

**PLACE SCRUTINY PANEL**

A meeting of the Place Scrutiny Panel was held on Monday 7 October 2024.

**PRESENT:** Councillors D Branson (Chair), J Cooke, J Ewan, N Hussain, D Jackson, J Kabuye, T Livingstone, A Romaine and L Young

**OFFICERS:** G Bergman, G Field, R Horniman, S Lightwing, J McNally and J Savage

**APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE:** Were submitted on behalf of Councillor J Banks

24/26 **WELCOME AND FIRE EVACUATION PROCEDURE**

The Chair welcomed all present to the meeting and read out the Fire Evacuation Procedure.

24/27 **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

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

24/28 **HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT - SCRUTINY REVIEW**

The Council's Independent Travel Trainer gave a presentation to the Panel in relation to travel training.

Independent Travel Training (ITT) was about enabling students to gain the confidence to use public transport, demonstrate road safety awareness and be able to travel by themselves without confusion or anxiety. ITT involved young people being taken on practical journeys by a travel trainer, who would highlight important aspects of travel, the rules of road safety, personal safety, and what to do if they became lost or anxious. Travel training was a gradual process which culminated in a young person being able to complete unaccompanied journeys. ITT was a bespoke service that built on a young person's existing skills as well as teaching them new ones with the goal of being confident and safe to travel on their own.

ITT also aimed to demonstrate to parents that their child was capable of travelling independently. Students were empowered to feel more confident and independent and this helped with preparation for adulthood as well as being able to go out with friends and have more freedom. Once trained, students no longer had to rely on specialist transport or parents or carers. In turn this provided parents or carers with some respite and confidence that their child could be more independent. By gaining new skills, including how to ask for help and what to do if things went wrong, students would feel safer in the community and have a better chance of finding and maintaining employment.

Initially, the Independent Needs Assessor would receive a referral from a school or the Council's Special Educational Needs (SEN) Service. Following an assessment parents would be informed whether or not their child was eligible for transport to and from school, or eligible for travel training or not eligible. Details of those students who were eligible were passed to the Travel Trainer. The Travel Trainer would then contact the school and the parents to seek their permission and a journey plan was created which was shared with all.

The journey plan included information in respect of the starting point, destination, route, timings and mode of transport. The Travel Trainer could work with the students in school but needed parental consent in order to work with them in the community. If parental consent was not provided for travel training the transport offer would be withdrawn.

Once parental consent was obtained, the Travel Trainer would meet with the student and complete skills assessments. The Travel Trainer worked with students from the Year 6 age group up to College age. Students received an emergency care card which contained contact telephone numbers for their next of kin and Travel Trainer as well as the name of the school or college that they attended. The card was bright yellow and students were aware that if they were too anxious to ask for help they could show the card to a "safe stranger" for help. No names were included on the card so that the student could not be identified.

The Travel Trainer would meet with the student at home for their first practical training session. Sometimes they would walk to the bus stop and just watch the buses and talk about them and then walk back home. Once the student was ready, they would get on the bus and travel a few stops and back. Since travel training was a bespoke service it very much catered to the individual's needs. Every contact was logged with parents, student and school.

Once the journey to and from school had been completed and the student was feeling more confident, the Travel Trainer might meet them at the bus stop and shadow them while they complete their journey. Once the student was ready to be signed off they would receive a certificate. The Travel Trainer would write a report for the student and parents accompanied by a safety plan. The Travel Trainer commented that she often received thanks from parents for the progress made by their child.

As at June 2024, there were 34 students on the waiting list for travel training. Two had since moved out of area, 4 students' parents had declined the offer, 6 had been deemed not ready yet but would be reviewed annually, 9 were reassessed after more information was provided and 13 had been successfully Travel Trained.

The Travel Trainer was currently working with 3 college students and 7 in schools and there were 7 on the waiting list. The Travel Trainer shared some success stories:

- Student A in year 11 had been transported to and from school. After working with the Travel Trainer in school and on the buses, Student A was able to travel to and from school independently. Transport was stopped, parents and student very happy with student's newly-found independence.
- Student B in year 6 completed Travel training in two sessions and was very happy to be able to make their own way to school
- Student C, also in year 6, worked with the Travel Trainer whilst in Primary school and in the summer holidays and was able to complete the journey to and from school independently at the start of year 7, saving the Council money in transportation costs.

The Travel Trainer commented that she got immense job satisfaction working with students, watching their confidence grow, their parents' confidence grow, and them being able to travel independently.

Examples of the many positive comments received by the Travel Trainer from parents were shared with the Panel.

In response to a query as to how well the Council supported the service, the Travel Trainer stated there were no financial issues. However, additional support in the form of "Bus Buddies" would be welcomed as this would enable more students to be trained. The Council's Passenger Assistants would sometimes take on that role but they were only available outside of school term time. Additional support to travel with students on the buses would free up more time for the Travel Trainer to undertake the training in schools. It was difficult to say how many additional students could be trained if additional bus buddies were made available, since some students might take longer to train than others and some might prove not to have the capacity or skills required to complete the training.

