

Place Select Committee

A meeting of Place Select Committee was held on Monday, 26th September, 2022.

Present: Cllr Chris Barlow (Chair), Cllr Mohammed Javed, Cllr Pauline Beall, Cllr Luke Frost, Cllr Stefan Houghton, Cllr Hilary Vickers, Cllr Bill Woodhead MBE

Officers: Simon Grundy (F, D&R); Dale Rowbotham, Darren Robinson, Joanne Roberts (CS, E&C); Rachel Harrison, Rebecca Saunders-Thompson, Gary Woods (CS)

Also in attendance: Lucy Watts

Apologies: Cllr Louise Baldock, Cllr Hugo Stratton,

PLA Evacuation Procedure

13/22

The evacuation procedure was noted.

PLA Declarations of Interest

14/22

There were no declarations of interest.

PLA Minutes

15/22

Consideration was given to the minutes of the Place Select Committee meeting which was held on the 25th July 2022 for approval and signature.

AGREED that the minutes of the meeting held on the 25th July 2022 be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

PLA Action Plan for Agreed Recommendations - Review of Residents Parking Zones

16/22

Members were presented with the Action Plan setting out how the agreed recommendations from the Scrutiny Review of Residents Parking Zones will be implemented and target days for completion.

AGREED that:

- 1) the Action Plan be approved.
- 2) a progress update will be provided to the Committee at the 27th March meeting.

PLA Monitoring the Impact of Previously Agreed Recommendations **17/22 Progress report for the previously completed Burial Provision review.**

The Select Committee considered a progress update, including assessments of progress and supplementary appendices, following implementation of the recommendations from the review of Burial Provision. Highlights included:

Recommendation 1

- A review of Council owned land had been completed by Inclusive Growth and Development and it was identified there were no suitable options.

- A review of private land had been undertaken and a handful of potentially suitable options were identified and were being further investigated.
- An independent surveyor with expertise in rural estates had been engaged to act on behalf of the local authority to enter into negotiations with the landowners on the Council's behalf, targeting sites considered to be most feasible. Responses were awaited from landowners and their agents.

Recommendation 2

- A private consultancy firm specialising in Cemetery Management and Design were engaged to review those sites considered most feasible. The work by the specialist consultancy firm identified that there were no overriding showstoppers from a desktop perspective, and recommended site investigators to confirm this.
- Work with the Finance team needed to be carried out to work out the next stage.

Recommendation 3

- A number of discussions had occurred with Town and Parish Councils on burial requirements and advice offered with continuing support offered in discussing requirements.

Committee comments and questions were recorded as follows:

- Members queried if officers could release the names of the sites identified as suitable for Burial Provision. Officers responded they could not release the names of the sites at the current time, but of the two most suitable sites once was located central and the other more western.
- Members questioned when the next update could be provided to the committee. Officers responded that they had been regularly contacting the external surveyors for an update and hoped to provide the committee with an update in a couple of months.

AGREED that the assessments of progress be confirmed, and a further update be provided in due course.

PLA 18/22 Scrutiny Review of Planning (Development Management) & Adoption of Open Space

This was the second evidence session of the scrutiny review of Planning (Development Management) and Adoption of Open Space where members received a detailed presentation from the Manager of Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council's (SBC) Planning Services team, the content of which covered the following:

- Additional Information requested: Detail was provided by the Manager of SBC's Planning Services team as identified in the previous meeting. Detail was provided on which cases were sent to committee, appeals including contrary to recommendation decisions, appeal cost information, the method/ pre applications received and a staffing comparison comparing the level of staff within Stockton on Tees Borough Council's Planning Services team to other authorities of a similar size.
- Pre-application Advice: Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council provided a

discretionary free pre-application advice service, providing guidance on planning applications for the best opportunity for planning approval. From 2017, the number of pre-applications received remained consistent with 2022 not being completed. Pre-application performance fluctuated since 2017 due to a variety of reasons such as, the volume of applications, staff shortages, and COVID 19.

