

CABINET
3 DECEMBER 2024

**PUBLIC CONSULTATION ON DRAFT APPRAISAL PROPOSING THE DESIGNATION OF
A NEW MIDDLETON ST GEORGE CONSERVATION AREA**

**Responsible Cabinet Member -
Councillor Chris McEwan, Economy Portfolio**

**Responsible Director -
Ian Williams, Chief Executive**

SUMMARY REPORT

Purpose of the Report

1. The report seeks Members' approval to commence public consultation with a draft appraisal proposing the designation of a new Middleton St George Conservation Area.

Summary

2. The report provides justification for the completion of an appraisal for Middleton St George including proposals to designate conservation area boundaries. It also briefly outlines the contents of the document and the proposed consultation process.

Recommendations

3. It is recommended that :-
 - (a) Cabinet authorises public consultation on the draft appraisal for Middleton St George, attached at **Appendix 1**.
 - (b) The draft document is publicised for a period of at least six weeks, to allow members of the public and other stakeholders sufficient time to submit comments.
 - (c) The draft document is amended and finalised in the light of comments received during the public consultation period.
 - (d) A finalised appraisal is submitted to Councillors for adoption and designation of conservation area boundaries; this will be subject to another Cabinet report.

Reasons

4. The recommendations are supported by the following reasons :-
- (a) Middleton St George includes non-designated heritage assets of international significance due to structures and associations directly linked to the birth/early years of the Stockton & Darlington Railway (S&DR) of 1825.
 - (b) The bicentennial of the S&DR is next year. There will be many events in Darlington and elsewhere to celebrate the birth of the modern railway. The Council is currently making significant investments in preparation for the 2025 celebrations.
 - (c) In the run-up to 2025, heritage assets at Middleton St George have been promoted through the neighbourhood plan, S&DR Heritage Action Zone and Fighting Cocks Heritage Hub.
 - (d) The draft appraisal picks up the 'unfinished' work carried out recently by Durham County Council who proposed a conservation area boundary for Middleton St George in 2022.
 - (e) The draft appraisal provides a detailed record and analysis of Middleton St George and its wider surroundings which will be of interest to the public and other stakeholders, as well as some of the Council's staff (e.g. planning officers). It draws attention to locally important heritage assets to further public understanding and inform decision making.
 - (f) The proposed conservation area boundaries not only relate directly to the S&DR but also to other early development of the village, which used to be very industrialised due to the railway links.
 - (g) The draft appraisal also includes suggestions to improve the condition of the area. These are in line with the aims of the Middleton St George Neighbourhood Plan and the Fighting Cocks Heritage Hub.

Ian Williams
Chief Executive

Background Papers

<https://www.darlington.gov.uk/media/17327/msg-np-made-version.pdf>

<https://www.darlington.gov.uk/media/16184/fighting-cocks-heritage-hub-guide.pdf>

S17 Crime and Disorder	Possibly slightly positive impact. The information provided in the draft appraisal may lead to wider improvements in the area.
Health and Wellbeing	Possibly slightly positive impact. The information provided in the draft appraisal may lead to wider improvements in the area.
Carbon Impact and Climate Change	Possibly slightly positive impact. The draft appraisal raises some awareness against the use of modern materials that are incompatible with traditional buildings, which often have a high-carbon footprint and adverse effect on the insulating properties of traditional structures.
Diversity	No impact
Wards Affected	Sadberge & Middleton St George
Groups Affected	No impact
Budget and Policy Framework	This report does not recommend a change to the Council's budget or policy framework.
Key Decision	No
Urgent Decision	No
Council Plan	The draft appraisal: (a) Supports economic growth through sustainable and well-planned development (priorities). (b) Underpins the Plan's priority of valuing our heritage and culture.
Efficiency	For the public consultation process, the additional workload will only be temporary and mainly with the Conservation Officer. In the long term, depending on the outcome of the adopted appraisal (subject to a future cabinet meeting), there may be a slight increase in additional officer workload in planning applications and enforcement.
Impact on Looked After Children and Care Leavers	No impact

MAIN REPORT

Background Information

5. A conservation area is '*an area of special architectural or historic interest, the character or appearance of which it is desirable to preserve or enhance*' (Planning (Listed Building and Conservation Areas) Act 1990). There is currently no conservation area at Middleton St George.
6. Much of the special interest of Middleton St George comprises structures and associations linked to the birth/early days of the Stockton and Darlington Railway (S&DR), which is of international significance, being the world's first public railway on which a locomotive hauled passengers. The S&DR opened in September 1825. At Middleton St George, the presence of the railway led to the establishment of various industries and associated workers housing.

