

SCRUTINY REVIEW PANEL - THE COUNCIL'S POLICY FOR ACTIVE STREETS, PLAY STREETS AND SCHOOL STREETS

Meeting: 3 March 2021
At: 6.00 pm

PRESENT

Councillor Adrian Nottingham (Lead Councillor) in the chair; Councillors Charles Gibson, John McGahan, Mark Roberts and Kerry Waters.

1. MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 3 February 2021 (copies of which had been circulated) were approved as a correct record.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillors and officers were invited to declare any interests which they had in any of the items on the agenda.

No declarations were made.

3. INTRODUCTION TO ACTIVE NEIGHBOURHOODS IN STOCKPORT

Amy Beasley (Transport Strategy and Growth Manager, Stockport Council) attended the meeting and made a presentation in relation to the progress of the active neighbourhoods programme in Stockport.

The following comments were made/ issues raised:-

- Active neighbourhoods schemes would benefit not just those who were active cyclists or runners as they would provide improvements in connectivity and infrastructure that would serve the entire community.
- There would be a comprehensive consultation on the introduction of any new scheme and they would also be subject to engagement with the consent of the local Area Committee.
- Many schemes were contingent on securing external funding such as through the Mayor's Challenge Fund.

RESOLVED – That Amy Beasley be thanked for her attendance and presentation.

4. DISCUSSION IN RELATION TO THE OPERATION OF ACTIVE/ PLAY/ SCHOOL STREETS IN STOCKPORT

The Chair reported that a number of interested parties had been invited to attend the meeting to discuss how the current active street, play street and school Streets policies in the borough operated and to provide the benefit of the experience of other authorities and organisations from elsewhere in the country.

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Each representative was afforded the opportunity to make a brief statement or presentation followed by questions from the Panel.

(i) Holly Beasley (Chair, Aldwyn Crescent Community Club)

- Holly had been involved in Stockport's only current play street scheme in Aldwyn Crescent, Hazel Grove since April 2018.
- The Community Club had been established to organise 'playing out' events after the initiative had featured on BBC News.
- The Club organised a consultation with local residents by arranging a meeting and circulating fliers in the community which solicited significant interest.
- Many people became involved who didn't have children but just wanted to assist.
- The most significant barrier encountered by the Club was the requirement to obtain Public Liability Insurance at a cost of £277 per year.
- There were additional one-off costs associated with acquiring signs and barriers to give effect to the road closures, although funding was obtained from the local area committee to offset this.
- The ongoing impact of the coronavirus pandemic had limited opportunities to benefit from the scheme over the past year, although there had been some small-scale events such as socially-distanced carol singing.
- The scheme was well-supported and had forged new community links and friendships.
- Children had adapted well to the scheme and had understood its extent and limitations.
- The requirement to canvass residents to obtain support for the scheme was also highlighted as a barrier to new schemes as it was perceived as unnecessarily confrontational.

The following comments were then made/ questions asked:-

- In response the sustainability of schemes to operate when key personnel moved on or when their children were no longer of primary school age, it was stated that many of the current volunteers had no children at all, and Holly was currently in the process of passing the management of the scheme onto someone else as she was now moving out of the area,
- It was suggested that the term 'community street' might be more appropriate than 'play street' as this encompassed the whole range of activities that might take place during street closures.
- The Community Club had an active core team of around six volunteers.
- The street closures were 'self-managing'.
- There had been no significant difficulties encountered with regard to recruiting sufficient marshals to manage the scheme.
- It was suggested that Stockport's starting point seemed to be to assume that such initiatives would be a problem, whereas some other authorities started from the opposite viewpoint which was perhaps a feature in why they had far more schemes in operation.
- The process in Stockport needed to be made far more straightforward to encourage and not dissuade residents from starting a scheme.

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(ii) Sarah McClelland (on behalf of Stockport WalkRide Groups)

- Sarah was a volunteer with WalkRide Heaton and had previously been involved in organising a one-off street closure for a street party.
- There was a need to make better sense of our streets.
- Active travel needed to be considered as part of the norm.
- The review being undertaken by the Panel was welcomed as recognition that the current policy was not working.
- The speed and excess of traffic was identified as the reason why 'playing out' had reduced so significantly over the last 30 years.
- 'Sat navs' had increased the number of vehicles that now used traditionally residential streets as thoroughfares.
- On average, 86% of vehicles driving down roads with a 20mph limit were travelling in excess of the speed limit.
- Children needed to be encouraged to walk to school, and if those streets were safer to walk and cycle on it acted as a 'miracle pill'.
- Play streets reduced the number of vehicles travelling down streets within the scheme area.
- School streets were an essential part of active neighbourhoods and it needed to be made easier to do with schools being encouraged to set them up.
- Calderdale Council had done some work in this area and had demonstrated that it didn't result in a displacement effect on neighbouring streets.
- The process needed to be simple and without a requirement to have Public Liability Insurance in place or if this was required the cost should not fall on the community.
- Schools should be actively encouraged to apply to operate school streets on a trial basis.

The following comments were then made/ questions asked:-

- There needed to be a shift in approach away from residential roads being used as thoroughfares.
- Work needed to be undertaken to address concerns about barriers to introducing schemes such as cost and practical impediments such as the need to canvas residents beforehand.

(v) Alice Ferguson (Co-Director, Playing Out)

- The play street initiative started in Bristol in 2009, and Playing Out has now grown into a national organisation supporting schemes throughout the country.
- Over 80 local authorities now have a play street policy in place.
- 'Playing out' was formerly seen as normal, but has now become increasingly unusual and it was important for children and families to reclaim that space.
- Traffic and the perception of danger are seen as the biggest factors in this loss of freedom.
- Children's right to roam has become more restricted.
- Levels of activity among children and young people have reduced dramatically as a result.
- Children are becoming increasingly restricted to their homes which has a consequent impact on mental health.

