

**PLACE SCRUTINY PANEL**

A meeting of the Place Scrutiny Panel was held on Monday 4 November 2024.

**PRESENT:** Councillors D Branson (Chair), J Cooke, J Ewan, D Jackson, J Kabuye, T Livingstone (Vice-Chair) and A Romaine

**OFFICERS:** G Faint, S Lightwing and J McNally

**APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE:** Were submitted on behalf of Councillors J Banks and L Young

24/35 **WELCOME AND FIRE EVACUATION PROCEDURE**

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

24/36 **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

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

24/37 **MINUTES - PLACE SCRUTINY PANEL - 23 SEPTEMBER AND 7 OCTOBER 2024**

The minutes of the Place Scrutiny Panel meetings held on 23 September and 7 October 2024 were submitted and approved as a correct record.

24/38 **EMPTY PROPERTIES - SCRUTINY REVIEW**

The Chief Executive Officer (CEO) from the Ethical Housing Company (EHC) was in attendance at the meeting and gave a presentation in relation to the Company's business model and partnership work with Middlesbrough Council to bring empty properties back into use.

The Ethical Housing Company (EHC) provided homes for people in housing need across the Teesside private rental market. The EHC's unique business model combined financial and social outcomes and had a long-term approach, ensuring rents were kept at affordable levels and providing a stable option for those in housing need. This unique business model combined commercial and social outcomes in the growing world of impact investment. The company was based in Redcar but covered the whole of the Tees Valley area and had two arms of operation: lettings and housing.

The Company aimed to fill the gap in the private sector but with a social purpose. EHC was funded through private equity by a range of investors who had different portfolios from retail to housing.

Customers of the EHC were among the most vulnerable in society, often unable to access safe, high-quality, and affordable housing due to complex needs or issues related to drug, alcohol, or mental health. The EHC filled a crucial gap in the private rented sector (PRS), effectively serving as the equivalent of the social housing sector within the PRS. Customers not only chose the EHC because they provided good quality, affordable housing, but also because they received comprehensive support throughout their tenancy. This support included assistance with employment and training, help with benefit claims, and access to financial support services.

The EHC's business model was based on the following key factors:

**Property Acquisition:** EHC purchased properties in Teesside, often directly from social housing providers, local authorities, homeowners and landlords. The EHC aimed to acquire properties off-market, thus avoiding traditional estate agency listings and fees.

**Affordable Housing:** EHC focused on providing high-quality, affordable housing to people who were often excluded from the housing market due to issues like financial constraints or complex needs (for example, mental health or substance abuse).

**Social Impact:** EHC mission was to address housing shortages and homelessness. The

company refurbished derelict homes, which not only provided housing, but also helped revitalise communities.

**Comprehensive Support:** Tenants received extensive support services. This included help with finding employment, training opportunities, assistance with benefit claims, and access to financial support. This wrap-around support ensured tenants were able to maintain their housing and improve their overall quality of life.

**Sustainable Practices:** EHC was committed to ethical and sustainable practices. EHC aimed to operate in a way that benefited both the community and the environment, ensuring long-term positive impact.

In essence, EHC combined housing services with a strong social mission, providing affordable housing and comprehensive support to those in need, while also contributing to community development and sustainability.

The EHC was currently working closely in partnership with Middlesbrough Council to bring empty homes back into use and provide good quality affordable housing and reduce the need for temporary accommodation. Nine houses in the TS1 area of the town had been refurbished as part of this pilot scheme and the Panel were shown some photographs of refurbished properties. The plan was to scale up the pilot into a long-term project, offering fully refurbished properties at affordable rent levels. Currently, empty properties often became eyesores, attracted anti-social behaviour, and caused general blight to areas.

The refurbishment usually involved stripping properties back to brick and fitting new kitchen, bathroom, heating system, windows and/or roofs. There was no restriction on the type or size of property that would be considered. In particular there was a shortage of level access ground floor properties suitable to accommodate families. Local contractors were employed to carry out the refurbishments.

The EHC wanted to ensure that those who were unable to access social housing had a suitable alternative within the Private Rented Sector (PRS) which mirrored the offer ordinarily received from Social Housing providers including cyclical maintenance plans, affordable rent levels, a dedicated housing officer per approximately 150 properties, and opportunities for support with employment amongst other services. The EHC currently owned and managed 98 properties across Teesside.

The EHC's aims were summarised as follows:

- Deliver good quality, affordable homes within Middlesbrough.
- Actively work with good landlords within the PRS and to encourage a better, fairer rental experience and to discourage and differentiate from rogue landlords.
- Create communities where people want to live.

