

COMMUNITY SAFETY SELECT COMMITTEE

A meeting of Community Safety Select Committee was held on Thursday 11 July 2024.

Present: Cllr Mrs Ann McCoy (Vice-Chair, acting as Chair), Cllr John Coulson, Cllr Jason French, Cllr Lynn Hall (sub for Cllr Alan Watson), Cllr Shakeel Hussain, Cllr Barbara Inman, Cllr Sylvia Walmsley

Officers: Sharon Cooney, Stephen Donaghy, Leanne Maloney-Kelly (A,H&W); Gary Woods (CS)

Also in attendance: Cllr Norma Stephenson OBE (SBC Cabinet Member for Access, Communities and Community Safety)

Apologies: Cllr Paul Rowling (Chair), Cllr Richard Eglington, Cllr Alan Watson

CSS/13/24 Evacuation Procedure

The evacuation procedure was noted.

CSS/14/24 Declarations of Interest

There were no interests declared.

CSS/15/24 Minutes

Consideration was given to the minutes of the Community Safety Select Committee meeting which was held on 13 June 2024 for approval and signature.

AGREED that the minutes of the Committee meeting held on 13 June 2024 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

CSS/16/24 Scrutiny Review of Welcoming and Safe Town Centres

Following the Committee's approval of the scope and plan for the Welcoming and Safe Town Centres review at the last meeting in June 2024, this first evidence-gathering session involved an initial submission from the Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council (SBC) Community Safety and Regulated Services department.

Led by the SBC Service Manager – Public Protection, and supported by both the SBC Environmental Health Service Manager and SBC Team Leader – Licensing, a presentation was given which covered the following:

- What does Welcoming and Safe mean?
- Welcoming and Safe in Stockton
- Proposed Scope and Plan
- Establish the key issues: What do we already know?
- What is already in place?
 - Licensing
 - Trading Standards

- Environmental Health
- Powering our Future: Community Safety and Regulated Services
- Next Steps: Priorities for 2024
- Role of Safer Stockton Partnership

The session began with considerations around definitions of ‘welcoming’ and ‘safe’. Highlighting that each of the Borough’s six town centres (Billingham, Ingelby Barwick, Norton, Stockton, Thornaby and Yarm) had unique characteristics and different opportunities and challenges, a late-2023 Parliament debate on town centre safety was referenced which experienced its own difficulties in narrowing down what this actually meant, principally as it impacted all who lived, worked or visited these locations. An example of another Local Authority (York) which had outlined a vision for its town centres was also shared, and a potential definition for Stockton-on-Tees was provided which could be adapted / refined as part of this review.

One of the Committee’s aims was to establish the key issues within each of the Borough’s six town centres with regards safety. To this end, feedback on the Public Spaces Protection Order (PSPO) consultation from December 2022 was relayed which, following an encouraging 1,300 responses, identified public perceptions of feeling unsafe in Stockton and Norton town centres, and particular concerns about alcohol-related anti-social behaviour (ASB) and aggressive begging. It was also known that Stockton town centre had the highest volume of reported crime and ASB across the Borough, whilst Yarm and Ingleby Barwick had the lowest. In terms of Community Safety requests for service in relation to town centre locations, ASB (38%) and crime (17%) had the largest percentages of all requests between April 2022 and June 2024.

Attention was drawn to data on reported incidents within each of the Borough’s town centres since 2022-2023 which indicated the following:

- Stockton: Highest number of incidents, with over 900 ASB reports in 2022-2023, dropping below 700 last year (2023-2024). Crime reported to SBC was over 700 last year. (*note: last year, SBC started including CCTV-monitored incidents in the figures, which accounted for the increases in other categories*)
- Thornaby: ASB continued to be the stand-out issue at around 200 incidents each year for the last two years (2022-2023 and 2023-2024). Recently, a group of young people (who had been causing problems around the Golden Eagle / Allensway) successfully completed the ‘Making Good’ programme and had not been involved in further incidents. Thornaby town centre was covered by ASB hot-spot patrols (funded by the Home Office).
- Billingham: ASB reports were around half of that in Thornaby. Off-road bikes were often a cause for concern. Billingham was also in the ASB hot-spot patrol routes which were delivering reductions in ASB reports (outcomes from an evaluation of these patrols by the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner for Cleveland were awaited).
- Yarm: Parking issues were the most reported category, with low reports of ASB each year (an average of 50 reports per year). Challenges associated with the busy night-time economy did occur but were well managed between partners, including the SBC Licensing Team.

