

**OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD**

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

<b>PRESENT:</b>	Councillors L Young (Chair), J Ewan (Vice-Chair), D Branson, E Clynch, D Coupe, B Hubbard (Substitute for M Saunders), I Morrish, J Platt, Z Uddin, G Wilson and J Young
<b>PRESENT BY INVITATION:</b>	C Cooke - Elected Mayor and Councillor N Walker (Executive Member for Finance)
<b>ALSO IN ATTENDANCE:</b>	D Hodgson (Local Democracy Reporting Service)
<b>OFFICERS:</b>	M Adams, S Bonner, A Humble, S Lightwing and J Savage
<b>APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE:</b>	Councillors J Kabuye, L Lewis, T Mohan and M Saunders

**25/33 WELCOME AND FIRE EVACUATION PROCEDURE**

The Chair welcomed all those present to the meeting and described the fire evacuation procedure.

**25/34 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

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

**25/35 MINUTES - OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD - 22 OCTOBER 2025**

The minutes of the Executive meeting held on 22 October 2025 were submitted and approved as a correct record.

**25/36 SCRUTINY CHAIRS UPDATE**

The Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Board (OSB) invited the respective Panel Chair to provide their update.

The Chair of the Children's Services Scrutiny Panel advised the Board that at the Panel's last meeting information had been received regarding Workforce Planning in relation to Education services. As part of the Panel's review into Out of Area Provision, it intended to examine how this affected social care. At its next meeting in December the Panel would be receiving a presentation from the South Tees Child Safeguarding Board.

The Chair of the Place Scrutiny Panel advised the Board that the last meeting of the Panel had taken place on 17 November 2025 and had received a presentation from the Director of Regeneration regarding the Town Centre Board, the Place Leader's Partnership and a presentation from Creative Factory whose intention was to create art facilities in the town. The Panel was continuing to examine ways the town centre could be regenerated and what barriers existed. The Chair of the Panel was also scheduled to attend Executive on 3 December 2025 to present the Panel's final report into Empty Properties.

The Vice Chair of the Adult Social Care and Health Scrutiny Panel advised the Board that the Panel last met on 20 October 2025 and focussed on the review of Healthy Placemaking with a Focus on Childhood Obesity. The Panel approved its Terms of Reference and received information from officers in Planning Services, Public Health Services and the Head of Transport and Infrastructure. The next meeting of the Panel was scheduled for 1 December 2025 where it would hear information from the Chair of the Teeswide Safeguarding Adults Board.

**NOTED**

**OSB REVIEW INTO POVERTY - OVERVIEW**

The Chair welcomed the Mayor, Executive Member for Finance, Director of Public Health and Head of Resident and Business Support to the meeting.

It was explained that the presentations to be delivered constituted an overview of the Board's review into poverty. It was also explained there would be two presentations: the first covering the Welfare Strategy and the second covering the Poverty Sprint.

The Head of Resident and Business Support delivered her presentation, regarding the Welfare Strategy, which included the following points:

- It was important to share the work being undertaken by the Council to support poverty in the town.
- The initiatives described in the presentation had been commended and awarded in 2023.
- There were 11 themes being delivered. Those included food poverty, Section 13A funds and centralising debt collection teams.
- Several initiatives had seen quantifiable actions, including work with Public Health colleagues, to identify those eligible for free school means but not claiming them. This had led to an additional 546 recipients.
- The Resident and Business Support Team was expanding to include debt management support. This was required as some residents were planning their finances on a day-to-day basis.
- Crisis support was available for residents who had lost access to their money with over £55,000 worth of funding made available. This support had been crucial to those in need of it.
- 81 referrals had been to the MEC equating to over £3,000 in energy vouchers.
- In terms of centralisation of debt, there had been 59 credits moved to support debt.
- There had been over 8,000 Housing Benefit Claims with over £42 million of funding made available.
- In terms of Household Support Fund (HSF), the government had continued their support and as such 65,245 awards had been made, totalling over £3 million distributed. Households could receive multiple awards rather than just one award.
- Overall, over 37,000 HSF awards were made to households with children, over 6,000 awards were awarded to households with pensioners and more than 21,000 awards were made to other household types.
- Support had been delivered through a combination of vouchers, cash payments and physical goods.
- Importantly, households were eligible for support if they fell outside the benefit window but were in employment.
- In total there had been a total of 234,987 awards made under Household Support Fund totalling £10,662,772.

The Chair thanked the Head of Resident and Business Support for her presentation and invited questions from the Board.

