

Cleaner Greener and Safer Scrutiny Committee Report on Newcastle under Lyme Subways

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Advisers and Consultees

Staffordshire County Council (SCC) Officers

Chris Plant James Bailey David Greatbatch Dave Walters

SCC Portfolio Holder Councillor Mark Deaville

Newcastle Borough Council Officers Graham Williams, Kim Graham Jayne Briscoe Chris Hewetson

Future Partners suggested by Committee members

Town Centre BID team for liaison between town centre businesses and operations staff at the Council

County Council Safer Routes to School team

Joint Operations Group can advise and sometimes fund initiatives that prevent crime, reassure the community and pilot projects that create environmental improvements

Town Centre LAP could have a role in finding funds and dispersing information

Newcastle Sustainable Transport Group

Annabel Chell Senior Strategy Office at SCC

County Councillor for Town Ward; may be able to offer some funding and advice

Chair's Foreword

Underpasses, commonly called subways were seen as a good solution to the problem of separating pedestrians from fast moving traffic. In the decade of the 1960s many town highway engineers were attuned to the needs of through traffic. Ring roads were constructed; town centres bypassed and subways were constructed as part of the process. Newcastle under Lyme was no exception

The numerous (14) subways across the town, some not directly linked to a ring road, are useful in many ways. They offer ramps and steps and an easy way to cross busy roads. They have become a 'problem' as the funding for their maintenance appears to have been steadily eroded and with a divided responsibility between the Borough Council and the County Council the perception is that subways in our Newcastle public domain are progressively neglected

The Borough Council risks its reputation due to poor public experience in subways and the possible loss of Purple Flag award an accreditation awarded to towns and city centres that meet or surpass standards of excellence in managing the evening and night time economy. Newcastle has recently been through an assessment and retained its Purple Flag status

Specific Issues Which the Scrutiny Committee Identified for Review

- Risk to pedestrians from storm water flowing into subways and not getting away down drains due to infrequent attention to inadequately sized and sometimes blocked drains
- Impact of increasingly dirty barrel roofs and walls with patchy and dirty appearance largely due to the need to spray out offensive and unpleasant graffiti. Subways may be perceived as places to avoid and may increase the fear of crime
- High cost of continuing need to clean off graffiti. This can fall to the Borough Council if there is offensive material. Other graffiti in the public domain is left by the County Council for long periods of time as they have the responsibility for graffiti connected to 'highways' sites and may leave cleaning for long term maintenance programmes
- Lack of engagement with Councillors and members of the public about the issues. It is unlikely that residents of the Borough know there is divided responsibility for the public domain, subways included. The County Council takes total responsibility for these structures. The Borough Council only sweeps the ground surface of subways and collects litter

Positive Actions

There have been joint approaches to some aspects of subways in Newcastle. *Led* lighting has been installed resulting in much improved brighter lighting. So-called 'sacrificial light covers have been used to defray costs of replacement when damaged by graffiti. Roof barrels have been painted bright white

Scrutiny Methodology: Subways Survey and Evaluation 2016 -2017

Classification: NULBC UNCLASSIFIED

Fourteen surveys have been completed by members of Cleaner Greener and Safer Scrutiny Committee on the 15 subways with more done for town centre subway arms than outlying ones. The survey format was set up by Chris Hewetson (Research Officer) of the Council

The subjective comments of Committee members surveying subways were as follows: they were generally litter free. At the time of the surveys there hadn't been heavy rain so the *drains blocked* issue was not observed. The lighting was just about adequate and walking surfaces were acceptable. All the subways were recorded to a greater or lesser degree as rendered unpleasant due to scrawls of graffiti some of it offensive or bordering on offensive. Most of the walls were shabby, dirty, patched up and giving an impression of neglect

The detailed results and evaluation of the survey written up by Chris Hewtson are given in Appendix at the end of the report

Local Policing Unit Comments

Recommendations

1 Engage further 'community payback' teams to start on a publicly visible and ongoing approach to cleaning off graffiti Ask partner organisations (see Section 1) for their experience with these initiatives indicating successes and limitations .Police Commissioner's Proceeds of Crime and People Power Funds may offer routes forward

2 Safer Routes to School initiative of the County Council could be seen as a driver to improving the environment of identified relevant arms of subways. No parent wants to be explaining offensive drawings and words on subways to children on their way to school. County Council to be engaged with this with a view to funding clean up schemes

3 Drains need more frequent suction. Responsibility and process mechanisms to be identified clearly and on a proper maintenance programme to be agreed between NBC and SCC Together with an agreed cleaning maintenance and renovation programme

5 Develop the idea of paid for advertising panels; this had been mooted by the County's portfolio holder as something to be trialled in Stafford. An example was cited; Newcastle College might wish to publicise courses in the subway arm nearest to it and where student footfall was at its highest. It could be that the college itself could fund or get sponsors for such an installation

6 Build on the popular 'Art in Subways' NBC/BID could work jointly to gain funding

7 Some subways could be gated off entirely. Start the process of identification. Whilst this is a costly process in the long term, it is a logical step and plans should be drawn up and agreed between NBC and SCC identifying where closure could take place, and what alternatives can be made available for pedestrians such as Pelican Crossings

8 The offer from the portfolio holder Councillor Mark Deaville at SCC to be taken up and agreed for the first of regular quarterly meetings An agenda item for the first meeting to be: discussion of County handing over responsibility and funding for complete maintenance of subways to the Borough Council

9 Council's website to allow reporting by members of the public on subway 'issues'

10. Probation Service Offer (Under discussion at present)

Conclusion

The current management of our subways is steadily failing the residents of Newcastle in respect of providing a pleasant experience to a necessary process: crossing a busy road

Despite a difficult economic climate, it is now time for the two Authorities and 'partners' to meet and come up with a satisfactory plan to address the recommendations in this report

The effort made to use the subways as 'canvases' for artwork is excellent. The themes already on colourful display are impressive with their references to the history; life and culture of the town and the great coverage of wall seem to deter graffiti

The longer-term future of underpasses is one of closure in the view of the Scrutiny Committee members in favour of overland pedestrian controlled crossings. It would make sense for the two Councils to begin that discussion

In the meantime, we ask the County Council to read this report's recommendations and help us move forward with a clearly defined and properly funded maintenance regime for subways in Newcastle

Acknowledgements

The Councillors on this Scrutiny Committee would like to thank Council staff in Newcastle Borough Council and Staffordshire Country Council named in *Membership and Partners* (page1) for their advice, information and willingness to help with questions

Thanks also to Councillor Mark Deaville, Portfolio holder (Highways and Transport) at Staffordshire County Council for his encouragement.

Appendix 1

Subways evaluation 2016/17

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