

STAFFORDSHIRE MOORLANDS DISTRICT COUNCIL

Questions to Portfolio Holders

Service Delivery Overview and Scrutiny Panel Wednesday 27 January 2021

Questions received from Councillor Malyon: -

Q1. Could we ask our planning department to respond to applicants and agents who have been waiting a long time after giving information that has been requested, or plans that have been put in and they have heard nothing for months?

Response from Councillor Wain, Portfolio Holder for Planning, Property and Development: -

“We currently have 2 full time planning officer vacancies within the team. As a result this means that the caseloads of the remaining officers are much higher than we would like. Unfortunately, this does mean that we are not able to deal with applications or respond to additional information or revised plans which have been submitted as quickly as we would normally like to do and I apologise for this. We are actively recruiting to the vacant posts and an appointment was made before Christmas and we are hopeful that a new officer will join us in around a month’s time. We are currently advertising the other vacant post. Meanwhile, we are grateful for the patience and understanding of our customers and we would like to assure you that officers are dealing with enquiries as quickly as they possibly can”.

Q2. Now we are out of Europe and still in the grips of COVID19 do we need to rethink our policy with regard to tourism as more people may stay at home for holidays?

Response from Councillor Bowen, Portfolio Holder for Communities: -

“The Council continues to work with partners to understand trends in tourism and is also currently refreshing our tourism strategy. Officers are in regular contact with Destination Staffordshire to discuss the key factors that need to be considered in our marketing activity going forward and which need to be addressed in our tourism strategy, including the possible shrinkage of overseas markets but also opportunities for growth. We continue to support tourism businesses to make sure they have a strong offer for the staycation market and work with partners to raise the quality of the tourism offer across the Moorlands. We have continued to signpost to various sources of business support and promote initiatives such ‘cyclist welcome’ etc. While Visit Britain are predicting a boost to ‘stay-at-home’ tourism in 2021, they are not necessarily predicting that this will be a medium or long term trend but do recognise that the trends for more frequent but short term breaks will continue.”

Q3. Now that we are out of Europe what are we going to do to support our farmers as they will lose their subsidies over the next 2/3 years?

Response from Councillor Ralphs, The Leader: -

“The policies for replacement of farm subsidies is something that is being managed at a national level. We have already fed our views in terms of the need to support upland farming including cost impact of managing land [owned by farmers] for visitors as a public good into DEFRA consultation which is influencing this policy

development. We continue to ensure that farm business can access grant funding for covid as well as support either through growth hub, NFU or other appropriate agencies.”

Q4. Will the mills be used again now we are out of Europe as taxes may change on imports and what is the Council doing to look into this?

Response from Councillor Ralphs, The Leader: -

“The district already has higher levels of manufacturing than national levels and we continue to support businesses of this nature to grow and thrive in our district. Our local plan sets out requirements for future business accommodation and we continue to monitor take up and refresh assessment on need. We have also already been lobbying for the Shared Prosperity Fund (which is the UK replacement for EU funding streams) to support rural manufacturing and growth projects, however it is not a given that Brexit will necessarily increase home-grown manufacturing across all sectors, primarily because tax on exports may reduce market demand and many UK manufactured products may require raw materials or parts which are imported. The trends in manufacturing growth will be monitored alongside partners in Staffordshire and LEP. It should also be noted that even if there is a boost to UK based manufacturing, the accommodation needs of these businesses are unlikely to include a significant demand for new employment uses of Victorian Mill buildings, as most businesses are looking for modern, low maintenance, energy efficient properties. Officers are currently preparing a paper for committees regarding our approach to mill buildings which will be presented to committee shortly.”

Q5. Question received from Councillor Jill Salt: -

The roundabout on St John’s Red in Biddulph has 3 blue lanterns that are an asset of SMDC and arrived around 18 years ago. They require urgent attention and require refurbishment. I was wondering if they’re a. on an asset register and b. When are the plans for a refurb? - they are currently an eyesore.