A Member thanked the service area for their work and commented that a benefit awareness session had taken place in his ward several years ago. It was queried if this would be repeated. It was clarified there were plans to expand the team to cover such work and that officer would link in with community hubs to target those in need.

A discussion took place regarding the family resilience fund and how residents were being navigated to different places for support. It was important to drill down into the issues facing those in need to understand what support could be offered. However, debt management was a crucial element of support, as many people were spending money too early and not making efforts to budget.

It was commented that in Hemlington Ward Citizens Advice Bureau sessions were available and residents could book one of the sessions via the local library. It was also commented that more information could be made available on the Council's website regarding what support was available. Internally, a welfare support directory was available on the Council's Intranet.

pages. Thanks were expressed to the officers in the Resident and Business Support Service.

A Member queried how people could be made aware of the support available. It was commented that applications for benefit support were sometimes associated with stigma. As such, a significant piece of work was required around communication, especially connecting with those households that were entitled to benefits but were not in receipt of them. It was found that word-of-mouth approaches worked better than leaflet and poster campaigns. It was also commented that whenever a contact was made with a resident, they were always directed to the Welfare Strategy.

It was asked if there were any connections to the Staying Put Agency. It was commented that some referrals were made, and it was important that both areas worked together to pool their knowledge. It was also commented that even if people were not entitled to benefits, support could still be offered around debt management.

A conversation took place during which the issue of how to connect with residents was discussed. It was reaffirmed that some residents were more challenging to connect with but that new roles in Resident and Business Support would help with this process. It was also reaffirmed that word-of-mouth approaches of connecting with residents had shown the most success rather than leaflet and poster campaigns. Following a query about collaboration with local chemists it was clarified that a pilot had taken place in some doctor's surgeries, but many residents were reluctant to engage in that environment and as such the pilot had ceased. It was also stated the service was working with, and through, the Financial Improvement Group and therefore had some connections with Thirteen housing.

The Chair thanked the Head of Resident and Business Support for her presentation and invited the Director of Public Health to deliver his presentation on the Poverty Sprint.

As part of his presentation the following points were made:

- The Poverty Sprint was carried out over a two-week period.
- A central theme of the Council Plan was to support residents out of poverty.
- Middlesbrough was now the second most deprived Local Authority area in England. This was in contrast to it being the fifth most deprived area in 2019.
- 13 of the 90 Local Super Output Areas (LSOA) in the town were ranked as the top first most deprived out of 33,755 LSOAs.
- Newport Ward had the highest rate of child poverty of any ward in England.
- There was a need to maximise the Council's approach to poverty via policy and strategy.
- There was a need for greater clarity around what the Council could do locally to achieve a greater impact on poverty.
- Several experts from different fields were invited to provide input to the Poverty Sprint. This included input from external stakeholders and partners.
- At a high level the issue of unsustainable personal debt affected all other factors in the town.
- The issue of poverty did not appear explicitly in many Council strategies and there was a tendency for the Council to develop policies and strategies on this matter in silos.
- There needed for a more joined-up strategic approach regarding poverty.
- There was also a disconnect between need and practice with front line staff not always being aware of what support was available.
- There was a requirement to signpost residents more effectively when a request for assistance was received.
- There was a need for strategic leadership in terms of housing as many housing strategies were out of date. The creation of such strategies required input from a range of key partners, as well as residents.
- There was a need to build a better and wider understanding of poverty in Middlesbrough, rather than trying to fix the immediate problem.
- The breadth and depth of poverty in the town was not fully understood by all officers and the establishment of a Poverty Action Network which encompassed the Financial Improvement Group should be explored.
- Services were disjointed and too focussed on tackling symptoms of poverty rather than root causes.

- There was a need for the Council to try and influence the Tees Valley Combined Authority to adopt a broader “public health” approach.
- The main consideration was trying to target people who did not present themselves to the Council. This included people that were working but struggling financially or those who had recently become economically inactive.
- In terms of crime and anti-social behaviour, tackling deprivation was not a focus of the Community Safety Plan. This, however, should be developed through a poverty lens.
- Consultation with communities should move to a long term sustained model of engagement and co-production. It was important the voice of people informed strategy creation.
- There was a lack of intelligence gathered from Council Services that worked in communities.
- In terms of skills and jobs, anchor institutions via the Tees Valley Anchor Network, should work to remove barriers where they existed. The Council should also work to challenge existing processes, where necessary.
- Improved health was also important to supporting poverty, with long term illness such as Musculo-skeletal and cardiovascular ailments being some of the most common. It was important to support GPs and the fit-note process to reduce the number of fit notes.
- In terms of proposals on how to address this issue as a Council, there was a need for the Council to stop working in silos and not to adopt single focus strategies.
- In terms of outstanding works for the Council, there was a need to collate intelligence from communities to inform service development.
- Housing was a key element to alleviate poverty and with the Council's Head of Housing there was a need to align demand and supply.

