

MINUTES OF THE PLANNING AND ENVIRONMENTAL COMMITTEE HELD ON 8TH APRIL, 2014

Present: Councillor Mrs J A Bell (Chair) and Councillors B Allen, Mrs B E Allen, Mrs M R Baird, E Bell, Mrs G Bleasdale, B Burn Snr, B Burn Jnr, S Cudlip, Miss S Morrison, N R Page, G A Shepherd, C Snowball, R Whitehead, K Younger

Apologies: Councillors R Arthur, Mrs H Cahill, R Meir, I Paul

1. DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS

Members were reminded prior to the start of the meeting of the need to disclose any interests, prejudicial or personal, in accordance with the Code of Conduct.

2. PRESENTATION

The Chair welcomed Councillors Lucy Hovvels, Maurice Nicholls and Audrey Laing of Durham County Council to the meeting together with Ms Jeannette Stephenson, Strategic Programme Manager: Safer and Stronger Communities and Superintendent Karen Smith from the Police who were present to address Members on the issues concerning traveller encampments.

Councillor Hovvels began by reporting that the County Council was operating in a different way to tackle this emotive issue. She advised that the County Council had a policy in place for temporary stop-overs and they hoped to increase the number of such sites around the County. They currently have temporary stop-overs in Teesdale and Bishop Auckland which have both proved successful. They were attempting to reduce the number of enforcements by having designated places where the travellers could be accommodated. She was aware that Seaham had experienced issues in the past when travellers had parked in the centre of the town and Durham County Council had been asked to move them on from the inappropriate site. She explained that if travellers stop on County Council land the County Council try to manage the situation, however if they stop on private land or Town and Parish Council land, it was down to the landowner to take appropriate action.

She explained that the County Council had certain responsibilities to take the welfare needs of the travelling community into account. It is a complex and sensitive issue to ensure that the needs of the community are addressed whilst applying that statutory duty of care to work with the travelling community at the same time. Temporary stop-overs do work. When travellers go to the horse fair at Appleby there are a number of temporary stop-overs en route and the County Council has been tasked to acquire an additional one.

These temporary stop-overs remain in place for a period of 28 days and they can be just a big field. There is no requirement for planning permission, they just open up a field, provide some toilets and water, direct the travellers to it and after the 28 days it is closed.

In East Durham it is proving quite difficult for example they turn up in Peterlee on an industrial estate which is not County Council land. If the landowner contacts the County Council they do try to offer support and advice and guidance on what steps to take and, depending on the issues, they can be moved on.

Councillor Hovells explained that more sites were needed around the County and if this was the case it would be easier to manage the activity that takes place. In East Durham it is proving difficult because of the built up areas. After this year they hope to increase the number of temporary stop-over sites, and with this aim they have spoken to a number of Parish and Town Councils to request them to review any spare land they have on the outskirts of their areas that they could lease to the County Council. They have also looked at private land, however the County Council has only limited funds available. There is another issue of concern which is the health needs of the travelling community.

In terms of the horse fair which has taken place in Seaham, Horden, Blackhall and other places, it is the travellers who decide where it will take place. Last year the County Council was in a difficult position as they did not know where it was going to be. Although they work closely with the Police to acquire any intelligence and ensure that consultation take place with the communities when it does happen, any advance notice given would make it easier. In East Durham it is called the East Durham Fair and the County Council manage the risks associated with that. If they knew it was going to take place in Seaham, they would notify the Town Council accordingly. It is imperative to have open dialogue with Councils as well as the Organiser so he understands where the Council is coming from. In addition the County Council has also had conversations with the AAPs.

The Committee was advised that the Traveller Liaison Service had been restructured and there were now only 2 people who were working with Neighbourhood Wardens on the ground who feed information back to the Police. Superintendent Karen Smith stated that she is the Superintendent for the whole of County Durham and her responsibilities are for all Neighbourhood Community Officers. She has been with Durham Constabulary for one year prior to which she was with North Yorkshire Police. She has had dealings with travellers and the horse fair. She was working with the group present tonight recognising some of the difficulties from a policing point of view within communities. She stated they had been working to understand what the legislation is under the Community Act and added that they strive to bring tensions down. She went on to say that sharing the net is very important so there were no surprises. She went on to say that they have to work with people to identify issues in each community and work also with the Organisers to ensure they adhere to the needs of the community - it is about trying to manage it in the best way possible.

At this point questions and views were invited and a summary of the comments made are detailed below:

