

COMMUNITY SAFETY SELECT COMMITTEE

A meeting of Community Safety Select Committee was held on Thursday 28 November 2024.

Present: Cllr Paul Rowling (Chair), Cllr Mrs Ann McCoy (Vice-Chair), Cllr John Coulson, Cllr Shakeel Hussain, Cllr Barbara Inman, Cllr Eileen Johnson (sub for Cllr Richard Eglinton), Cllr Sylvia Walmsley, Cllr Alan Watson, Cllr Sally Ann Watson (sub for Cllr Jason French)

Officers: Dawn Tyerman (A,H&W); Gary Woods (CS)

Also in attendance: Andy Turner (Cleveland Fire Brigade); Cllr Helen Atkinson, Dee Smith (Billingham Town Council); Cllr Mark Fairbairn, Cllr Phil Genery (Thornaby Town Council)

Apologies: Cllr Richard Eglinton, Cllr Jason French

CSS/29/24 Evacuation Procedure

The evacuation procedure was noted.

CSS/30/24 Declarations of Interest

There were no interests declared.

CSS/31/24 Minutes

Consideration was given to the minutes of the Community Safety Select Committee meeting which was held on 24 October 2024 for approval and signature. Updates were provided on the following items that were on the agenda:

- Scrutiny Review of Welcoming and Safe Town Centres: The Committee was yet to receive a response from the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner (OPCC) for Cleveland regarding the request for additional information on the anticipated public scrutiny panel – this would be shared with Members once received.
- Safer Stockton Partnership (SSP) – Previous Minutes (March, May and July 2024): As agreed, a letter had been sent to the Chair of the SSP regarding Committee concerns around stated truancy levels within the Borough, as well as the issue of home schooling and how this was being checked / quality controlled – any response would be shared with Members once received.

AGREED that the minutes of the Committee meeting held on 24 October 2024 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

CSS/32/24 Scrutiny Review of Welcoming and Safe Town Centres

Cllr Mrs Ann McCoy wished it to be recorded for transparency purposes only that she was currently a member of Billingham Town Council as well as a Ward Councillor.

The fourth evidence-gathering session for the Committee's ongoing review of Welcoming and Safe Town Centres considered submissions in relation to this scrutiny topic from Cleveland Fire Brigade and Town Councils across Stockton-on-Tees.

CLEVELAND FIRE BRIGADE

Presented by the Cleveland Fire Brigade (CFB) Group Manager / Head of Prevention & Engagement, several documents were summarised which covered the following:

- Fire Incidents (Stockton District): Town Centres / High Streets
- Fire Incidents (Stockton District): Economic Cost of Deliberate Fires
- Stockton District Station Work (2024)
- Stockton Community Hub Work (2024)
- Stockton Community Liaison Officer (CLO) Work (Aug 23 – Oct 24)
- Commissioned Services Work (2024)

Data on recorded incidences of deliberate primary and secondary fires within the Borough's town centres / high streets was provided for the current 2024-2025 year (up to 30 September 2024) as well as the previous five-year period (covering 2019-2020 to 2023-2024). Subsequent analysis of this information was noted as follows:

- Billingham Town Centre: Between 7.00pm and 9.00pm was the time where most fires occurred, with Thursdays being the most prevalent day for incidents.
- Ingleby Barwick Town Centre: Early evening (6.00pm to 8.00pm) saw the highest number of incidents, with Sundays experiencing the most fires since 2019-2020.
- Norton High Street: Wednesday was the most common day for recorded fires, though total numbers were low since 2019-2020. Again, 6.00pm to 8.00pm was the time when most incidents took place.
- Stockton Town Centre: Historically, the highest number of fire incidents were recorded in this area, with Thursdays being the most frequent day and 6.00pm to 7.00pm being the most common time.
- Thornaby Town Centre: Like in Norton, Wednesdays saw the most incidents, with 5.00pm to 6.00pm and 8.00pm to 9.00pm providing the highest number of fires.
- Yarm High Street: Recorded incidents were very low for each of the years since 2019-2020, with Sundays and Mondays seeing most fires.

Having access to this data enabled CFB to direct its crews to certain parts of the Borough at specific times in order to reduce incidents.

Separate analysis on the economic cost of recorded deliberate fires within the Borough across the previously completed five years (2019-2020 to 2023-2024) and the current 2024-2025 year (up to 30 September 2024) had been compiled. For the six Stockton-on-Tees town centre spaces, it was estimated that the number of incidents since April 2019 had cost the local economy around £1.8m (with Stockton high street accounting for nearly half of this amount).