The Chair thanked the Director of Public Health for his presentation and invited questions from the Board.

It was queried if the Selective Landlord Licensing scheme could be utilised to ensure that, in the view of new legislation, Landlords did not increase rents disproportionately. The Mayor commented that rental costs were driven by supply, and work to reduce the number of empty properties would help to regulate costs. However, there was a recognition the Council needed to be bolder in this approach.

A conversation took place during which it was discussed that, in terms of housing, the Integrated Care Board could play a role in working with the Council in this regard.

A Member queried how successful the Selecting Landlord Licensing Scheme had been and if it was planned to roll it out to other areas. The Mayor commented that Selective Landlord Licensing was sometimes difficult to monitor on larger scales. It was also a tool that should not be used in isolation. A more targeted application of the scheme, such as at street level, could be explored. The Mayor also commented there was a need for the Council to be more proactive in addressing properties that were not fit for purpose.

Given the relationship between education and poverty, and the need for the Council to work with schools to reduce permanent exclusions, a Member queried if any schools had been involved in the Poverty Sprint. It was confirmed that schools had not been directly involved and that the Council's connections with some schools had been lost since academisation. While there had been attempts to engage with schools it was recognised they may not have had the capacity to attend partnership meetings.

The Chair commented that the North East Combined Authority was actively engaged in the Child Poverty agenda and queried if the TVCA could be more engaged in the poverty agenda generally. It was clarified that the TVCA was engaged with the poverty agenda, such as the introduction of the Care Leavers Bus Pass initiative, but it was acknowledged TVCA could be more engaged generally.

The Chair stated there seemed to be a dislocation between policy and strategy and asked if a standalone poverty strategy would be more beneficial than incorporating the poverty agenda into the Council Plan. It was clarified that, as the Council was no longer in an imminently challenging financial position, it could examine how best to address the poverty agenda and incorporate it into its day-to-day activities. While it was recognised there was potential to

create a separate industry around this issue, it was also stated a poverty strategy, and the Council Plan, may not be mutually exclusive.

The Chair expressed his thanks for the presentations delivered and asked that the information be noted.

**NOTED.**

25/38

**DELIVERY AGAINST THE CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT PLAN - PROGRESS UPDATE**

The Chair invited the Mayor to deliver his presentation on the Continuous Improvement Plan.

The Mayor stated his presentation complemented a report that had been circulated to Members and which had been agreed by Executive on 12 November 2025. As part of his presentation the Mayor made the following points:

- The Council was moving toward the end of its improvement journey and there was a need to talk about next steps.
- The Council Plan contained high level aims which had been amended to make them more accessible and understandable.
- This process was being undertaken for all the measures contained in the Council Plan with examples provided to the Board. One of the primary goals of transformation was to make Council services more efficient.
- In terms of where the Council was heading, there was a need to introduce long term projects to bring about town-level change.
- It was possible that promised returns may be difficult to articulate and that financial investments would be over the longer term but would be focused on the town.
- Examples cited included the 10x10 childhood enrichment programme that was of a societal nature but would not be realised in the short term. This would see improved access to opportunity, highlight the industries and activities in the town and maintained links with schools.
- The next cohort of children would not complete the programme until 2036.

The Chair thanked the Mayor for his presentation and invited questions from the Board.

Following an example cited in the Mayor's presentation, a Member queried the definition of Biodiversity. This was provided and the Mayor advised that the wording of all actions was being examined to make them more accessible.

A Member queried what the Mayor's main priorities were. It was clarified that childhood enrichment was a key priority followed by economic growth. It was important for the Council to articulate what Middlesbrough was.

There were no further questions for the Mayor and the Chair thanked the Mayor for his presentation and asked the Board to note the information.

**NOTED.**

25/39

**EXECUTIVE MEMBER UPDATE - FINANCE**

The Chair welcomed the Executive Member for Finance to the meeting and invited her to deliver her presentation.

As part of her presentation the Executive Member for Finance made the following points:

- An overview of the Finance portfolio included responsibility for ensuring the Council was financially sustainable, delivered value for money and operated openly and fairly in these respects.
- The Executive Member's personal targets for the previous year had been to deliver within budget for 2024/25, balance the budget for 2025/26 without the need for further exceptional financial support and to introduce a new Member Enquiry system as well as creating a working group for Councillor communications.
- All of the personal targets described had been achieved.