A Member queried whether buying properties at auction price or through landlord negotiation made economic sense. The CEO confirmed that it was a long-term investment and not about making money quickly.

It was noted that 78% of tenants had remained in properties for 2 years and this was due to the wrap around support provided by the EHC. Tenants had predominantly previously been in the private sector but without referrals into employability or foodbanks as well as active engagement with housing officers. More enquiries were now being received and more properties were required.

The EHC met fortnightly with the Council, working together on issues such as permits for skips, selective landlord licensing and legislation. The projected number of properties for purchase and refurbishment within the Middlesbrough Council partnership for years 1 to 3 was 66 per year. However, the EHC was also open to other avenues for property purchase.

A Member asked how the EHC could ensure that the social commitment from private investors continued. The CEO confirmed that there were Key Performance Indicators in place and if the business was sold it would be to like-minded buyers. It was also confirmed that properties would not be sold as the EHC's intention was to grow its portfolio. This also gave comfort to tenants that they would not be served notice.

The EHC carried out an annual satisfaction survey with tenants and would be reaching out to communities to work with them and engage in the future.

On behalf of the Panel, the Chair thanked the CEO for attending the meeting.

**AGREED** as follows that:

1. The information provided was received and noted.
2. A copy of a Social Impact Report and KPIs produced by the EHC and the presentation slides would be circulated to the Members of the Scrutiny Panel.

24/39

**EMPTY PROPERTIES SCRUTINY REVIEW - UPDATE FROM TASK AND FINISH GROUP AND DRAFT TERMS OF REFERENCE FOR THE REVIEW**

The Vice Chair confirmed that the Task and Finish Group had met earlier in the day and drafted Terms of Reference for the scrutiny review into Empty Properties. The Vice Chair would circulate the draft Terms of Reference for approval at the next Place Scrutiny Panel meeting.

**NOTED**

24/40

**HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT - SCRUTINY REVIEW**

The Head of the Integrated Transport Unit (ITU) was in attendance and gave a presentation in relation to Middlesbrough Council's Home to School Transport Policy and implementation.

The Council's Home to School Transport Policy for Students Aged 5-16 was last reviewed in preparation for September 2024. The Policy was deemed as 'Good' by peers and other Local Authorities. The Service continued to:

- Review Working Practices including improving communications, earlier assessment for future years' offer with parents/carers and other stakeholders.
- Promote eligibility to stakeholders including schools, colleges, social workers.
- Review the Post 16 Transport Statement and information available to parents/carers.
- Work in greater detail with Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND), School specific and Health colleagues to gain a better understanding of the needs of the students based on their diagnosis or Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP) needs.

With regard to policy implementation, assessments were carried out and/or validated by the Independent Needs Assessor using the following criteria for mainstream students and those with special needs and/or disability.

Education – Statutory Mainstream:

- Distance from the home to school by the shortest walking route (as accompanied by a responsible person).
- Low Income reducing the distance from 3 miles to 2.
- Low Income and attending a school on faith or religious belief - reduces the distance from 3-15 miles to 2-15 miles from the home.
- Unsafe Walking Route – (as outlined in the policy).
- No other special needs.

Education - Special Needs and/or Disability:

- Child/Young Person had an EHCP issued by Middlesbrough Council with the setting named at Section I and that was stated by the Local Authority and distance to the setting.
- Assess information from SEND, school or previous setting, parents/carers and other professionals such as Epilepsy, Asthma, Diabetic Teams at JCUH and CAMHS for areas including mobility, medical, behavioural, vulnerability, practicality and training.

Those SEND students that did not have an EHCP also had a needs assessment using a scoring matrix which covered the six areas listed above and attended their nearest qualifying setting.

Appeals were submitted in accordance with the Home to School and Post 16 Transport Appeals Policy.

Risk assessments were undertaken in line with the Council's Risk Management Strategy and there were 4 levels of risk which ranged from Level 1: passenger had no additional needs other than transport and would not require an individual risk assessment or protocol, up to Level 4: passenger may be too high risk for ITU to transport or further measures and mitigation needed to be a major factor in any transport provision. Alternative transport provisions should be considered.

The number of children with complex educational and medical needs with an EHCP aged between 5-25 in both Middlesbrough and out of area was increasing with approximately 45 additional children becoming eligible for transport assistance each year. The ITU worked closely with colleagues in Education and the SEND team to ensure sufficiency of localised placements and help to plan for the future.

There were evolving pressures in the 2024/2025 budget and weekly management of expenditure to ensure that there were sufficient resources to meet the statutory duty of care.