- Ingleby Barwick: ASB issues remained low at around 50-60 reports a year. Vehicle issues around schools did feature, either through direct reports or via Elected Members. Demand due to reports were low but perceptions including fear of ASB were poor.
- Norton: Biggest reported issue to SBC was ASB, peaking at over 400 in 2022-2023, dropping to 150 last year (2023-2024) following the introduction of a PSPO. Concerns regarding off-road motorbikes high. ASB hot-spot patrol routes had recently been reviewed and Norton town centre will form part of the revised coverage.

An overview of activity that was already taking place within the SBC Community Safety and Regulated Services department to support town centre safety was then provided:

- Licensing: The core functions of these services were to ensure public safety through licensing policies and documents to promote the licensing objectives throughout the Borough. Licensing Officers carry out both proactive and reactive visits, and investigate / take action against licenced and unlicenced activity to promote public safety. The team process around 2,000 applications and 1,000 service requests per year.

Relevant town centre-related initiatives were highlighted, including Pubwatch (local, independent groups of people working in licensed premises who work together to tackle and prevent ASB / crime and promote safe drinking environments) and the introduction of trauma packs (designed to improve the chances of victims in the event of a serious accident or a violent incident) in key locations and licensed premises. The team's contribution to regular audits organised by SBC Town Centres Development was also noted.

- Trading Standards: Working to promote a fair and safe trading environment (to the benefit of both consumers and reputable businesses), SBC Trading Standards Officers investigate all complaints regarding the sale of such products from town centre premises and market traders. This also plays a part in disrupting organised crime.

Examples of involvement in named operations to combat sales of counterfeit / illicit tobacco and illicit / non-compliant vaping products were highlighted. The service utilises the help of young volunteers to check if shops are selling age restricted products (i.e. cigarettes, alcohol, vapes and fireworks) to children – much of this work was carried out within the Borough's town centre locations, often alongside police colleagues. Officers also carry out proactive food standards inspections to check that town centre premises are selling food that is correctly described and meets compositional standards, as well as ensuring that the requirements around allergen controls are being implemented.

- Environmental Health: The service is involved in a wide range of activity, including animal controls (joint responsibility with the police), addressing dog fouling, air quality monitoring, noise / dust / odour assessment and control (incorporating the imposition of controls around any new developments), and food safety inspections / complaints management.

The Borough's positive performance in relation to air quality was documented (an area which was predominantly impacted by either vehicle movement or domestic heating sources), as was the number of noise complaints addressed during 2023-2024.

As part of the Council's *Powering Our Future* initiative, a review of the existing Community Safety and Regulated Services offer was ongoing, with a view to presenting recommendations to Cabinet later in 2024. The review was focusing on having the correct team structures to meet future demand, improving digital innovation to maximise officer time in the community (demonstrations for potential new initiatives / technologies were scheduled for next week), and improving customer access and experience (including reporting and updates).

Several identified priorities for the department during 2024 were listed which involved maximising the use of civil legislation to disrupt crime (particularly serious and organised crime), diverting young people away from ASB, and utilising Safer Streets 5 funding to further support town centre safety. An evaluation and review of the Stockton and Norton town centre PSPO was planned, as was the introduction of a Problem Solving and Partnerships officer to work alongside the community and internal / external partners to enhance community resilience and exploit opportunities for collaboration.

The presentation concluded with a summary of the role of the Safer Stockton Partnership (SSP). Responsible for setting a strategic plan to identify and tackle key community safety issues in Stockton-on-Tees, it monitored progress and performance in relation to harm reduction and perceptions of safety, and acted as a critical friend for proposals and initiatives with all partners. SSP brings together key statutory stakeholders and partners to deliver plans, provides an overarching view of key strategies that impact this area of business, and is responsible for setting a strategy and action plan to tackle serious violence.

Committee questions began with a query around the distribution of trauma packs and whether these were accompanied by some form of training. SBC officers stated that a QR code was included within the pack which users could scan to take them to a video about how to utilise the contents, though the Council was considering whether to create its own version as the one via the QR code was quite formal. There had also been some (albeit limited) communications issued regarding the introduction of these packs (of which funding had been provided about a year ago for 50, with further talks to be held with the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner for Cleveland to increase this number), and individual premises should be able to train their staff in using them. Members commented that the availability of these packs should not be a replacement for people calling 999 in the event of an incident necessitating the use of such kits, and also flagged concerns regarding the contents of the one in Yarm – SBC officers committed to following this up after the meeting.

Commenting on the statistics for reported incidents within each of the Borough's towns (note: police data represented recorded cases on a Ward-basis, not just town centres), Members noted some positive developments which did not appear consistent with negative perceptions of safety – SBC officers added that the majority of issues within these locations were seemingly being caused by a small number of individuals. The Committee also stressed the importance of ensuring a sense of safety for those working within town centres – something which would aid recruitment and retention efforts (a well-documented area of concern for many sectors at present).

