

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD

A meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Board was held on Wednesday 19 March 2025.

PRESENT: Councillors I Blades (Chair), J Kabuye (Vice-Chair), E Clynch, D Coupe, J Ewan, L Lewis, I Morrish, Z Uddin, G Wilson, T Livingstone (Substitute for D Branson) and J Platt (Substitute for M Saunders)

PRESENT BY INVITATION: Mayor C Cooke and Councillor J Thompson

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE: D. Hodgson (Local Democracy Reporter)

OFFICERS: C Benjamin, S Bonner, J Dixon, G Field, L Grabham, S Lightwing, E Scollay and A Wilson

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE: Councillors J Banks, D Branson, B Hubbard, M McClintock and M Saunders

24/71 **WELCOME AND FIRE EVACUATION**

The Chair welcomed all those present and outlined the fire evacuation procedure.

24/72 **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest received at this point in the meeting.

24/73 **MINUTES - OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD - 12 FEBRUARY 2025**

The minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Board meeting held on 12 February 2025 were submitted and approved as a correct record.

SUSPENSION OF COUNCIL PROCEDURE RULE NO. 4.13.2 – ORDER OF BUSINESS

In accordance with Council Procedure Rule No. 4.57, the Board agreed to vary the order of business to deal with the items in the following order: 8, 8a, 9, 10, 5, 6, 7 and 11.

24/74 **EXECUTIVE FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME**

The Chair introduced the item for the Board's consideration. A copy of the Work Programme was attached at Appendix A and Members were asked to raise any issues they had in relation to any of the items listed.

A Member commented that, in relation to the Forward Plan entry *Neighbourhoods Model*, there was no description attached to the Forward Plan. It was agreed this would be provided to Members.

In terms of the *Disposal of Land and Assets at Gresham to the TVCA* it was queried if any valuations had been carried out. It was confirmed that valuations had been carried out and that information would be made available at the appropriate time.

It was agreed the report due to be considered by the Executive Sub Committee for Property on 2 April would be brought back to OSB at its 9 April meeting.

ORDERED that

1. That a description of the Neighbourhood Model be included on the Executive Forward Plan.
2. The *Disposal of Land and Assets at Gresham to the Tees Valley Combined Authority* report considered at the Executive Sub-Committee for Property be brought back to

the 9 April meeting of OSB.

3. That the information presented be noted.

24/75 **FORWARD PLAN ACTIONS PROGRESS**

The Chair advised that this update had been provided to the Board.

NOTED

24/76 **TVCA SCRUTINY UPDATE**

The Chair provided an update on scrutiny activity at the Tees Valley Combined Authority (TVCA).

In terms of background, the TVCA update was a new agenda item for OSB and would be provided to the Board when available.

TVCA Scrutiny Committee met six times a year and comprised of three Councillors from each constituent authority. The representatives from Middlesbrough were Councillors Blades, Branson and McCabe. While Councillor Steve Nelson from Stockton Council was elected to be Chair of the TVCA Scrutiny committee, he had not been able to attend due to illness since the summer and so Councillor Blades had been acting as Chair during this time.

The Scrutiny Committee and TVCA had a busy programme of work over the previous 12 months including the Tees Valley Independent Review. This work had seen the Scrutiny Committee become more prominent than it had been previously.

The Chair commented that during his tenure as Chair of TVCA Scrutiny he had improved its profile and secured an agreement whereby the Tees Valley Mayor would attend a minimum of two scrutiny meetings per year as well as engaging in a question-and-answer session.

The committee was working on two in depth reviews undertaken by a Public Transport Sub-Committee, Chaired by Councillor Branson of Middlesbrough and an Education, Employment and Skills Sub-Committee Chaired by Councillor Creevy of Hartlepool. The results of the work carried out by both Sub-Committees would be brought to OSB in due course.

NOTED.

24/77 **SCRUTINY CHAIRS UPDATE**

The Chair invited the Chair of the People Scrutiny Panel to provide his update.

Since the last meeting of the People Scrutiny Panel the Children Missing Education review was now at the report writing stage with the Panel's second review into Homelessness at the evidence gathering stage.

The Chair invited the Vice Chair of the Place Scrutiny Panel to provide his update.

The Vice Chair of the Panel advised the Board the Panel had last met on Tuesday 11 March and considered its final report on Home to School Transport where Members suggested final recommendations. The Panel's report into Empty Properties was still in preparation. The Director of Regeneration presented information relating to barriers to regeneration and further examination of this would be undertaken to understand how to progress the topic. The Chair was scheduled to meet with the Director of Regeneration on 27 March in pursuance of this. The Chair of the Panel also provided an update on the work being carried out in relation to crustacean deaths.