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- Play is a core element of the path to recovery as we emerge from the coronavirus pandemic.
- Play streets are a resident-led model that didn't necessarily need help and support from the Council.
- However, there did need to be a supportive policy in place that needed to be straightforward and simple.
- Most councils used an indemnity clause rather than a requirement for Public Liability Insurance.
- For schemes to work councils as a minimum needed to 'get out of the way', but could go further and offer support and funding.

The following comments were then made/ questions asked:-

- The use of indemnity clauses rather than a requirement for Public Liability Insurance was an idea worth considering further.
- The coronavirus pandemic had provided for a level of community that many had thought had disappeared and this needed to be capitalised upon.
- Playing Out had a number of templates that local authorities could use in implementing and developing their own schemes.

(iv) Katrina Adam (Project Co-ordinator, UK Liveable Streets)

- Liveable streets are any sort of street that increases access for pedestrians.
- UK Liveable Streets had largely been involved in school street schemes, but their work also applied to play streets as well.
- Effective consultation underpins the success or otherwise of play streets and school streets.
- Local authorities and increasingly embracing school streets.
- A number of barriers have been identified to implementing a successful scheme including onerous or unclear applications processes.
- Each scheme should have a nominated key contact with clear identification of responsibility for signage placement.
- School streets need not have a requirement for stewards.
- The strongest policies will indicate clear support from the council and its elected members.
- School street and play streets are low cost initiatives and make a significant contribution to mental and physical health, are enabling, safer and make for positive places.

The following comments were then made/ questions asked:-

- The national perspective that had been provided was useful context.
- Increased member engagement in the process at Stockport was something that could be considered.

(v) Lynsey McGarvey (Principal Transport Planner, Leeds City Council)

- It was important to be selective with schemes to ensure that they would be effective.
- Only the police can enforce moving traffic restrictions.

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- There was a need to acknowledge that parents were not always able to walk and cycle and as such park and stride sites should be considered on conjunction with any scheme.
- There had been a 'freeing-up' of road space as a result of the implementation of schemes in Leeds.
- There had been a lot of positive feedback from school staff and no desire to return to the old road layouts and as a consequence the temporary traffic regulation orders would be made permanent.
- Volunteers, and the commitment of schools were important to the success of School Street schemes.

The following comments were then made/ questions asked:-

- It was noted that Stockport had a number of vacancies for school crossing patrols and whether this indicated that the level of volunteering associated with school street schemes may be difficult to resource. In response, it was stated that in the early stages of a scheme the council assisted with staff to support them, and then as parents become more accustomed to the restrictions this became less necessary.
- Some schools offered free before and after school places so that children were able to help volunteer.
- There was a political drive in Leeds to get school street schemes off the ground.

(vi) Elected Member participation

The Panel had also invited elected members to attend to share their views and contribute to the discussion. Responses, attendance and contributions were received from Councillors Malcolm Allan, Grace Baynham, Kate Butler, Yvonne Guariento, Aron Thornley, Iain Roberts and Matt Wynne.

The following comments were made/ issues raised:-

- Stockport can be reasonably proud that it was one of the first councils to introduce a scheme for play streets in 2013.
- However, now was the time to learn from those authorities that had subsequently introduced schemes.
- The two most significant barriers were the requirement for Public Liability Insurance and the need to reduce bureaucracy associated with the application process.
- It was interested to note that Leeds had been able to introduce a significant number of schemes simultaneously.
- The complexity of applications forms needed to be reduced.
- There was a general lack of funding and resourcing to tackle issues of parking and speeding.
- There was a cultural issue around driving and road use that was generally poor and resulted in parents causing a danger to other pupils.
- The experience of some councillors had been of being discouraged from setting up play streets.
- Self-insurance could be considered as this had worked for other temporary street closures.

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The Panel then made the following points, or highlighted the following issues as being most pertinent to the discussion:-

- The requirement for Public Liability Insurance and the need for residents to canvass support were seen as the two most significant barriers.
- Consideration could be given to using the phrase 'community street' rather than 'play street' to encourage uptake in applications.
- There needed to be a simple, easily digestible 'how-to' guide developed to guide residents through the process.
- The application process needed to be streamlined to reduce bureaucracy.
- The cost of signage and insurance should not fall on the community.
- Schools should be actively encouraged to apply for school street schemes on a trial basis.
- The council should actively encourage schemes to take place and mobilise to support residents to do so.
- Consultation should be a simple process and should not require applicants to produce a petition indicating support. An alternative arrangement was discussed whereby residents were simply notified of the proposal to introduce a scheme and asking people to raise any concerns if they had them.
- Residents should sign a reasonable indemnity clause rather than the council insisting on Public Liability Insurance. The indemnity clause should not be phrased in such a way as to disincentivise applications.
- A key contact for each scheme needed to be clearly identified.
- Any scheme needed to have clear identification of who was responsible for the erection of barriers and signage.
- Publicity should be provided to members on the benefits of school streets.

RESOLVED – (1) That all attendees be thanked for the time and their detailed and informative presentations to the Panel.

(2) That the comments and discussion held by members be used to inform later stages of the review.

5. DATES FOR FUTURE MEETINGS

RESOLVED – That the next meeting of the Panel be held on Monday, 29 March 2021.

The meeting closed at 8.20 pm