A summary of the work undertaken during 2024 by community fire stations across the Borough showcased several safety initiatives implemented by CFB – these included

'Safer Homes' visits, operational intelligence / station risk footprint visits, school visits, a property risk register, arson audit inspections, community engagement by fire stations crews, and Operation Autumnus (bonfire period work with partner agencies). Future plans to aid in making town centre spaces more welcoming and safer included the development of partnership agreements with other key agencies and strengthened arrangements around supporting vulnerable groups.

Stockton Community Hub activity for the 2024 calendar year was then highlighted, with data supplied in relation to at risk adult cases, school engagement (including the number of pupils involved in these sessions), and individuals identified for fire setter intervention (mostly children, though CFB was starting to deal with adults). In terms of the latter, CFB acknowledged that it might not be aware of all individuals who may benefit from being involved with the fire setter programme, and urged Members to let the Brigade know of anyone it could be engaging with to help minimise future incidents. Other Community Hub work was outlined, including involvement in events, meetings with local partners, the use of risk reduction equipment, homelessness referrals, and sessions delivered as part of the Borough's Holidays Are Fun (HAF) programme. Staff walk-arounds in hotspot areas were planned, and it was suggested that negative perceptions of town centre spaces could be addressed by the promotion of ongoing work (continuing public events, consultations and surveys) and case studies of successful prosecutions for key areas of concern that residents had.

An overview of the achievements of the local Community Liaison Officer (CLO) since August 2023 demonstrated a range of engagement (including attendance at Stockton Tasking and Co-ordination Group (TCG) and Stockton Joint Action Group (JAG) meetings) which aided in preventing access to 'fuel' (materials that could be burned). Again, Members were encouraged to contact CFB if they were aware of any properties (e.g. empty / derelict) which may provide a greater risk in terms of fire setting.

Finally, safety initiatives involving CFB Commissioned Services during 2024 (up to the end of July 2024) were documented, with road safety education in primary schools, carbon monoxide awareness sessions, and the issuing of grants to reduce arson all highlighted. Investment in high quality professional youth work was seen as important in addressing negative safety perceptions of town centres, along with community consultation around what would help make people feel safer (and then acting on this).

Thanking CFB for all the support it provided (with specific reference to the recent work in Tilery where officers had put their own safety on the line), the Committee began its response to the information presented by asking how many fire incidents had been reported at nearby John Whitehead Park, Billingham, and whether the Brigade liaised with Cleveland Police when any fire-setting within the park occurred. CFB confirmed that the majority of fire incidents in and around the Billingham town centre space happened inside John Whitehead Park (further data could be provided to back this up), with CFB requesting that the police attend if the person responsible for setting the fire was known / suspected.

Members highlighted the issue of derelict / empty buildings which had the potential to attract those intent on setting fires, and queried what powers CFB had to secure such premises. The Committee heard that there was little the Brigade could do in this regard, though it was aware of a number of buildings which were considered a concern (Members highlighted problems with young people getting into Kensington Gardens, Billingham, and setting fire alarms off). The CFB Community Liaison Officer

(CLO) role was to draw owners' attention to any property risks, and it was noted that Middlesbrough Council proactively boarded up identified problem buildings and then recharged owners.

The Committee questioned if fire incidents in Ingleby Barwick had reduced since the removal of the recycling site at Tesco supermarket around five months ago – CFB confirmed that there had been a subsequent fall in incidents, though Ingleby Barwick was not a significant pressure area for the Brigade. It was noted that Ingleby Barwick Town Council had previously paid for a dedicated enforcement service which was operational all week apart from Sundays (the day which had the highest number of recorded fire incidents) – this had since changed to an 'on call basis' arrangement only. CFB encouraged partners to inform them of any relevant officers who may need to be contacted in the event of a fire.

CFBs relationship with local partners (including SBC) was probed, with Members being assured that this was strong and that the Brigade attended the same meetings as the police.

For those incidents where there was a reasonable idea of who had caused them, the Committee asked what was being done to track down the culprits once the fire had been put out (as the public perception was often that nothing happened). In response, Members were told that CFB considered every deliberate fire a crime, however, the police did not see it this way. Every CFB officer wore body-worn cameras (prompted to a large degree by physical / verbal abuse they received) which had the potential to aid identification of those responsible for fire-setting, and the Brigade actively pushed for an arrest if it had evidence. CFB requested that its CLO be made aware of suspects so individuals can be reported to the police.

Referencing ongoing efforts to regenerate the Borough's town centre spaces, attention turned to concerns around the prevalence of rubbish bags around takeaways which had the potential to present fire-setting opportunities, with the Committee querying what work was being done with businesses to reduce risks. Members were informed that the Brigade's Fire Engineering Department was responsible for this and had a business premises inspection programme in place (on a five-year cycle) which involved discussions with the 'responsible person' for a property. A particular area of concern had been identified in relation to flats above Chinese restaurants, though these were not generally located within town centre areas. Again, CFB encouraged the sharing of any information on specific premises which may present risks.

