

Friends of the S&DR: AGM 2 September 2021

Planning Officer's Report

1 It is the job of the planning system, through Local Plan policies and decisions on planning applications, to serve the aims and objectives of the Rail Heritage Board and facilitate the proposals of the Programme and Delivery Plan of the Heritage Action Zone. Throughout the last year, the Friends have continued to ensure the protection, enhancement and promotion of the S&DR by responding to opportunities to comment on emerging Local Plans, on other studies and on planning applications.

2 All three Local Plans (Durham County, Darlington Borough and Stockton Borough) contain a specific policy for the S&DR and we have submitted comments in support of them at all stages in the consultation process. The Stockton Plan was formally adopted in 2019; the Durham County Plan followed in October last year. Darlington Council submitted its Draft Plan to the Secretary of State in August 2020; the Examination on Public commenced last May and will resume later this month to consider modifications. We have drawn attention to the absence of the Coal Depot Branch and errors in plotting the Croft Branch on the proposed Policies Maps.

3 We have responded to a number of planning applications, but with less success than in previous years.

4 The biggest disappointment came in early June when Darlington Council's Planning Committee approved the conversion and extension of Platform 1 pub, formerly the Fighting Cocks Inn, to a Sainsbury's food store. This was approved, despite the contrary recommendations of the Council's Conservation Officer and opposition from the residents of Middleton St George, the Parish Council, the community group proposing to buy out the pub and ourselves. The conduct of the meeting, the misinformation provided by the officers and the lack of understanding by some of the committee raises a number of questions that need to be addressed if future catastrophes are to be avoided.

5 Elsewhere our request for minor alterations to other proposals were not taken up by the officers, resulting in missed opportunities at Gainford, Whessoe Road, the former S&DR new town at Middlesbrough, Layfield House and 704-706 Yarm Road (both at Eaglescliffe).

6 We have commented on other applications, which at the time of writing, have yet to be decided. These include the proposals for the North Road Rail Heritage Quarter and for the major enhancement of Bank Top Station. We have objected to development alongside the Etherley Incline and to proposals to extend private gardens on to the Croft Branch at Hurworth Place. We can only wait and see if our submissions are to be successful.

7 There is now concern that some Council planning officers may not be giving sufficient importance to their policies to protect, enhance and promote the heritage assets of the S&DR in dealing with developers and their planning applications. This could be seen to conflict with their Council's involvement and commitment in delivering the objectives and projects of the Heritage Action Zone. The Rail Heritage Board should be asked to take this up with the respective Councils.

8 Since the AGM in December 2020 I have logged approximately 175 hours in performing my duties as planning officer. This includes time spent on monitoring the three Councils' online planning registers for applications on or adjacent, to the S&DR and its branch lines; identifying any issues which need to be addressed, visiting the sites and submitting comments after consulting the Trustees and Friends. In some cases there are meetings with developers and negotiations to modify the proposals to resolve any problems. I also prepared for, attended and spoke at Darlington's Planning Applications Committees regarding the application to change the Platform 1 pub into a food store.

9 I am again very grateful for help given to me by individual Friends and those in the various local interest groups, BIG, SIG etc, for their local knowledge, visiting sites, taking photographs, talking to local residents and notifying me of any issues they come across whilst 'out there' and think needs attention.

Ross Chisholm
Planning Officer and Trustee
FSDR
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