7. General interest in the railway heritage of the area increased as minds started to focus on the approaching 2025 S&DR Bicentennial and the founding of the Friends of the S&DR in 2015. A 2016 Historic Environment Audit identified Fighting Cocks (i.e. the former station area at the northern end of Middleton St George) as a location of significant heritage value with several assets and remains still to be found.
8. In 2017, Historic England accepted the whole 26-mile route of the former S&DR as a Heritage Action Zone, following an application by the Stockton & Darlington Railway Heritage Board which included Darlington Borough Council. Launched in May 2018, the S&DR HAZ aimed to better manage, preserve and utilise heritage assets with a view to stimulating economic growth through various projects in the build-up to the railway's bicentenary in 2025. Programme outputs which will directly affect Middleton St George include improvement works to the level crossing and the provision of information and interpretation.
9. In May 2019, Middleton St George Parish was formally designated as a neighbourhood area. In September 2022, the Middleton St George Neighbourhood Plan (2022-2036) was approved which includes actions and policies protecting the former route of the S&DR.
10. In early 2020, the Parish Council and the Friends of the S&DR responded to local interest by establishing the Middleton St George S&DR Heritage Steering Group with the mission of delivering the Fighting Cocks Heritage Hub, which comprises a number of projects to improve the heritage assets at Fighting Cocks.
11. In July 2022, Durham County Council (DCC) provided *Conservation Area Assessments – Route of the former Stockton & Darlington Railway. Darlington & Middleton St. George*, proposing a conservation area boundary for Middleton St George. This was not accompanied by an appraisal to justify their proposal.

Recent Assessment

12. In November 2023, Darlington's Conservation Officer was invited to the Fighting Cocks by the Friends of the S&DR. Projects to be delivered by the Fighting Cocks Heritage Hub were also outlined. The Conservation Officer met the Friends on several occasions in 2024 when there was progress or completion of some of the projects (e.g. mural, waiting shed, vegetation clearance).
13. An appraisal for Middleton St George was drafted between March and June 2024 by the Conservation Officer.
14. The draft appraisal includes:
 - (a) Information on the planning implications of conservation area designation.
 - (b) A detailed assessment of the significance of Middleton St George and its surroundings based on its historical development, spatial/character analysis and values attributed by the local community and other stakeholders.
 - (c) A description of its condition and its causes and any issues which have led to the deterioration of the area.

- (d) An assessment of threats/potential future issues as well as opportunities for enhancement.
- (e) Proposed conservation area boundaries, including DCC's initial suggestion as well as additional areas.

Proposed Public Consultation Process

- 15. Upon request from the clerk of the Middleton St George Parish Council, a presentation to the public about the proposed conservation area designation will be held by the Conservation Officer in the village following cabinet approval.
- 16. The draft appraisal will be available for public consultation for a minimum of six weeks, starting on 6 January 2025.
- 17. It will be available:
 - (a) On the Council's website, along with a feedback form that can be completed. Additionally, members of the public can email a response to conservation@darlington.gov.uk
 - (b) As a paper copy at the Town Hall (by appointment only) and at the libraries on Crown Street and Cockerton Green/Woodland Road during normal opening hours. Paper copies of the feedback form will also be provided.
- 18. At the commencement of the public consultation period, the Conservation Officer will directly approach individuals, groups and organisations that are likely to have a particular interest in the proposed Middleton St George Conservation Area. These include the Council's Members of the affected ward/parishes and some of its staff, and railway-related heritage groups.
- 19. There will also be a press release.
- 20. Following the consultation period, the draft will be reviewed in the light of the comments received and finalised before being put to Councillors for adoption.

Financial Implications

- 21. Very minor. Printing costs of paper copies and Conservation Officer time for evaluating comments received and amending draft.

Legal Implications

- 22. At the time of public consultation there will be none.
- 23. Conservation area designation would take effect following the adoption of a boundary (or multiple boundaries), which would be subject to another cabinet meeting.

Estates & Property Advice

24. Proposed boundary may affect the Council land (TBC).

Carbon Impact and Climate Change

25. The draft appraisal raises some awareness against the use of modern materials that are incompatible with traditional buildings, which often have a high-carbon footprint and adverse effect on the insulating properties of traditional structures.

Consultation

26. See above.

Outcome of Consultation

27. To be confirmed.