The Community Cohesion Task and Finish Group had completed its report and would be presenting it to the next meeting of OSB.

NOTED.

24/78 **EXECUTIVE MEMBER UPDATE - NEIGHBOURHOODS**

The Chair welcomed the Executive Member for Neighbourhoods and the Director of Environment and Community Services to the meeting. The Executive Member advised that her portfolio had been circulated to the Board and proceeded to deliver her presentation.

Since her last appearance at OSB the Executive Member's title had changed to Neighbourhoods and Public Protection had been added to the portfolio remit. In terms of libraries and hubs, one of the main developments was the refurbishment of Central Library. The refurbishment included the addition of a lift, making the building more accessible for people with disabilities and improved ICT facilities.

Four other libraries had recently been refurbished thanks to libraries improvement funding. The venues also included hublets, which were easy to use and required very few IT skills.

Neighbourhood Action Partnerships (NAPs) had recently received funding from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) totalling £1.9 million. The funding had been used to tackle crime and anti-social behaviour across the town with initiatives including publicity for road safety and a mobile boxing gym to deter young people from participating in anti-social behaviour. The East Middlesbrough NAP was in the process of developing a newsletter which would be delivered to each household in that area. An online newsletter had been rolled out by the South NAP and there were plans for this to happen in the North and West NAP areas.

Silver Recovery Group had been established following the riots which took place in August 2024. The group met monthly and included different partnership organisations. The Executive Member attended those meetings. Funding had been received from government in the wake of the riots amounting to £600,000 for recovery and £50,000 for community cohesion purposes.

Silver Recovery Group had established several subgroups including Communications, Young People and Community Conversations. In terms of Communications, this subgroup had received approximately £20,000 for projects that included photography, community radio and the promotion of We Are Middlesbrough. In terms of Young People, this subgroup received £195,000 which was in turn divided between other youth organisations. The Community Conversations group was awarded £20,000 which enabled difficult conversations to take place with young people and adults aimed at addressing misinformation.

The Executive Member invited questions from the Board.

A Member commented the slides stated £5,274 had been paid to 15 claimants following the riots but the Council had claimed significantly more than this. The Member queried what the situation was with the remaining funding. It was clarified £600,000 had been given to the Council in response to the riots. The claims totalling £5,274 as stated on the slides were claims made by individuals and were managed by the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner.

The Chair queried library attendance figures as this was linked to value for money. It was agreed this would be provided to the Board.

A Member queried if mobile libraries would continue. It was confirmed they would.

The Vice Chair of OSB queried, in terms of recovery funds, if a report into this would be produced. It was clarified an evaluation report would be produced based on the feedback provided to Silver Recovery Group and in turn reported to Government.

It was queried if support to the Junction youth organisation was still being provided. Money was being provided to such groups via the Silver Recovery Group. While it was likely that additional support would also be provided, it would be from different departments. It was agreed the figures for this support would be provided to the Board.

A conversation took place about Central Library's closure and what impact this had on other community spaces in the town. It was commented that, depending on visitor figures, it may be beneficial to continue some Central Library activities in other hubs.

The Chair commented that, during the Executive Member's previous attendance at OSB, it

was highlighted there was a programme of recruiting new Neighbourhood Wardens and queried if there was an update on this. It was clarified there was 22 wardens in place due to extra funding the Council had received. The Chair also asked if the new wardens were deployed equally across the four neighbourhood areas. It was commented that wardens were deployed where there was greatest need, and that flexibility was important for this. Further deployment information would be provided to Members, and it was also clarified there was no additional funding available to increase the number of wardens.

Thanks were expressed for the warden's work.

In terms of Central Library's redevelopment, a Member queried if the library facilities at Newport hub would be lost when Central Library re-opened. It was clarified that the redevelopment of Central Library was to develop a Children's literature centre of excellence. As such there were no plans to change library provisions in other parts of town.

In terms of warden provision, it was clarified there were 12 were permanent staff and that 10 positions were grant funded. The grant funding has been extended for 2025-2026 and the Council would have further discussions about this as part of the MTFP programme.

It was agreed that a preview of works at Central Library could be made available to Councillors.

The Chair thanked the Executive Member for Neighbourhoods and the Director for Environment and Community Services for their presentation.