The final question focused on youths involved in fire-setting and the extent to which CFB educated young people to minimise future incidents. CFB gave assurance that once individuals engaged in fire-setting were identified, education officers visited schools (mainly primary) to conduct 1:1 intervention (though it was noted that those starting fires in town centres often did not live in these locations). Multi-agency 'Silver Recovery Groups' also existed in both Hartlepool and Middlesbrough which enabled information-sharing around known / suspected fire-setters.

TOWN COUNCILS

The Committee was keen to receive input from the Borough's Town Councils (Billingham, Ingleby Barwick, Thornaby, and Yarm) on this scrutiny review topic and had therefore made an approach to seek information / views. All four Town Councils were either represented at the meeting and / or provided a written submission for

consideration – key elements, as well as any subsequent discussion, was recorded as follows:

- Billingham Town Council: The Chair of the Town Council, accompanied by the Town Clerk, was in attendance to summarise its response. The main issue for Billingham town centre was anti-social behaviour (ASB) and vandalism from younger people (another issue was shoplifting, however, because this happened in the shops, this did not directly affect the people walking through the centre). The Town Council did not address these issues – if anything was reported, it passed the information over to the town centre management.

Residents had expressed concerns that the town centre felt unwelcoming and lacked safety, with a general perception of it being dull and grey. There was a strong desire for a greater variety of shops, including independent retailers who could offer a unique shopping experience (distinct from typical high street offerings) to attract out-of-town visitors. Residents would also like an improvement to the quality of the buildings, making the town centre more visually appealing, and advocated for re-instating the flats above the shops to increase activity in the area. More of a leisure offer to boost night-time / weekend activity would be welcomed (especially with having the Forum next to the site), as would no charges for car parking (encouraging visitors and boosting business). Local people were, however, against the re-development of the existing town centre site for housing (reflected in the recent responses to an SBC consultation).

Future priorities to make Billingham town centre as welcoming and safe as possible should include extra security presence (especially during evenings), good lighting (which needs to be extended to John Whitehead Park), an enhanced leisure offer (e.g. places for people to eat in the evening to increase the night-time economy and complement existing offers like the Forum theatre), and making the town centre more visually appealing. Creating a busier town centre could possibly mean less ASB as more people were around to deter potential offenders.

Reflecting on the identified need for better and more varied shop provision, the Committee highlighted the pop-up shop initiative in Yarm which could be an idea for Billingham. The successful enterprise arcade concept (providing short-term flexible low-cost retail space) in Stockton was also noted, with Members recognising the clear call for a diversified business offer within the Billingham town centre area.

The Committee asked if the Town Council thought it was being consulted enough on future thoughts / plans around Billingham town centre developments and whether it felt that SBC was listening. In response, it was stated that whilst existing Town Council membership included five SBC Ward Councillors (who were invited to give updates on what was happening in their individual wards), much information was sourced via social media. The town centre manager was sometimes not aware of developments – this made the Town Council look inefficient.

Reluctance around plans for town centre housing proposals was followed-up, with Members suggesting that authorities needed to make it clear to local people how this would positively contribute to the end 'goal' for Billingham as a place to live and visit. In answer to a query on why there was such objection, concerns around who would be living in these properties were relayed.

Exploring the increasing prevalence of shoplifting (also highlighted at the previous Committee meeting in October 2024), Members emphasised the benefits of a visible policing deterrent and felt inaction around this issue would be off-putting for potential new businesses (USA-style 'mall police', where premises provided funding for shared security arrangements, was noted). The Town Council agreed that any future plans were dependent on the town centre space being secure.

Discussions concluded with broad acknowledgement of the change in how people looked at town centres and how shopping habits had altered (increase in out-of-town provision and online options). However, the desire for a greater variety of shops was re-iterated, with the existing Forum possibly offering the creation of a leisure focus. The importance of building décor in promoting a stronger sense of a welcoming town centre space was also stressed.

The Committee thanked the Billingham Town Council representatives for their input and praised the passion used to put across their points. Mindful of the issues raised as part of this debate, the Chair suggested that he was considering writing to the relevant SBC Cabinet Member to inform them of this discussion.

