

STAFFORDSHIRE MOORLANDS DISTRICT COUNCIL

Questions to Portfolio Holders

Service Delivery Overview and Scrutiny Panel

Wednesday 6 March 2024

Question received from Councillor Haines:

Q1. *“What is the Portfolio Holder’s view on the importance of markets in our towns?”*

Response from Councillor M Swindlehurst, Portfolio Holder for Leisure & Tourism:-

Markets are hugely important to the success and vibrancy of our town centres. Markets are central to the local community and shape the identity of our town; acting as a centrepiece that attracts shoppers, visitors and businesses. They create employment and entrepreneurship; providing opportunities for small, local, independent businesses to thrive.

As shopping habits have changed, our town centres have changed. People want an experience, they seek out places for leisure, culture, food and drink, and where people can meet and spend time with friends and family. Hence we are keen to invest in markets to reflect the changing customer habits and to ensure that the markets offer broad range of products and services; an offer that meets the needs and expectations of a wide range of customers and clientele and provides a platform new business and entrepreneurs to grow and develop.

Markets are rooted in our local heritage and are central to our cultural identity so it’s imperative they reflect our history and place as a space for communities to come together and local businesses to thrive. We are keen to build strong relationships with town councils in this regard.

Question received from Councillor Hoptroff:

Q2. *“The Council’s Tourism Strategy has a key objective to increase overnight stays. Does the Council have an operational plan on how this might be achieved?”*

Response from Councillor M Swindlehurst, Portfolio Holder for Leisure & Tourism:-

Tourism is vitally important to the economic success and prosperity of the District. The tourism data shows extremely positive results for us following the pandemic which hit the tourism and hospitality really hard.

As an example, the economic impact of the visitor economy in 2022 was £498million. This represents a 62.5% increase on 2021 and an increase of 19.2% on pre-pandemic figures (2019). Much of this growth can be attributed to the ‘outdoor offer’ we have as well as our welcoming towns and villages offering a range of accommodation and a wealth of tearooms and pubs to explore after a long walk in the great outdoors.

Data shows that staying visitor figures are up 18.3% on 2021, with an average stay of 2.5 days. We however want to keep striving for improvements – improving the quality and range of visitor accommodation, as set out in our Tourism Strategy. We continue

to invest in tourism through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund. We are working alongside colleagues at County a hotel and visitor accommodation accelerator plan. This includes exploring gaps in the market and identifying prime locations for growth. We are focussed on encouraging visitors to stay longer and accommodation to meet the needs and aspirations of our visitors is central to that ambition. The role of towns and villages is central to this, as is the relationship with town councils.

Question received from Councillor Salt:

Q3. *“Can the Portfolio Holder for Leisure & Tourism outline the strategy to support grassroots football in Biddulph and the wider Staffordshire Moorlands? In Biddulph we have 60 grassroots teams and have seen an explosion in the youth game, especially for girls and I'd be keen to hear how the Administration are going support this amazing growth in physical activity locally?”*

Response from Councillor M Swindlehurst, Portfolio Holder for Leisure & Tourism:-

It is excellent to hear about the growth in football being reported in football across the Biddulph area, particularly in junior age groups and specifically for girls. We support and encourage the initiative taken by those involved, and Officers are looking forward to working with Councillors and partners to support these groups over the coming months, particularly those partners who have a dedicated team and associated resource to support the development of the grass roots game, such as Staffordshire County Football Association and the Football Foundation.

SMDC have dedicated a significant amount of officer time and resources to support the development of grass roots football over the last few years particularly, including work with the footballing community and key partners to develop the first Local Football Facilities Plan – A nationally approved plan which confirms priorities for investment into the local game. This plan, together with a tremendous amount of partnership working as helped deliver support and key infrastructure projects in several towns and villages across the Moorlands, including in Waterhouses, Cheadle, Leek, Biddulph Moor, Werrington, and recently Biddulph to support the ongoing development of Knypersley Knights. These projects have helped to grow the number teams, purchase new maintenance equipment and improve facilities, securing more than £800,000 funding since 2019.

In support of the current growth in participation being reported in Biddulph, Officers have arranged to meet as part of a stakeholder group on Friday 15th March to discuss local priorities further and help develop a deliverable plan to support continued growth in the game. As the Football Foundation are the principal investor in grassroots football facilities, it will be important that they, along with Staffordshire County FA are involved and endorse any plans, with a view to including any priorities within any new iteration of the Staffordshire Moorlands Local Football Facilities Plan when it is refreshed by Football Foundation in the future.

From April 2024, the Council will hold a budget of £200k over the next 4 years (£100k across 24/25 and 25/26 - £100k across 26/27 and 28) which will be used strategically by providing match funding to help community organisations secure further funds towards the delivery of agreed local projects, this includes the potential to support projects agreed within any plan for improvements to football provision in Biddulph.

Question received from Cllr Haines:

Q4. *“Planning applicants have reported delays in processing applications, please can the portfolio holder provide an update on staffing levels, recent changes in the planning department and detail the current performance in relation to progressing planning applications?”*

Response from Councillor D Price, Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Regeneration and Planning:-

The Council’s performance on planning applications for the financial year to the end of January 2024 was as follows:

- Major Applications 100% determined within the statutory time period or another period as agreed in writing with the applicant
- Minor Applications 93% determined within the statutory time period or another period as agreed in writing with the applicant
- Other Applications 91% determined within the statutory time period or another period as agreed in writing with the applicant

Currently all posts within the planning team are filled. We have a consultancy framework in place to support with peaks in demand. We have secured Government funding to clear the remaining backlog of old planning applications and we are currently putting together plans to reinvest the recent increase in planning fee income to improve service capacity.