included the importance of co-ordination and planning for the sustainability of projects.
- Areas with a higher turnover of residents might struggle to sustain maintenance projects in the long term.
- The option of a small, pilot project, in a few locations across the Borough was considered. Lessons learned from the pilot project would influence and shape longer-term projects.
- Sustainable partnerships could be built with local businesses and charitable trust. In particular, the ethos of Cultivate Tees Valley is aligned with a community planter project.
- Catalyst's *Grantfinder Database* could be used in the future to source funding for community projects. Catalyst could also aid with writing funding bid applications and potentially provide volunteers for a future community project.
- Potential volunteers could also be drawn from *Bright Minds Big Futures*.
- Using existing partnerships with external organisations, it would be achievable to engage with residents about future community projects. Social Media platforms and the Catalyst bulletin are two examples of publicity methods.
- Support for community projects may be received from Town Councils and Housing Groups.
- It would be more advantageous to gather residents' views on planter projects through informal methods rather than by conducting a formal public consultation.

Conclusion

Brick planters have been installed in residential settings across the Borough over the last fifty years for several reasons. The size and condition of brick planters varies from ward to ward. Planters are maintained by Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council. Community maintenance projects have also taken place in the past in some wards.

The task and finish group have assessed the current condition of planters to determine whether they should be removed or maintained. The group's considered view was that there was benefit in retaining planters, provided these could be maintained appropriately and that volunteers should be encouraged to help with planting and maintenance. It was also agreed that local communities may prefer that some planters are removed. However, funding would need to be secured to achieve this. Residents would need to be consulted informally to gather their views on proposed options for planters in their area.

Assistance and support from Catalyst and community gardening groups, such as Cultivate Tees Valley, could facilitate the recruitment of volunteers for community planter projects and the submission of funding bid applications. It was also recognised that tenants and residents' associations, housing associations, town and parish councils, and local businesses might be willing to adopt or sponsor planters in their areas.

Recommendations

1. That, in line with usual practice, SBC continue to maintain the structure of planters, where repairs are needed, and any proposals to remove planters, following consultation with local residents, be considered on a case by case basis together with funding options.
2. That residents and community groups be invited to take on the role of coordinating and/or pilot planting through approaches to organisations such as:
 - o Cultivate Tees Valley, Shaw Trust, Billingham Environmental Link Programme (BELP), and other community gardening groups
 - o Tenants and Residents Associations
 - o Residents who are allotment holders or are on allotment waiting lists
 - o Councillors and Residents
 - o Community Partnerships
 - o BMBF, schools, and youth organisations
3. That Town and Parish Councils are asked whether they would be interested in taking on responsibility for any planters in their areas.
4. That Housing Associations are asked whether they would be interested in taking on responsibility for planters in areas where they have stock.
5. That local businesses are encouraged to sponsor planters or provide materials or funding.
6. That interested residents and groups be encouraged to:
 - a. Consider the longer-term maintenance and funding strategies and low maintenance planting schemes, such as wildflowers;
 - b. Consider the repurposing of planters, for example, as benches/seating
 - c. Work with local ward Councillors to consult the local community and encourage their involvement
7. That, following Cabinet approval, the Chair of the Task and Finish Group present the final report to the new Community Partnerships to seek interest from residents and groups.
8. That interested parties be signposted to Catalyst's Grantfinder Database.
9. That Community Services provide advice, guidance and appropriate support to interested individuals as part of approving planting schemes.
10. That opportunities are publicised with a view to seeking interest from individuals and groups and that successful pilot initiatives be publicised to encourage more interest.
11. That the inclusion of planters in residential settings should not be supported in future developments unless long term funding for their upkeep is identified and secured.