ORDERED that

1. The slides presented be circulated to OSB.
2. Library attendance figures be provided to the Board.
3. Figures for how much support was provided to the Junction was above that provided by Silver Recovery Group be provided to the Board.
4. Deployment information for wardens to be circulated to the Board.
5. A preview of the Central Library refurbishment works be made available to Councillors.
6. The information presented and discussed be noted.

24/79

SCRUTINY STRUCTURES 2024/2025 - EVALUATION

By means of context, the Chair stated that OSB had previously agreed to reduce the number of scrutiny panels from five to two and that Democratic Services Officers had worked hard around this change. The report before Members included consultation with both Members and officers about how successful the change had been. The Chair invited the Head of Legal (People) to speak to the report before inviting discussion.

The Head of Legal (People) commented it was for OSB to decide on how it wanted to proceed based on the recommendations in the report. Whichever recommendation was agreed it was not a standalone solution to the problem of effective scrutiny. Addressing the issues and barriers to effective scrutiny included examining work programming, pre-decision scrutiny and effective policy development all of which required a wider piece of work.

The report provided the successes and challenges over the previous 12 months and included comments made by Members as part of the Scrutiny workshops carried out several weeks before.

The recommendations in the report were outlined for Members and questions were invited. The Chair emphasised the decision made by OSB was for the next 12 months and was not permanent, if necessary.

A Member commented that health scrutiny needed to be separated from the People Panel and expressed a preference for recommendation three in the report, as Adult Social Care and Health scrutiny complimented each other.

The Chair commented that having two scrutiny panels meant each of their remits was too large to be effective. As the constitution referred to health scrutiny in several places the Chair

felt it was preferable to have a dedicated health scrutiny panel.

A Member commented that a return to the previous scrutiny structure was preferable, namely having separate panels that reflected council services. The Chair stated comparisons with other Councils showed the average number of scrutiny panels was three. A discussion took place about the resource implications of supporting an increased number of scrutiny panels. The Head of Legal commented that, while a consideration for the changes implemented in 2024, resources was not the only one and that improving the scrutiny function, focussing on outcomes and objectives, was a primary driver.

The Interim Democratic Services Manager pointed out that a result of the scrutiny changes was a more collaborative approach with both Members and officers and that irrespective of OSB's decision this approach was to continue going forward.

A Member commented it was difficult to see how scrutiny could be effective with fewer panels with larger remits and that a return to how to scrutiny used to work was preferable. The Chief Executive commented the way scrutiny worked previously was not necessarily what was required currently. The exercise carried out, resulting in the report before Members, covered the necessary bases. It was also important to realise that a recent LGA Peer Challenge had identified that scrutiny was a fundamental element of the Council's work, and that further work needed to be done to ensure it was effective.

A Member stated a preference for recommendation three in the report and stated the People panel had done a good job over the last 12 months and that panel members had worked well together. He expressed thanks to both members of the panel and Democratic Services staff. Despite this there was a need to make the remit of the People Panel more streamlined.

A discussion took place regarding potential scrutiny structures which included a proposal including moving back to five scrutiny panels and a corporate affairs and audit element. Proponents of this option recognised this would require additional resource but given the nature of the issues facing the Council argued this would be the most logical choice for scrutiny structure.

A Member queried the time commitments of Democratic Services Officers spent on Scrutiny. It was clarified that prior to 2016 there had been a dedicated scrutiny team supporting the scrutiny function.

The Mayor, in attendance at the meeting, stated that whichever structure was agreed scrutiny needed to align more closely with the priorities of the Council Plan.

A Member commented the proposed seating amounts of the panels was too large and should be reduced. Doing so may have been more conducive to an increased number of panels. A conversation took place about the timings of panels. Some Members commented the current meeting time of 4.30pm was not entirely helpful to Members that worked or did not, while others stated having daytime meetings would disenfranchise those Members that worked. The Chair stated that, depending on the agreed structure, each panel should be held on a separate day with one held during the working day.

The Interim Democratic Services Manager stated that, in terms of the number of seats on each panel, the intention was to maximise participation from all groups. In terms of meeting dates and times, it was suggested that more work be undertaken to understand this more.

A discussion took place about what alternative scrutiny structures were available after which the Chair put the options in the report to the vote.

ORDERED that

1. Recommendation three in the report be APPROVED namely a scrutiny configuration consisting of:
 - Overview and Scrutiny Board.
 - Place Scrutiny Panel (covering Environment and Regeneration).
 - Adult Social Care and Health Scrutiny Panel.
 - Children's Services Scrutiny Panel..
2. Scrutiny Panels meet on different days of the week.

LGA PEER REVIEW AND CQC INSPECTION UPDATE

The Chair welcomed the Mayor, the Chief Executive and the Interim Director of Adult Social Care and Health Integration to the meeting.