Whilst Travel Training did achieve monetary savings in terms of students no longer needing Council provided transport, the main purpose was to prepare students for adulthood and support those with SEN to become independent. Whilst the cost savings were a benefit, this was not the sole purpose of the service.

Some of the students who worked with the Travel Trainer had previously travelled on Council provided buses or taxis. The Travel Trainer developed journey plans which could include bicycle routes, walking routes or public transport but did not include transport by taxi.

The Travel Trainer worked with students aged from 11 up to 25 years old but they had to have a Middlesbrough address and attend an education setting within Middlesbrough's boundaries as per Council policy.

In terms of a cost comparison for a student receiving Council transport or being independent

trained, it was explained that there it would be a difficult comparison to make as students had different individual needs, some more complex than others. It was the case however that more students being able to travel independently was cheaper than providing other forms of transport.

The Chair thanked the Travel Trainer for attending the meeting.

**AGREED** as follows that:

1. The information provided was received and noted.
2. The Democratic Support Officers would re-arrange for the Independent Travel Needs Assessor to provide an overview on home to school travel assessments for a future meeting.

24/29

### **HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT SCRUTINY REVIEW - TERMS OF REFERENCE**

The Membership of the Task and Finish Group on Home to School Transport was discussed. Members agreed that the Task and Finish Group on Home to School Transport would meet to develop and draft the Terms of Reference for the scrutiny review.

**AGREED** as follows that:

1. Membership of the Task and Finish Group on Home to School Transport would include Councillors Branson, Cooke, Kabuye and Jackson.
2. Draft Terms of Reference for the scrutiny review of Home to School Transport would be presented to the next Place Scrutiny Panel meeting for approval.

24/30

### **EMPTY PROPERTIES - SCRUTINY REVIEW**

The Head of Resident and Business Support was in attendance at the meeting and gave a presentation in relation to Empty Non-Domestic Properties in Middlesbrough.

Middlesbrough had a significant number of empty non-domestic (commercial) properties, within the town centre and throughout the borough, some of which were in poor condition.

Properties like Vancouver House could attract anti-social behaviour, squatters, increase crime rates and decrease local property values and outside investment opportunities.

It was important for the Council to have a strategy for tackling empty properties although it did not have a great deal of power to do so. The majority of empty properties were in the central area of the town. A slide showing the break down of different categories was provided as well as a heat map.

As at September 2024, out of a total of 2522 non domestic properties, 761 were currently empty. The total number of businesses properties in Middlesbrough was 4638, meaning 16.4% were empty. Reliefs were available when properties were left empty. Previously exemptions could be claimed and properties could be used as storage although there had now been a change in legislation. The Valuation Office Agency (VOA) determined the rateable value of properties and when they could be taken out of rating.

When a property became unoccupied the following applied:

- Non-industrial – shops or offices - a 100% exemption was applied for 3 months, followed by 0% relief, a 100% unoccupied charge.
- Industrial - Factories, Warehouses or Workshops - a 100% exemption applied for 6 months, followed by 0% relief, a 100% unoccupied charge.

In all cases, where there might be a change of ownership or leaseholder, the exemption period did not reset. The new ratepayer was only entitled to claim the remainder of any 3 or 6 month exemption period. If these had expired the new ratepayer would be billed for the 100% empty charge straight away.

When properties were taking out of the rating by the VOA, the Council did not have any influence, although pressure was being applied for the VOA to take a different approach. Once properties were taking out of the rating, the owners were less inclined to maintain them.

The Council continued to inspect those properties however to check whether any work was taking place on them and try to engage with the owners. If empty properties became unsightly or unsafe, the Council would use what powers it had to intervene. 426 non-domestic properties were currently stood empty in Middlesbrough with zero rate value.

There were several large office buildings in Middlesbrough that the VOA had taken out of rating including Centre North East, Church House and Gurney House. This was lost revenue to the Council since business rates were not payable.

Members were shown a slide showing the top ten empty non-domestic properties with the highest rateable value and maximum annual charge which included, Debenhams Store, DW Sports Fitness and House of Fraser (Middlesbrough Development Corporation).

To try and encourage owners to bring properties back into use there were exemptions from paying business rates for unoccupied properties where the rateable value was below £2900, for listed buildings, bankruptcy or liquidation or prohibited by law. Small business rates relief was also available.

A ratepayer could see their charge increase because of the property becoming unoccupied. For example, if they had been in receipt of Small Business Relief and the property became unoccupied, a 100% charge would become due.

The risks faced by empty properties fell into three main categories. The most obvious was financial loss to the Council, but there was also risk to the building itself; and the risk of the owner incurring legal liabilities.

