

Friends of the S&DR: AGM 9 November 2024

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 try to ensure the protection, enhancement and promotion of the S&DR by responding to opportunities to comment on planning applications and other reports, with varied success.

2 Durham County, Darlington Borough and Stockton Borough Councils all have adopted Local Plans, each of which contains a specific policy for the S&DR. The policies maps show the main S&DR line and the Haggerleases, Black Boy, Surtees, Darlington (Coal Depot), Croft and Yarm Branches. Middlesbrough BC is preparing a new local plan, and we requested them to include a policy for the 1830 Middlesbrough extension to Port Darlington and the New Town, in order to be consistent with the other Councils. A draft plan was issued for consultation early this year, but it did not include the policy we recommended. We have asked the Council to explain this omission, before the plan enters the formal stages leading to adoption.

3 Since the last AGM we have been involved with 23 planning applications about which we submitted comments. 11 of these were carried over from the previous year. 14 have been approved to date and the rest remain to be decided. This is about the same workload as last year; I have logged 95 hours on planning duties. This work includes time spent on monitoring the three Councils' online planning registers for applications on or adjacent to the S&DR and its branch lines (we are not always notified of new applications); identifying any issues which need to be addressed; visiting the sites; submitting comments after consulting the Trustees and Friends (where time permits to meet consultation deadlines) and keeping track of changes to the proposals. In some cases there are meetings with developers and negotiations to modify the proposals to resolve any problems. As a last resort to achieve a satisfactory outcome, we sometimes have the opportunity to attend the Planning Committee and address members, but this has not happened this year.

4 Darlington Borough Council have completed public consultation on the draft Northgate Conservation Area Appraisal and Proposed Extension. This extends the boundary to include railway heritage assets centred on the S&DR line to the east and northwest of North Road Station; this was enthusiastically supported by the Friends. Consultation on the proposed Middleton St George (Fighting Cocks) Conservation Area is planned to start in the New Year. Durham County Council expects to progress designation of S&DR Conservation Areas within their boundary next year. There are no proposals for an S&DR Conservation Area in Stockton.

5 Permission was granted after a long delay for the extension of Craggwood Holiday Caravan Park at Ramshaw. This will see mobile homes sited on the top of the embankment of the S&DR Haggerleases Branch. This was previously a very untidy and prominent tipping site but the proposed fencing, hedging and embankment landscaping will provide a welcome improvement to the setting of the Branch. Story Homes have handed over £10,000 to the Friends as a requirement of their planning permission for a housing estate at Middleton St George. This will help pay for work at Fighting Cocks Heritage Hub, Walk Booklet 6 and for publicity.

6 Three sites along the S&DR in Darlington are being developed for massive warehouse/industrial/business units. Six huge new buildings are planned to line Tornado Way between the former Paton & Baldwin complex and the A66 Bypass, overshadowing the S&DR Walking and Cycling Route. Our pleas to set development behind screen woodland planting were set aside and token landscaping will do little to relieve the visual impact of these buildings.

7 The drawn out saga of Northern Metal Recycling's 100 metre long concrete panel wall at the foot of the Brusselton East Incline continues. Officially we are waiting to be consulted by the site owner on the mural required by the County Council's planning permission. One of our members is attempting to unblock the log jam by offering a solution but matters are caught up in an impasse between the site owner and the Council's planners.

8 It remains a problem that some applicants are either unaware of policies for the S&DR or that they choose to ignore them when justifying their proposals. Particular failings continue to omit or under-represent the impact of the proposed development on the setting of the S&DR or to make provision for the Walking and Cycling Route (now called the Discovery Trail). It is important that we draw attention to these discrepancies when commenting on applications as we cannot always be sure that the planning officer responsible for the case or Committee Members are fully aware of the situation. Very few applications obtain our unreserved support but it is rare for us to object totally to an application. Wherever possible we recommend how an application could be improved to become more compliant with policy or where a financial contribution to the line's enhancement can be justified.

9 Things would have a chance to improve if we could be treated by Councils as a specialist advisor and be involved in discussions with developers before planning applications are submitted. This is a matter I asked our consultants Tricolor to include in their bid for funding to establish the Friends in having responsibility for a management plan for the conservation of the S&DR asset.

10 In the coming year we propose to discuss with Darlington Council planners our concern about the diminishing rural gap along the railway between the town and Newton Aycliffe. Approved residential developments, industrial developments and the Burtree Solar Panel Farm will reduce the gap to just over one kilometre (at present it is almost four kilometres). In 1825 the S&DR passed through almost entirely undeveloped countryside but its success brought about the creation of the towns, industries and commerce that we know today. However, we feel that it is important that the rural sections of the active line that remain should be protected as a legacy of the original setting and character of the line.

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

Ross Chisholm
Planning Officer and Trustee
FSDR 02 11 2024