Response from Councillor Wain, Portfolio Holder for Planning, Property and Development: -

“The Miners’ Lamps were installed by the Council as part of a Biddulph East public art project in 2003. Unfortunately no maintenance arrangements were put in place at the time of installation and they were not added to any asset register or the lighting maintenance inventory. They are not standard highway-type lighting. It is thought that the power was fed from the street lighting circuit but the Council has no records to prove this and had no electricity bills. In 2016, E-on were requested to carry out a condition survey including an electrical network inspection, visual inspection of the lanterns and condition report. E-on’s report stated that the lights were non-standard and not maintainable in their current state, the control gear had been removed and the installation was not suitable for an exposed highway environment. The position after this report was therefore that the lanterns were to remain in place as a static, un-lit feature and the work to remove the electrics and ensure the lamps were safe was undertaken at a cost of £823.

A full refurbishment would require the removal of the lamps so repairs can be made to the corroded steel where possible. The steel requires to be powder coated to ensure longevity and additional groundworks may be required to replace the lamps following their removal for repair. A less costly alternative would be to simply repaint the lamps in situ, however it is unlikely that this would be more than a very short term

fix as the rust would simply return and a full renovation would still be required. Firm costs for these two options are being sought before any decisions can be made in line with available budgets and further engagement can be had with Biddulph Town Council.”

Q6. Questions received from Councillor Page: -

SMDC make a clear commitment to Leek as a conservation area on their website, recognising a duty to preserve and enhance features of character. Leek Conservation Area Character Appraisal [document](#), September 2017, refers to the Local Authorities requirement to have regard for the need to preserve and enhance our conservation area. The Market Place is referred to as 'the hub of the town, with cobbled surface with a fine Victorian lamp standard'. A fine pen and ink drawing has shown the Grade II listed standard from 1890, cast done by Smith Glasgow foundry. Why is this characterful feature being allowed to fall into disrepair? When and how can we ensure this literal beacon of our market square be given the maintenance it deserves to ensure its longevity as a historic feature of Leek.

Response from Councillor Wain, Portfolio Holder for Planning, Property and Development: -

“The Council agrees that this lamp standard is an important feature of the character of the Market Place in Leek. Any works required to keep the lamp functioning is covered within the Council’s contract with E-on to maintain all of the street lighting that SMDC has responsibilities for. However, this contract does not cover the fabric of the lamp standard. The Assets Team will undertake a review of the current condition of the structure and will then obtain quotes to undertake any required works to maintain the lamp. Once this information is received it will be reviewed in line with available budgets and other priorities to determine when the work could potentially be carried out.”

Q7. With reference to the management transfer of 11 sites to the Staffordshire Wildlife Trust, with a promise of £54,000 per annum estimated savings to SMDC, discussed at Service Delivery O&S Panel on 25th September 2019. With the exception of Wetley Moor Common, jointly owned by SMDC and SOTCC, I believe this transfer is agreed. The transfer issue related to Wetley Moor Common has been ongoing for several years. The Cabinet Member for Climate Change reassures us that he has a good working relationship with SWT and with changes to Stoke-on-Trent Council there may be the potential for discussion with decision makers in the Conservative leading group. What assurances can be given to this committee that this issue will receive his full and immediate attention to complete this transfer.

Response from Councillor Porter, Portfolio Holder for Climate Change and Biodiversity: -

“I can confirm that this project is a priority of this council as is detailed within our Corporate Plan. The transfer of the eleven countryside sites to the Staffordshire Wildlife Trust will ensure that these valuable sites are managed and maintained in the best possible way in future helping us to meet some of our climate change aspirations. I am therefore fully committed to ensuring that the transfer does happen and as a result I alongside Officers will continue to work with the Trust to ensure this whilst redoubling our efforts to resolve any outstanding issues with colleagues at Stoke City Council to ensure the transfer of these sites happens as soon as possible including Wetley Moor Common.”