- Ingleby Barwick Town Council: A written submission was considered which began by stating that Ingleby Barwick town centre was very different from the town centres in Billingham, Thornaby and Yarm in that it was spread out and not localised. In addition to the Tesco Supermarket and Myton Shops, it also consisted of shopping parades at Lowfields, Beckfields and Sandgate. Town Centre crime had been identified as being minimal by the SBC Community Safety Team whom the Town Council had an excellent working relationship with (and had done for several years).

Almost a third of the Town Council precept was spent on SBC Community Safety for the use of enforcement, CCTV and monitoring. There had in the past been small pockets of ASB and, more recently, the use of electric bikes and scooters – the Town Council strongly advised the public to report any aspect of these behaviours to the Civic Enforcement Team. Communication from local residents was low with regards to town centre safety – the main gripe was the lack of Christmas decorations in comparison to other town centres.

Noting that social media adversely distorted the reality of what was going on across the Borough, Members representing one of the Ingleby Barwick wards expressed their understanding that other areas of Stockton-on-Tees experiencing more challenging issues received priority in terms of resource allocation. Regarding Christmas decorations, the Town Council had a precept to use for these, but an issue with SBC meant there were difficulties in purchasing items.

The Committee also urged a look into prohibitive rent / rates which affected businesses across the Borough. Encouraging more service businesses in addition to the retail offer was advocated.

- Thornaby Town Council: Two Town Councillors were in attendance and spoke about the importance of perceptions when it came to the sense of a location being / feeling welcoming and safe. Referencing previous missed opportunities to have a more robust police presence within the town centre space, as well as the impact of social media in spreading misinformation, the change in shopping habits meant that the focus should now be on providing opportunities for products and services

that people could not obtain online. Towns needed to consider what their unique selling point was in order to attract footfall – leisure and other niche activities offered potential, but prohibitive business rates meant premises could soon close and / or relocate.

Acknowledging the historic planning issues which had impacted Thornaby, the Committee asked what the Town Councillors' perception of their town centre was – representatives responded positively, though expressed uncertainty (and a sense of powerlessness) around what would be replacing the former Golden Eagle hotel. Members stated that the town centre owners would decide the future of this site following a period of consultation, though it was envisaged that the space would likely have a family orientation.

- Yarm Town Council: A written submission had been received and was shared with the Committee. Main issues regarding town centre safety in Yarm that were regularly reported by residents and visitors were bouts of shoplifters targeting certain shops, extensive cycling on pavements, dog fouling, insufficient resources for high street cleansing, motorcycle parking provision, cluttered pavements, and problems with large trade waste bins.

Relationships between the Town Council and SBC were generally positive, though there had been rare but notable instances where some requests or the parish position were made to feel inferior. In terms of future priorities in making Yarm town centre as welcoming and safe as possible, tackling ASB problems at a nearby playing field, providing more town centre parking, improving parking and public toilet signage, ensuring good floral displays and refurbishing street benches, and the addition of historic reference points and markers were highlighted.

SBC WARD COUNCILLOR SURVEY

As part of the scoping phase for this review, the Committee identified the need to provide an opportunity for SBC Elected Members to give their views on this scrutiny topic. A list of proposed questions was therefore shared and subsequently agreed by Members – these would be circulated to all Ward Councillors via the Council's 'My Views' survey platform in early-December 2024, with a summary of responses received fed back to the Committee in the new year.

AGREED that the information provided by Cleveland Fire Brigade and the Borough's Town Councils be noted.

CSS/33/24 Stockton Home Safety Association - Previous Minutes (March and June 2024)

Cllr Mrs Ann McCoy wished it to be recorded for transparency purposes only that she was currently the Chair of the Stockton Home Safety Association.

Consideration was given to the minutes of previous Stockton Home Safety Association meetings which took place in March 2024 and June 2024.

AGREED that the minutes of Stockton Home Safety Association meetings which took place in March 2024 and June 2024 be noted.

CSS/34/24 Chair's Update and Select Committee Work Programme 2024-2025

CHAIR'S UPDATE

The Chair confirmed the re-scheduling of the cancelled Committee meeting that was originally planned for 19 December 2024 – this would now take place on 9 January 2025.

WORK PROGRAMME 2024-2025

Consideration was given to the Committee's current work programme (2024-2025). As already noted, the next meeting was due to take place on 9 January 2025 where evidence-gathering for the ongoing review of Welcoming and Safe Town Centres would continue, with a focus on business forums / groups (initial feedback from the SBC Ward Councillor survey may also be relayed if available).

In other matters, Members were reminded that an update on progress of outstanding actions in relation to the Committee's previously completed review of Tree Asset Management was due in early-2025 – relevant officers would be contacted shortly to identify an appropriate meeting date where this would be presented.

AGREED that the Chair's Update and Community Safety Select Committee Work Programme 2024-2025 be noted.