- COVID-19: The pandemic had resulted in a fluctuation of pre-application enquiries from April 2020-July 2021 with the beginning of this period receiving less applications and the latter half of the period receiving a high volume of applications (likely due to pent-up household demand). Pre-application enquiries were higher in 2021 than 2019, but lower than the COVID-19 average.
- Benchmarking: Planning applications and pre-applications received were compared with other unitary authorities of a similar population. During 2019/2020 Stockton-on-Tees received, along with Darlington, the highest number of planning applications and the highest number of planning pre-applications. With reference to pre-application fees, Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council was only 1 of 3 councils compared who did not currently charge for the pre-application service provided, the other Council's being Middlesbrough Council and Redcar & Cleveland Council.
- Charging: Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council received an average of 1350 pre-applications, the majority of applications received were residential 715.5 (53%). Minor applications covered 378 (28%), major applications covered 54 (4%) and other covered 202.5 (15%). Based on figures from benchmark authorities, it is anticipated that if Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council started charging for pre-application enquiries the reality would be that those number would be significantly reduced. Residential applications could on average be reduced to 72, minor applications to 38, major applications to 5 and other applications to 20.
- Enforcement: Planning enforcement was a statutory function meaning planning officers had to investigate any complaints made. The planning officer had to use the information they had to make a discretionary judgement on if the case needed to be taken any further.
- Service Demand: The average number of enforcement cases the planning service received annually ranged from 450-500 cases. During the period of 2017-2022 the number of enforcement cases received by the planning team had stayed relatively consistent, with an increase year-on-year. The number of enforcement cases closed within a certain period was increasing due to more demands on the service.
- Process review: A planning services review was held on 2019 to simplify the enforcement process. The review had sought to maximise flexibility and resources of the service by using planning officers to investigate breaches. This was due to a range of staffing changes during this time.
- Covid implications received/determined: From 2019/20- 2021/22, the number of enforcement requests received rose steadily from March to February. From September 2021/22, there was a spike (likely due to more disposable income during this period) followed by a slight reduction. The 2019/20 period had the

largest number of enforcement requests determined with the period of 2020/21 having the lowest number of determined requests.

- Service standards: In the future, potential service standards could be brought in. A Local Enforcement Plan, prioritisation, and 'waymarking' and service standards may lead to significant change within planning.

Regarding Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council charging for pre-application enquires, Members questioned if it was a good idea. Officers replied that if Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council charged, the service would be held to an even higher standard with more work being created as it would need to be constantly reviewed to ensure the council was charging the correct amount.

The Committee queried if other local authorities still had dedicated enforcement officers. Officers responded that some local authorities do have dedicated enforcement officers and other local authorities do not. The planning services manager was confident that the new service structure, with planning officers doing both planning and enforcement, would be effective once additional staff were recruited but that the overall effectiveness was continuing to be monitored. Whether a dedicated enforcement was required would be an option under consideration.

Members questioned what was the minimum staffing structure model that the planning service could operate on. Officers replied that the current structure in place for the planning service was the minimum the service could operate on and there would be a risk to service delivery with fewer staff.

Members queried why Stockton-on-Tees Borough council was struggling to recruit. Officers responded there was a shortage of qualified officers and those who were qualified were going into the private sector or using recruitment agencies.

Members commented that Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council should be offering more attractive salaries similar to other local authorities. Officers replied other local authorities were in some instances offering better salaries with one neighbouring authority doing so, others were recruiting more senior planning officers in order to offer higher pay and attract (and retain) more experienced planning officers.

AGREED that the evidence be noted.

**PLA
19/22** **Work Programme 2022-2023**

Consideration was given to the Work Programme.

The next Committee meeting would be held on Monday 17 October 2022.

AGREED that the Work Programme be noted.

**PLA
20/22** **Chair's Update**

The Chair had no further updates.