- (i) A Member asked whether, in relation to the temporary stop-overs, the Travellers made any contribution to them, particularly in respect of the cleaning up after they have left? In response it was reported that the County Council's view is that if they did not provide such facilities the costs would be greater. The temporary stop-over costs were minimal by comparison.
- (ii) In the case of unauthorised encampments where travellers are moved on, the costs of obtaining 'directions to leave', court fees, bailiffs etc., are significant and take some time to put into action. What tends to happen then is that the travellers move on to the next field where the same process has to be applied.
- (iii) A Member stated that when the travellers have been in Seaham, residents whose homes are adjacent to fields are upset and anxious about criminal and civil trespass when gates are broken through.
- (iv) The last time the horse fair took place in Seaham there appeared to be a complete disregard and lack of respect by the travellers for the Seaham community. If the town was aware of their intention to come in advance, perhaps facilities could be provided.
- (v) Superintendent Smith stated that where advance intelligence had been passed on to parish councils in the past, there had been occasions where blocking actions had been deliberately put in place by them, i.e. putting boulders at access points and ploughing fields.
- (vi) It was suggested that the fields behind Dalton Park may be a suitable site for a temporary stop-over. The travellers have camped in Caterpillar Woods in Seaham in the past beside the old railway line and in terms of disruption to residents this was preferable to them being in the centre of the town.
- (vii) A Member asked whether there was any system of registration in place so that travellers could be identified. It was reported that welfare checks do take place however apart from the Traveller Liaison Service having personal knowledge of regular seasonal travellers, no actual registration system exists. It was commented that if such a system was in place any problems identified after their visit could be addressed.
- (viii) It was reported that the Police have very few powers when the travellers are in a particular location unless there are issues that have already taken place. It was usual practice, if they had advance notification of where they were going to be, to put temporary road closures in place to minimise disruption.

- (ix) A Member asked for an indication of the costs that could be incurred by town and parish councils if they had to go through the court process. It was reported that the cost of a direction to leave was in the region of £80 per site but this takes a while to enact – usually about 4 or 5 days. The envisaged overall costs would therefore be approximately £3k to £5k.
- (x) A Member queried whether the children of the travellers attend school while they are on site and was advised that this was dependent upon the length of time they stayed. Some children are schooled at home and on static sites they may attend ordinary schools. In unauthorised encampments the authorities try to find out about the children and the appropriate body takes action to have them assessed in relation to their education. In respect of the few hundred children across the County who are home schooled, not all of which are traveller's children, they do not even fall under Ofsted rules.
- (xi) It was queried whether there was scope for the Town Council and the County Council and Police to work together to try and prevent unauthorised sites in Seaham being taken over. It was stated that in another area a meeting had been set up with the Planning people, the local Council and the local business sector in conjunction with Business Durham and Councillors in that area, so a model was already in place.

At this point the Chair thanked the visitors for their attendance and the information provided and they then left the meeting.

RECOMMENDED:

- (i) The Deputy Town Clerk draw up a map of Seaham identifying potential sites where travellers may camp.
- (ii) The Deputy Town Clerk submit a proposed plan of action to Members which could be progressed should advance notification of the travellers' intention to arrive be obtained.
- (iii) The County Councillors arrange to have the signage in the Seaham Hall car park replaced.
- (iv) The Deputy Town Clerk liaise with Sunderland City Council to try and ascertain advance notice of when the travellers leave Biddick Woods.

3. MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 11TH MARCH, 2014

RECOMMENDED the Minutes of these meetings, copies of which had been previously printed and circulated to each Member, be approved and signed as a correct record by the Chairman

4. **ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES**

a) **Pollution of Seawater**

The Committee considered extracts from the Seaham Star published on 19th March, 2014, copies of which were previously circulated, in relation to bathing water quality at Seaham's beaches.

RECOMMENDED the Council note the information now reported.

b) **Whitburn Discharges**

The Committee considered communications between a Whitburn resident and DEFRA in relation to seawater pollution which affects the coastline of the Northeast.

RECOMMENDED the Council note the information now reported.

5. **GENERAL ISSUES**

a) **Garden Waste Collections 2014**

The Committee considered a communication from the County Durham Association of Local Councils in relation to the revised Garden Waste Collection Scheme for 2014/15.

RECOMMENDED the Council note the information now reported.

b) **Neighbourhood Protection Team Updates**

RECOMMENDED the Council accept the Neighbourhood Protection Team Performance Report issued in February, 2014 in relation to Seaham.

c) **Preparing for an Emergency**

RECOMMENDED the Council note the document recently published by Durham County Council entitled 'Preparing for an Emergency'.

6. **NALC POLICY REVIEW SURVEY 2014**

The Committee considered the NALC Policy Review Survey, a copy of which was circulated separately. Responses to the survey were requested by 1st May, 2014 and Members were asked to provide their views at the meeting to enable a response to be submitted prior to the deadline.

RECOMMENDED the Town Council do not submit any views in relation to this survey.

7. PLANNING ISSUES

a) Monthly List

RECOMMENDED the list of planning applications referred to all Councillors since the last meeting, namely 5273 to 5280 as circulated, be noted.

8. CHANGE OF MEETING DATES

The Committee was advised that because of the close proximity of the April cycle of meetings to the Annual Meeting of the Town Council there may be difficulties in finalising the minutes prior to sending out the appropriate agendas. In addition, bearing in mind the Easter holidays and the Gerlingen visit, it was suggested that the following changes to meeting dates be considered:

- Full Council be moved to 23rd April instead of 30th April
- Arts and Information/Parks and Events be moved to 29th April instead of 6th May
- Finance and General Purposes/Planning and Environmental be moved to 6th May instead of 8th May.

RECOMMENDED the Council approve the changes to the meeting dates as outlined.

9. PRESS OPPORTUNITIES

RECOMMENDED the Council note that no press opportunities existed from this meeting.