

# **STAFFORDSHIRE MOORLANDS DISTRICT COUNCIL**

## **SERVICE DELIVERY OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY PANEL MEETING**

### **Minutes**

**WEDNESDAY, 27 JANUARY 2021**

PRESENT: Councillor Herdman (Vice-Chair)

Councillors J Aberley, G Bentley, J Davies, B Emery, K Flunder, N Hawkins, K Hoptroff, L Page, H Plimley, D Price, P Roberts, J Salt and H Sheldon MBE

ALSO PRESENT: Councillor B Johnson, I Plant, T Holmes, P Routledge, L A Malyon, C J S Atkins, S Scalise, K J Jackson, M Bowen, M Gledhill, L Swindlehurst, M A Deaville, P Taylor, J Porter and M Worthington

APOLOGIES: Councillors R Ward and C Brady

29 **TO APPROVE THE MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING.**

**DECIDED –** That the minutes of the meeting of the Panel held on 18 November 2020 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

30 **URGENT ITEMS OF BUSINESS, IF ANY. (24 HOURS NOTICE TO BE PROVIDED TO THE CHAIRMAN).**

There were none.

31 **NOTIFICATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS, IF ANY.**

Councillor Atkins was substitute member for Councillor Brady.

32 **DECLARATION OF INTERESTS:-**

None were declared.

33 **QUESTIONS TO PORTFOLIO HOLDERS, IF ANY.**

**Questions received from Councillor Malyon: -**

**Q1.** Could we ask out 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

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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".

Councillor Malyon accepted the response and understood the difficulties. However, she felt that the amount of time applicants waited to receive a response from officers wasn't acceptable. She stressed the importance of the Planning Team providing support to applicants as part of the economic recovery from Covid-19. In response, Councillor Ralphs agreed that there were some issues around communication. There were some excellent planning officers and improvements would be made to ensure applicants and agents were kept informed throughout the planning process.

**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."

Councillor Malyon highlighted how vital farmers were and the need for them to be promoted and supported. Councillor Ralphs agreed and gave assurance that the Council would give support and guidance around funding should it be requested.

**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: -**

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“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.”

By way of supplementary questions, Councillor Malyon explained that she thought the country should be more self-sufficient and fly the flag to bring textile production back to the area. In response, Councillor Ralphs didn't believe that manufacturing would return as before, but there were other uses for the mills. For example, they could provide the opportunity for small start-up business premises following the pandemic. A report on the regeneration of the mills would be considered by the Panel in the near future.

### **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.

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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.”

Councillor Salt was pleased with the response and requested for a timescale for the works and the name of the officer responsible for this project, which would be provided after the meeting. The lack of maintenance was discussed, and it was felt that this was an oversight. The refurbishment of the lanterns was very worthwhile and a good opportunity for SMDC and Biddulph Town Council to work together.

### **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.”

Councillor Page requested a timescale for the review and the name of the responsible officer at the Council. He felt that the matter should be investigated as a matter of urgency. Councillor Ralphs understood the importance of the asset being preserved and would ensure it was looked at as soon as possible.

A review of the ownership of assets was also requested by Councillor Page.

**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.

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### **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.”

The timescale for the transfer of the country park was requested by Councillor Page. Councillor Porter confirmed the he and officers were working hard to ensure the transfer was finalised as soon as possible.

### 34 **PARKWOOD ANNUAL PERFORMANCE UPDATE (PRESENTATION)**

Francois Smit - Regional Director and Elaine Harding – General Manager Parkwood Leisure, provided a presentation to the Panel which covered the following topics:-

- General overview and update
- Covid-19 compliance
- Leisure contract highlights
- Attendance figures April 2019 to February 2020
- Key usage statistics April 2019 to March 2020
- Memberships
- Activity programming
- Active communities and sports development
- Leisure Centre App update
- Customer satisfaction
- Parkwood Investment 2020
- Planned Authority capital works
- Competed Brough Park pool works
- Continual improvement

Members asked questions and raised the following queries:-

*Financial position* – Without the financial support of the government the organisation would be in difficulties. There had been a 40% reduction in memberships and a long recovery period was anticipated.

*Cleanliness* – This was still an area of concern for members and the officers gave assurance that a review of staffing levels at peak times would take place when the leisure centres re-opened and cleanliness would improve in the future.

*Changes to Steps to Health Programme* – Parkwood was working with the Sports Development Team on this, a new App was available, there was an increased number of on-line classes and plans were in place for digital activities to continue once the leisure centres had re-opened.

*Improvements to tennis courts* – Discussion in relation to planned works was taking place with officers

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*Event at South Moorlands Leisure Centre* – Members congratulated the officers and Paddles Swimming Club for this hugely successful event for swimmers with disabilities.

*Future investment and development of leisure offering* - A leisure review was currently underway and a system was in place to check the leisure offering of competitors. New activities and equipment were looked into.

