

CRIME AND DISORDER SELECT COMMITTEE

SCRUTINY REVIEW OF BONFIRES ON PUBLIC LAND

1.0 Executive Summary

- 1.1 This report outlines the findings and recommendations following the Crime and Disorder Select Committee's scrutiny review of Bonfires on Public Land.
- 1.2 Like many Local Authority areas, Stockton-on-Tees experiences an increase in bonfires between mid-October and mid-November each year. Whilst these usually occur because of 'bonfire night' (5th November) celebrations, such cases have led to significant issues including damage to grassed areas, fly-tipping (involving refrigerators, old mattresses, kitchen units, etc.), public disorder, and associated obstructive parking.
- 1.3 Another key feature of this period is 'Mischief Night' (which falls on the day prior to Halloween – 30th October), an American concept which sees mainly young people engaging in tricks and low-level anti-social behaviour (ASB), something that the Council and its various partners are trying to discourage / eradicate due to the significant issues it causes for the public and local services.
- 1.4 The Council and its key partners, Cleveland Police and Cleveland Fire Brigade, have historically worked together to mitigate the risks associated with the lighting of bonfires, particularly during the 'bonfire night' period. However, concerns persist around the prevalence and impact of this annual activity, and the unabating challenges faced by local organisations in managing any identified issues in relation to bonfires. Reported attacks on public sector workers when attempting to intervene is a further alarming aspect of this practice.
- 1.5 Brought together under the umbrella of the Safer Stockton Partnership (SSP), multi-agency partners jointly work together in a combined approach under the banner of the Bonfire Strategy, also known as 'Operation Trojan'. This joint strategy is centred on a programme of targeted interventions in the lead-up to this period, with a focus on education and diversionary activities aimed at problem areas across Stockton-on-Tees.
- 1.6 As well as associated ASB, bonfires also cause environmental difficulties by adding to air pollution. Burning plastic, rubber or painted materials not only creates an unpleasant smell, but also produces a range of poisonous compounds, potentially causing health issues for those nearby. Bonfires can cause annoyance to neighbours and the smoke, soot and smell from bonfires are the subject of many complaints to local Councils. Any bonfire is a potential fire risk.
- 1.7 Focusing on bonfire activity upon public land, the aims of this review were to firstly establish the extent of bonfire-related concerns (e.g. personal safety, damage to property, fly-tipping, etc.) within the Borough during the traditional 'bonfire night' season. The Committee then sought to understand what the Council and its partners have historically done to identify, address and reduce bonfire-related issues, and then investigate what, if any, further measures can

be put in place to strengthen the management, or reduction, of bonfires during this time period.

- 1.8 In terms of planning ahead of the bonfire period, the Committee heard from, and about, key partners involved in what was referenced as Stockton-on-Tees' 'mature' strategic approach, including several SBC departments, Cleveland Fire Brigade (CFB), and Cleveland Police. Well-established partnership-working (formal meetings, shared operation command rooms, reacting to partner intelligence) allied to individual organisational arrangements (including the use of collected data to identify bonfire hotspots, specific operational orders, and the preparation of additional resources for the period) demonstrate a range of local measures employed to reduce fire-setting and its associated impacts.
- 1.9 A crucial aspect of work undertaken in advance of the bonfire season is public engagement. Led by SBC and CFB, the Committee was informed of a number of existing initiatives which promote fire safety and raise awareness of fire-setting risks. These proactive approaches range from interactions with schools / educational establishments, leaflet drops, door-knocking, disseminating advice and information at local events, and utilising multiple media outlets. Members welcomed future intentions to further reinforce responsible behaviour via The Corner House Youth Project (Cleveland Police) and more targeting social media messaging (CFB), and encourage tapping into any available funding streams to assist in this endeavour.
- 1.10 Reducing the availability of combustible materials used in deliberate fire-setting is another vital strand involving all key partners. Concerns were raised around reduced access to refuse sites since the emergence of COVID-19 and the potential build-up of waste or use of alternative means of disposing of it (i.e. burning it). The Committee therefore encourage SBC to continue monitoring the existing arrangements with Suez (site managers), as well as reinforcing reporting routes with both CFB and Cleveland Police so their officers can report details of dispensed combustible materials for collection (both during and outside the bonfire season).
- 1.11 Similar to CFB, Thirteen Housing Group's focus is more on the Middlesbrough area, with less activity undertaken within Stockton-on-Tees due to a lower level of Thirteen-owned land. Conflicting accounts of SBCs response to Thirteen's offer of help in advance of and during the bonfire season surfaced, but it was subsequently found that active engagement does take place with different Thirteen officers to those who contributed to this review. Not for the first time, the Committee had to emphasise the need for the right personnel to provide the required information.
- 1.12 Whilst Stockton-on-Tees experiences less 'secondary fires' (uncontrolled, not supervised and at risk of spread) and bonfire and refuse incidents in proportion to its population than neighbouring Local Authorities, analysis shows an 33% increase of the latter within the Borough from 2019 to 2021. Hotspot areas were predominantly Newtown, Stockton Town Centre, and Billingham South Wards, though during the bonfire season, Billingham East, Hardwick, Mandale & Victoria, and Stainsby Hill have all seen an increased proportion of reported cases. The areas with the most demand over the bonfire season are similar to those areas where demand is normally higher.

- 1.13 Bonfires can adversely impact the community in several ways. They can be a blight on neighbourhoods, compromise public safety (whether real or perceived), and bring about negative environmental consequences. They have also proved to be a stimulus for related anti-social behaviour, including violence towards staff who have been called to attend a reported incident. CFB reported that bonfires have a major impact on the overall local economy, and that over the last five years, they are estimated to have cost Stockton-on-Tees around £10 million (based on data from central and local government). Given this financial claim and the known associated problems brought about by the setting of bonfires, partners and indeed the public should be questioning whether this seasonal practice is really worth it.
- 1.14 In summary, there was a general consensus from all partners who contributed to this review that bonfires themselves were not a major issue within the Borough (greater concerns were expressed in relation to the associated behaviours around bonfires (as well as fireworks)), though the Committee acknowledge that sporadic cases across Stockton-on-Tees have previously provided challenges for the Council and its partners despite the very established annual planning, response and review joint-working. Continuing to focus resources on these identified areas (and any emerging ones), particularly around education and diversion, remains paramount in the drive to further reduce the negative elements which bonfires can clearly foster.

Recommendations

The Committee recommend that:

- 1) To supplement Cleveland Fire Brigade's (CFB) annual promotion of fire safety ahead of the bonfire season, Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council (SBC) reviews its own public engagement approach to reinforce this messaging across all available communication mechanisms, emphasising dangers of bonfires and impact on local residents.**
- 2) In terms of communicating to the wider public, SBC considers adopting the Shrewsbury Town Council approach in emphasising a zero tolerance towards unauthorised bonfires (including contact routes for permission to light a bonfire on public land and the potential consequences for failing to seek permission).**
- 3) SBC reinforces existing communication arrangements with both CFB and Cleveland Police for them to report details of dispensed combustible materials for collection (both during and outside the bonfire season).**
- 4) SBC continues to support CFB and Thirteen Housing Group in undertaking leaflet-drops to identified bonfire hotspot neighbourhoods within the Borough regarding fire safety and reporting routes for anti-social behaviour / associated disorder.**
- 5) To further deter the construction and lighting of unauthorised bonfires, SBC identifies any alternative sites within the Borough where official bonfires may be able to be facilitated in the future.**