Noting the encouraging stated priority of the new Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) for Cleveland around tackling shoplifting, the Committee asked if there was any evidence that the introduction of the Public Spaces Protection Order (PSPO) in Stockton and Norton town centres had diverted identified problem behaviour to other areas of the Borough. In response, Members were informed that one individual did reappear in Thornaby (though this had been dealt with by authorities), and added that the perception from some about the implementation of the PSPOs was that certain people would be moved out of those town centre areas. However, issues only arose when individuals were not behaving appropriately.

Pointing to the numerous references to alcohol within the presentation, the Committee expressed surprise that there was no mention of drugs, a factor which continued to be a significant problem in parts of the Borough. SBC officers stated that a recording issue may be at play in this regard (with drug-related cases being coded under 'ASB' or 'addiction'), and that Cleveland Police would have more specific statistics on this element. That said, SBC did recognise the impact of drugs on town centre environments.

Highlighting the ongoing problem of scooters / bikes within Thornaby, Members sought further information on the referenced 'Making Good' programme. The Committee heard that this was a national initiative (via the Office of the PCC) and operated as a diversionary programme for those aged 12 and over. SBC could refer young people into the scheme where they completed a workbook on the impact of their behaviours and the potential consequences if this continued. Referral routes were currently being reviewed, though it was too soon to understand the effect of the initiative (the Office of the PCC would be evaluating the programme at some point in the future). Members highlighted a similar scheme to stop fire-setting, though cautioned that some may think that referral into such a programme could be viewed as a 'reward' for poor behaviour.

Drawing attention to a recent survey on the Council Plan which elicited concerns about people and towns within the Borough, the Committee suggested that SBCs vision for its town centres should include references to 'hospitable' and 'access to and from safely' (the latter being a particular issue for some following past changes to public transport routes which had inhibited / discouraged visits to town centre locations). Members also queried if any risk assessments had been done on the new Stockton waterfront development in terms of the potential spread of existing problem behaviour.

The Committee turned its focus onto air quality matters and noted the ongoing positive picture following the monitoring of pollutants of concern (comfortably below target for the last five years). A query was, however, raised around the effect of Teesside International Airport – SBC officers were not aware of any detailed analysis on the impact of local flights, though diffusion tubes could be placed at new sites to assess this if required.

Reflecting on the contents of the presentation, specifically the previous and ongoing work to improve safety within the Borough, the Committee felt that more needed to be done to highlight the positive work being undertaken (emphasising the success stories) to make town centres more welcoming and safer. That said, Members also acknowledged that many concerns being witnessed in these spaces were long-term issues that were not easily remedied, and therefore encouraged the Council and its

partners to be persistent in tackling existing problem behaviour. SBC officers referenced continuing issues within Liverpool and Newcastle despite significant regeneration initiatives – authorities needed to find the best way to manage locally identified challenges, though matters were not helped by people commenting on the state of town centres when they themselves had not visited the areas. Members concluded that the key word for all parties (the Council, its partners, all town centre users, and the wider public) was 'respect'.

Also in attendance was the SBC Cabinet Member for Access, Communities and Community Safety who praised the teams within the SBC Community Safety and Regulated Services department for the considerable efforts in making the Borough a safer place, and stated that there were answers to diverting people away from sitting around, for example, the Stockton town centre fountain all day – this would be for the benefit of the individuals themselves and also for all town centre users. An issue with the North East Ambulance Service NHS Foundation Trust (NEAS) regarding responsibility for bleed packs was also noted – the positioning of these packs next to defibrillators was being considered as a way of possibly resolving this.

Thanking SBC officers for the presentation, the Committee turned its attention to the next evidence-gathering session which was scheduled to involve input from further Council departments. In relation to seeking future views from a range of town centre users, it was also suggested that The Moses Project (a registered charitable company which provides guidance, mentoring and support to adult males with past and current addictions to drugs and alcohol) could be a useful vehicle to gain valuable contributions towards this scrutiny topic.

AGREED that the information be noted.

CSS/17/24 Chair's Update and Select Committee Work Programme 2024-2025

Chair's Update

The Chair had no further updates.

Work Programme 2024-2025

Consideration was given to the Committee's current work programme (2024-2025). The next meeting was due to take place on 26 September 2024 where the second evidence-gathering session for the review of Welcoming and Safe Town Centres would be held featuring anticipated contributions from further SBC departments.

AGREED that the Community Safety Select Committee Work Programme 2024-2025 be noted.