A Member queried if the identified underspend for 2024/25 would have been placed into reserves. It was clarified that the Council continued to contribute to its reserves. The cost of the Councillor Gateway system was queried, and it was clarified that the cost of the IT product was £145,000 but this did not include costs around support officers.

In terms of reserves, a chart was displayed for Members that demonstrated there was an upward trend in the replenishment of the Council's reserves.

The Executive Member outlined her personal targets for 2025/26 which were:

- To deliver within budget for 2025/26 and to improve the budget clinic process to incorporate Transformation.
- Review the Councillor Gateway System and to improve communications channels with officers.
- Use the Household Support fund to help pensioners impacted due to the removal of the Winter Fuel Payments and those on low incomes.

The Board was advised that at Quarter One there had been a projected overspend of £4.4 million but this was expected to be reduced when the Quarter Two information was released. Children's Services continued to be the Council's main overspending service, but there were also overspends in other areas. Members were advised that all services that had predicted overspends had been requested to submit recovery plans.

A Member commented that the Regeneration Department had a predicted overspend of 12% of its budget and this was concerning. It was clarified that the Regeneration Department's overspend could be attributed to the relatively low size of its budget and high-income targets.

A Member queried that Children's Services had consistently been overspent against its budget, and why it was forecasted as a lower spender. It was clarified that if additional budget was assigned to the service it would expand into it. Were additional funds be allocated to Children's Services there would be reduced funding available for other front-line services. There was a need for Children's Services to adopt a more corporate outlook.

In terms of reviewing the Councillor Gateway system and improving Member communication with officers, a survey had been carried out with Members and a project team had been established which included both Members and Officers. While there was not a significant response rate to the survey the issues contained in it would be examined.

A conversation took place during which Members commented the appointment of a Gateway Officer had been beneficial, especially with assisting with closing enquiries. It was also queried if improvements could be made to the address the system's location facility. The Executive Member for Finance stated that if Members had questions about the system, they could be directed to either herself or to the Gateway Officer.

The Executive Member moved to her final objective, using the Household Support Fund to help pensioners impacted by the removal of the Winter Fuel payment. Members were advised that the scheme was agreed in May 2025 and included those in receipt of Council Tax Reduction or Attendance Allowance and were not eligible for the Winter Fuel Payment.

The Household Support Fund also contributed to the poverty agenda as it included an increase of £10 per child for those in receipt of free school meals, Council Tax Reduction, Universal Credit or Housing Benefit. There had also been an increase in the amount paid to couples and singles in receipt of benefits.

Members were also advised that, in terms of the Fair Funding Review, there was a revised settlement date beyond the 15 December and that a policy statement was due on 20 November. As such, the budget report due to be considered by Executive would be based on some assumptions supported by modelling. The way in which government settlement was awarded had changed as it now recognised Council need. Middlesbrough was part of the Special Interest Group of Municipal Authorities (SIGOMA) which lobbied government for secure sufficient, sustainable and fair funding for local areas which included transitioning to a three-year settlement rather than one year.

It was commented that there had been some delay to the Fair Funding Review due to ministerial changes. It was hoped that as the review was so advanced there would be no significant changes at this point. It was hoped that Middlesbrough would benefit from the changes the review brought.

Members were also advised about the Ward Priorities Fund, which had been approved in October 2025. Several initiatives had been implemented and supported by the fund which included the installation of knee rails and barriers to prevent anti-social behaviour, Christmas lights and events and the installation of CCTV cameras. Members were also advised of the Members Small Scheme Capital programme that was approved on 19 November 2025 and a list of the approved schemes were displayed for Members.

A Member commented that the Small Scheme programme was useful, but the application form could be made easier to complete. It was noted that the form would be considered going forward and that future bidding processes would be undertaken to align with the beginning of the new financial year.

There were no further questions from the Board and the Chair thanked the Executive Member for her presentation and asked that the information be noted.

**NOTED.**

25/40

#### **EXECUTIVE FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME**

The Chair introduced the report 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.

There were no questions from Board.

**NOTED.**

25/41

#### **FORWARD PLAN ACTIONS PROGRESS**

Members were advised that questions arising from the previous meeting of Overview and Scrutiny Board relating to the Forward Plan had been circulated to the Board via email.

**NOTED.**

25/42

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

None.