The ITU also managed expectations through working with schools to identify any issues and also for use of school minibuses.

The ITU currently had a workforce of 146 and a fleet of vehicles to maintain. Routine maintenance on all vehicles whether owned/leased or hired had to be carried out every ten weeks. All vehicles operated on a Section 19 permit.

Service Level Agreements (SLAs) were in place with all education settings and providers, including the River Tees Multi-Academy Trust (RTMAT), mainstream and SEND schools in order to help with resourcing delivery of the Home to School Transport Service. Wider benefits included: children arriving at school ready to learn, utilising the school's specialist training and their detailed knowledge of the children and familiarisation.

The Travel Training provided helped young people to gain greater independence in preparation for adulthood and increase opportunities to education, employment and social interactions as well as maximising their world.

The ITU also offered transport support over the winter months and use of a personal budget for the Spring/Summer months, Parental Travel Assistance (PTA), Top Ups or Personal Budgets. Wider benefits of this support were improved health, greater independence, and opening up opportunities to meet with peers outside of school times.

In terms of Health and Safety, travel routes were monitored and improvements made as necessary. This helped to minimise risks, improve relationships with staff, operators, parents/carers, schools and most of all, passengers.

There were currently 1069 young people on record with SEND and 1067 young people receiving transport assistance. There were 388 mainstream pupils, 150 of whom attended Outwood Riverside, and 238 low income, distance needs. 189 routes operated daily across 61 education settings.

The 2024/2025 budget was set at £6.7 million and the Council received £47,300 for transporting children from low income households and those with distance needs. Additionally, the DfE currently fully funded the transport of pupils to Outwood while the Riverside School did not have physical building.

A Member asked how Middlesbrough compared with other Local Authorities in relation to costs and provision. Benchmarking with other Local Authorities was difficult since needs and operating systems were quite different. It was apparent however that all Local Authorities had experienced a marked increase in the number of students needing transport this year.

In response to a question about parental travel allowance, it was confirmed that this was one option that was available following discussion with parents as to the most suitable form of travel for their child. An allowance of 45p per mile for a return journey could be claimed.

The service liaised with SEND forums and other stakeholder groups in terms of feedback from parents and innovative ideas. The ITU also worked with the Council's Inclusion Team to look

at different ideas to help meet the needs of the families they represented.

The Chair thanked the Officer for her attendance at the meeting.

**AGREED** as follows that:

1. The information provided was received and noted.
2. Further information would be provided in relation to:  
2018 comparative unit head costs – data published in 2019, statistical neighbours, consultative forums, reasons for the increase in complexity of needs of young people.

24/41 **HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT SCRUTINY REVIEW - UPDATE FROM TASK AND FINISH GROUP AND DRAFT TERMS OF REFERENCE FOR THE REVIEW**

A note of the meeting of the Task and Finish Group on Home to School Transport held on 14 October 2024 had been circulated with the agenda. The next steps for the Group would be to obtain evidence from relevant schools to find out how they thought the system was operating and speak to users of the service.

**AGREED** that:

1. The information provided was received and noted.
2. Terms of Reference for the scrutiny review of Home to School Transport were approved as follows:
  - To establish the nature of the Home to School Transport Service currently provided by Middlesbrough Council's Integrated Transport Unit.
  - To examine the nature of the Home to School Transport policy in light of the relevant statutory guidance.
  - To establish whether the present system is providing adequate support for students travelling on school transport.
  - To identify the reasons for the increase in costs over time and the implications for the overall funding on the service.
  - To investigate how other similar local authorities provide this service and to identify ways in which the service could be improved and any costs minimized.

24/42 **OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD UPDATE**

The Chair provided a verbal update on items considered at the Overview and Scrutiny Board meeting held on 23 October 2024. It was highlighted that the Final Report of the former Environment Scrutiny Panel on Waste Management had been approved by the Board and would be submitted to the Executive.

24/43 **CRUSTACEAN DEATHS COLLABORATIVE WORKING GROUP - UPDATE**

There was no update for this meeting.

24/44 **DATE AND TIME OF NEXT MEETING**

The next meeting of the Place Scrutiny Panel was scheduled for Monday 2 December 2024 at 4.30 pm. Discussion took place regarding potentially changing the time and/or dates for Panel meetings from January 2025 and the Chair invited Members to let him have any suggestions.

24/45 **ANY OTHER URGENT ITEMS WHICH IN THE OPINION OF THE CHAIR, MAY BE CONSIDERED.**

None.