Discussion also took place around the promotion of South Moorlands Leisure Centre and investment in Cheadle. Communication was key in the encouragement of the public to use the facilities after lockdown, along with the promotion of outdoor activities.

Members were pleased with the recent refurbishment of Brough Park Leisure Centre and were grateful for the leisure centres being open over the summer period.

A request was made for Diabetes Groups to be made available in Cheadle and the officers agreed this would be investigated.

It was noted that physical activity was more important than ever for positive mental health during the pandemic.

The Chair thanked the Parkwood representatives for the informative presentation.

DECIDED:

- 1) That the presentation be received
- 2) For the next annual update to include the percentage of use at each of the leisure centres.

### 35 **PROPOSAL FOR A LEISURE FACILITY WORKING GROUP**

Councillor Deaville – Portfolio Holder for Leisure and Sports and Robert Wilks Principal Officer (Leisure and Recreation), introduced a report on the progress of the second stage of the Council's Leisure Consultancy work. The Panel considered the formation of a Member working group to support the development of a 'Leisure Transformation Plan'.

In response to a query about the Cheadle Stakeholder Group, it was confirmed by the Portfolio Holder, that there would be good communication between the groups and there wouldn't be any duplication of work.

Leisure and sports facilities in the rural areas would be considered as part of the review and the costings of the consultants awarded the contract to lead this project would be provided after the meeting.

A number of councillors showed their interest in becoming members of the working group and the Panel was advised that the nominations would be made by each Group Leader after the meeting.

**DECIDED:**

That the Service Delivery Overview & Scrutiny Panel:

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- 1) Noted the progress of stage two of the Council's Leisure Consultancy work.
- 2) Agreed to the formation of the Member working group to support the development of a 'Leisure Transformation Plan', as set out in paragraph 3.7 of the report.

### **36 GREEN INFRASTRUCTURE STRATEGY DELIVERY PLAN UPDATE**

The Panel considered an update report on the progress of the preparation of a Green Infrastructure Delivery Plan. Councillor Porter – Portfolio Holder for Climate Change and Biodiversity, highlighted the key points within the report and responded to questions from members.

A Green Infrastructure (GI) Strategy was adopted by the Council at the meeting of Cabinet on 19th June 2018. The Strategy included the commitment to prepare a Delivery Plan to support the Strategy's implementation.

Staffordshire Wildlife Trust had been commissioned to prepare detailed habitat mapping of the District to help identify opportunities for green infrastructure delivery.

The mapping was supported by a description for each habitat opportunity area, provided detail of specific opportunities for creation, enhancement, or connectivity improvement within each habitat type.

The 2018 Strategy included mapping to illustrate opportunities to support more walking and cycling for short journeys to key destinations, as well as to encourage leisure walking and cycling

A review of the evidence base mapping, alongside discussion with partners, had enabled a collection of potential GI delivery projects to be drawn together and recorded in a schedule.

The next steps for the work included integration of the GI area map of opportunities with the Council's GIS system so that the map could be used in a more interactive manner and to prepare full delivery plans for priority projects on the draft schedule.

Members welcomed the report but were concerned that it did not incorporate a list of deliverable priority projects, with attached timescales and costings. The Portfolio Holder explained that this was an update report which contained proposals and wasn't the final report. The projects were reliant on the Council working with its partners and the proposals would be prioritised at the next meeting of the Project Board. The management of grasslands was being reviewed with Staffordshire Wildlife Trust and SMDC was one of the first Council's to look at nature-based solutions.

Discussion also took place around active travel, cycle parking, orchards, tree planting on private land, Biddulph in Bloom and the possibility of a dedicated Climate Change officer. It was felt that more could be done to enhance the biodiversity of grasslands, without assistance from partners and that the Council needed to expedite progress to achieve its target to be carbon neutral by 2030. The importance of an Urban Tree Strategy was highlighted and a suggestion that there

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was a minimum planting requirement for all new housing developments. The wildlife corridor along the railway track in Cheadle required attention to ensure the trees were planted before Springtime.

Councillor Porter agreed that Parish and Town Councils needed to be fully engaged with the plans and encouraged councillors to invite him to their meetings or to contact him with any suggestions in relation to carbon reduction.

Councillor Davies offered to send the details of wildlife research carried out in Biddulph to Jo Bagnall after the meeting.

### **DECIDED:**

- 1) The Panel noted the progress on the preparation of the Green Infrastructure Delivery Plan, which included the mapping of opportunities for the enhancement of habitats and their connectivity, and the preparation of a first draft schedule of green infrastructure delivery projects.

### 37 **WORK PROGRAMME**

The Panel considered its Work Programme and agreed the items listed.

Councillor Page requested that the item on the Council's Street Assets had an officer assigned and for the review to include street furniture. He also suggested that the next Green Infrastructure Delivery Plan report incorporated measurable outcomes.

**DECIDED:** That the Work Programme for 2020-21 be agreed.

The meeting closed at 9.45 pm

\_\_\_\_\_ Chairman \_\_\_\_\_ Date