- Business rates - the financial impact of an empty property - no rates payable for a period (3-6 months), following which full rates became payable. The ability to collect worsened when properties were empty as there were limited options for enforcing when there was no trading and/or a reluctance to pay. Rates avoidance reduced the potential empty charge payable each year.
- Obligations - unless the landlord took active steps to keep the building in good repair and secure, there was a real danger that it would deteriorate or be subject to vandalism and become an eyesore.
- Squatters and illegal use of premises - empty commercial properties could be attractive to squatters. Once squatters were in the building, it could be difficult to remove them.

In addition empty properties might be used for illegal purposes.

The Council was in the process of developing an Empty Property Strategy to include:

- Collaboration with other stakeholders, partners and Council Services such as Street Wardens who could provide intelligence/local knowledge.
- Using legislation that had been introduced to address rates avoidance issues to maximise rates payable.
- A review of properties within the town to identify those that should be in the rating system that were not currently.
- Ongoing - empty property inspection programme and cross-directorate working arrangements.

An element of the new strategy would be identifying where the Council could make the most impact with the powers it had available, by identifying the right route for the relevant property. There was a cross organisation arrangement with the Regeneration Directorate as well as a Business Support Strategy. Advice and direction was available to new business start ups. One thing that had been encouraged was converting former commercial properties into accommodation. Funding was available of up to £14,000 per unit from the Towns Fund, although this was generally only sufficient for small conversion projects. The Regeneration Directorate also worked with owners to try and get their properties occupied.

One option open to the Council to deal with empty properties was by Compulsory Purchase Order (CPO) and the powers around CPO had recently been changed. However, the funding required to implement that legislation was not currently available to Middlesbrough Council. Another option was rental auctions, where the Council could take ownership of a retail unit and auction it off. However, there was not the demand in Middlesbrough for this type of property currently.

A suggestion was made that the Council could be empowered to take ownership of de-rated properties and sell them. However it was highlighted that the Council would then become responsible for the rates and ensuring the property was secure whilst empty and this would incur cost to the Council. The Head of Resident and Business Support suggested more cohesive working with the VOA around the timeframes for properties being removed from the ratings. Modifying current legislation to provide powers that allowed the Council to positively influence and persuade businesses to take a more proactive approach would be beneficial.

It was clarified that the ratable values of properties outside of London were determined by a national calculation which was set by the VOA.

In terms of the success rate of the current investigation strategy it was confirmed that there were two investigation officers who visited and inspected empty properties to check that they were indeed unoccupied and details were kept on a database. In terms of enforcement – this would form part of the new strategy.

The Chair thanked the Head of Resident and Business Support for the presentation.

**AGREED** as follows that the:

1. Information provided was received and noted.
2. Information requested in relation to the following would be obtained and circulated to Panel Members:
  - annual amount of Council Tax due on empty properties in Middlesbrough.
  - amount of rents lost on empty properties owned by the Council.
  - Middlesbrough share of the national non domestic rates on empty buildings owned by the Council and also on properties owned privately.
  - a list of the enforceable powers that are available to use in relation to empty domestic properties.

#### 24/31 **EMPTY PROPERTIES SCRUTINY REVIEW - TERMS OF REFERENCE**

The Membership of the Task and Finish Group on Empty Properties was discussed. Members agreed that the Task and Finish Group on Empty Properties would meet to develop and draft the Terms of Reference for the scrutiny review.

**AGREED** as follows that:

1. Membership of the Task and Finish Group on Empty Properties would include Councillors Ewan, Hussain, Livingstone, Romaine and L Young.
2. Draft Terms of Reference for the scrutiny review of Empty Properties would be presented to the next Place Scrutiny Panel meeting for approval.

#### 24/32 **OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD UPDATE**

The Chair provided a verbal update on items considered at meetings of the Overview and Scrutiny Board that were held on 25 and 30 September 2024.

There had been a discussion on community cohesion at the meeting on 25 September 2024 and a working group had been established to follow up on work that had taken place since the last review on this issue in 2021.

The meeting on 30 September 2024 was a Call-in, in relation to Disposal of Land at Nunthorpe Grange. The Board agreed that the decision would not be referred back to

Executive.

24/33 **DATE AND TIME OF NEXT MEETING**

The next meeting of the Place Scrutiny Panel would be held at 4.30 pm on Monday 4 November 2024.

24/34 **ANY OTHER URGENT ITEMS WHICH IN THE OPINION OF THE CHAIR, MAY BE CONSIDERED.**

The Chair informed Panel Members that Councillor Banks would be resigning as Vice Chair of the Place Scrutiny Panel and that nominations for his replacement would be voted on at the next Council meeting on 16 October 2024.

The Chair also advised that Erimus Rotary were setting up a steering committee to provide support for projects for greening Middlesbrough in partnership with the Council. Any Members who wished to be involved were asked to contact the Chair.