The Chief Executive provided Members with an overview of the Local Government Association (LGA) Peer Challenge that had been undertaken. As part of the overview the Chief Executive made the following points:

- The Peer Challenge process was well established and happened every five years or so.
- External reviewers assessed the Council against several established areas.
- The report had been received and circulated to OSB and was available on the LGA website.
- The report would also be discussed at the next Council meeting on 26 March.
- The Peer Challenge had been conducted in parallel with the work of the Middlesbrough Independent Improvement Advisory Board (MIIAB).
- The Peer Challenge team would visit the Council again in 12 months' time.
- There was nothing in the Peer Challenge report that was surprising.
- While the Council still had work to do, the Peer Challenge recognised the Council was emerging from a difficult financial and cultural position.
- The recommendations of the review included developing a long-term vision for the town in co-production with residents and partners.
- While the Council Plan was recognised as a plan for the Council it was also recognised there needed to be a plan for the town.
- One of the benefits of having clear objectives for the town was it made Middlesbrough more attractive for business and investors.
- The Peer Challenge also asked for a redefinition of strategic partnership as there had been a lessening of engagement with some strategic partners.
- There was a need to improve and strengthen the relationships between the Council and Tees Valley Combined Authority.
- A strengthening of equality and diversity was required, including around the Council's workforce and community engagement. Middlesbrough had a complex set of communities, and the Council needed to be better at engaging with those communities.
- In terms of improving financial resilience and ensure savings targets were met, the MIIAB were impressed with the work the Council had carried out. There was more work to do in this area, and there was a need for scrutiny and audit to play a role in this.
- There was a need to re-shape the Council's approach to transformation given the Council's improved financial position.
- There was a need to continue the work of the MIIAB after it was disbanded.
- internal audit procedures, scrutiny processes and support to the Executive function.
- A need to strengthen internal audit procedures, scrutiny processes and support to the Executive function were all identified as part of the Peer Challenge report.

The Chief Executive commented there was nothing surprising as part of the report, and the creation of an action plan to monitor the recommendations would provide a valuable mandate to carry out improvement work.

The Chair commented that, while the outcome of the report was not surprising to officers, he queried if politicians were surprised at the outcome of the report. The Mayor responded that the improvement journey had allowed the Council to assess its position correctly. Importantly, the Council's focus needed to shift to outside considerations and not just internal considerations. The Mayor also commented there was an opportunity for the Council to be more involved in, and return to, strategic housing.

A Member queried if the Mayor's intention was to bring more housing stock back within Council control. The Mayor responded this was an aspiration, provided relevant assessments were carried out. One of the factors to consider was potential changes to the Local Government Housing Revenue Account which would allow the Council to possess more Council houses. There was also a fund available to trial a forced purchase route with an

example of a property in east Middlesbrough being cited.

A discussion took place about how the Council would engage with communities around Equality, Diversity and Inclusion matters. It was commented the Council needed to take communities with it on decisions. A recent example of this was the Communities Fund and how allocations from that fund were decided by a panel made up of different communities. When the neighbourhood model of working became active it would mean Council services were placed within communities. There was a need for proportionality in Middlesbrough Communities to understand this.

It was also commented that discussions of the neighbourhood model included the realisation those participating in the riots in August 2024 were not necessarily driven by far-right motives but instead were disaffected individuals. There was a degree of disconnectedness on the part of the Council and the neighbourhood model would help to rebuild relationships with communities.

It was stated the reports of the Peer Challenge and the MIAB would be available for the full Council meeting on the 26 March.

The Chief Executive recognised and expressed his thanks to junior staff members for their work during the Council's improvement journey.

The Interim Director of Adult Social Care advised the Board she was attending the next meeting of the People Scrutiny panel and would be providing a detailed overview of the Council's CQC inspection and resulting action plan. As the Council was close to a "good" rating, future inspections would be light touch which likely included a quarterly update to the department of health and social care. Some of the issues identified in the CQC inspection were brought out in the Peer Challenge.

A discussion took place about CQC inspections nationally. It was commented that at the point Middlesbrough's CQC inspection was made public approximately half of Councils had been rated as "needs improvement" and half were rated as "good". It was also commented that the CQC was working to new inspection processes.

The Chair thanked the Mayor, Chief Executive and Interim Director of Adult Social Care for their attendance.

NOTED

24/81

ANY OTHER URGENT ITEMS WHICH, IN THE OPINION OF THE CHAIR, MAY BE CONSIDERED.

None.