

Executive Scrutiny Committee

A meeting of Executive Scrutiny Committee was held on Tuesday 23rd September 2025.

Present: Cllr Sylvia Walmsley (Chair), Cllr Jim Beall, Cllr Marc Besford, Cllr Carol Clark, Cllr Lynn Hall, Cllr Shakeel Hussain, Cllr Niall Innes, Cllr Mrs Ann McCoy, Cllr Tony Riordan and Cllr Marilyn Surtees

Officers: Clare Harper, Ged Morton, Jonathan Nertney, Geraldine Brown, James O'Donnell, Gemma Jackson, Judy Trainer, Gary Woods and Michelle Gunn

Also in attendance: None

Apologies: Cllr Kevin Faulks, Cllr Sufi Mubeen and Cllr Laura Tunney

ESC/16/25 Evacuation Procedure

The evacuation procedure was noted.

ESC/17/25 Declarations of Interest

For transparency purposes, Councillor Jim Beall declared an interest in agenda item 8 as Chair of the Eastern Ravens Trust.

ESC/18/25 Minutes

AGREED that the minutes of the meeting on 22 July 2025 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

ESC/19/25 Financial Update and MTFP 2025/26 - Quarter 1

The Committee was presented with a report summarising the Council's financial performance and position at the end of the first quarter of the 2025/26 financial year. The Powering Our Futures programme, and in particular the transformation mission, had identified savings of £5.8m by 2026/27. The updated savings target was now £1.35m in 2025/26 and £2.256m in 2026/27. The transformation programme, alongside the wider Powering our Futures Programme, would continue to look to address the budget gap, alongside ensuring improvements to services to local residents.

The financial position for the Council for the first quarter of the financial year (to 30th June 2025) highlighted a projected overspend of £1.684m against the budget. Growing demand for Council services and the increased cost of delivery was putting pressure on several budget headings. Work was underway to look at ways to mitigate this projected overspend and the position would continue to be closely monitored and managed throughout the remainder of the financial year.

The financial challenges facing Stockton reflected a wider national picture, with councils across the country experiencing significant and well-documented pressures.

Stockton had managed these pressures responsibly, using earmarked reserves over recent years to support the Medium-Term Financial Plan and maintain stability during a period of exceptional strain. Looking ahead, reliance on reserves alone was not sustainable. Work was already under way on the 2026/27 budget and the updated MTFP, ensuring that planning was proactive and focused on maintaining financial resilience. Cabinet would continue to receive regular updates on progress and the measures being developed.

The report also presented an update on the Capital Programme.

Key issues highlighted and discussed were as follows:

- Members asked whether a further uplift was anticipated in relation to inflationary pressures relating to accommodation costs and living allowances for children in care and care leavers, food costs and highway maintenance. Officers advised that inflationary pressures had been estimated during budget setting as well as demand on services, however, there were inevitably other factors that could have an impact such as contract renewals
- Members queried why the overspend in Home to School transport had not been predicted. The Committee discussed the increasing numbers of children requiring home to school transport nationally and it was noted that the Government was looking at this issue. Officers advised that trends were being examined to understand pressures on future budgets. Members requested details on the numbers of pupils being transported by the Home to School Transport Service
- The overspend in relation to Preston Park Museum was due to the closure of the museum being longer than anticipated. The Director would be approached to clarify whether an increase in the entry fee was planned. More detail around Libraries service pressures would also be provided
- Overall, good progress had been made to manage budgets and achieve savings although there were still ongoing pressures. The current predicted MTFP position in the Budget report approved by Council in February 2025 would be confirmed after the meeting
- Members questioned the budget pressure on Wellington Square. Members requested further information on the work planned with prospective tenants to mitigate the financial pressure
- Details of savings generated by moving to paperless Committee agenda despatch (printing and posting) were requested
- Details of what was included in the planned maintenance programme for Community and Environment, Culture and Leisure 2025/25 were requested and how the MEND grant impacted the programme following work at Preston Park Museum and Grounds

AGREED that the update to the Medium-Term Financial Plan, the current level of General Fund balances and the revised capital programme be noted.

ESC/20/25 Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman - Annual Complaints Report 2024/25

The Committee considered a report which provided details of the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman's (LGSCO) annual review letter for 2024/25. The annual review letter reported that 30 enquiries had been submitted to the Ombudsman during 2024/25 (a reduction from the previous year). Of these, eight met the threshold for a detailed investigation by the Ombudsman. Of the eight complaint investigations, all

had been upheld. All recommendations made by the Ombudsman had been accepted and implemented by the Council.

The importance of learning from complaints and the specific role of Members in providing feedback on the effectiveness of improvements was discussed.

The Committee also discussed the role that Select Committees could have in scrutinising the outcome of Ombudsman investigations as well as wider complaints in order to analyse trends and be assured that appropriate action had been taken.

AGREED that the report be noted and arrangements be made for the submission of regular reports to Executive Scrutiny Committee and the Select Committees regarding the trends from Ombudsman investigations and complaints data.

ESC/21/25 Scrutiny - Overview and Performance

The Committee received a presentation on proposals to report performance information to Executive Scrutiny Committee and the thematic Select Committees.

Overview and Scrutiny was a statutory function of the Leader and Cabinet model and had the following broad roles:

- Policy Development
- Holding the Cabinet (and other bodies e.g. health service) to account
- Investigating issues of local concern
- Scrutiny of other organisations

To complement deep dive in-depth scrutiny reviews, effective scrutiny needed an element of oversight or overview. It was proposed to introduce regular progress and performance reporting to Scrutiny, aligned to Council priorities in the Stockton-on-Tees Plan. This was in line with Statutory Guidance and would enable overview and scrutiny Members to discharge their roles effectively.

Executive Scrutiny Committee would receive twice yearly updates on Tier 1 indicators (Council outcomes) and Select Committees would receive twice yearly updates on Tier 2 indicators (service outcomes and progress update).

An update was also provided on the Local Government Outcomes Framework and the Council's new corporate complaints process.

Members supported the proposed approach and commented on the importance of partnership working to achieve the Council's Council Plan objectives.

AGREED that the update be noted and proposed approach for performance reporting to scrutiny be supported.

ESC/22/25 Chairs' Updates

Members were provided with updates from the Chairs of each Select Committee.

Adult Social Care and Health Select Committee.

After receiving the Peopletoo findings, an informal session of the Select Committee had been held to discuss the findings and draft recommendations from the Reablement Service review. It was the intention to take a draft final report to the Select Committee in October with a view to reporting to Cabinet in November.

Children and Young People Select Committee

The Chair of the Select Committee provided a further update following the meeting of the Children and Young People Select Committee the previous week.

Action plans in relation to the Committee's previous review of Narrowing the Gap in Educational Attainment had been received with updates on work planned in relation to careers, pastoral support and support for Parent / Carers to develop language and reading skills. As action plans had been considered in relation to all recommendations, future updates would focus on progress and impact.

The Select Committee had received an updated action plan in respect of their previous review of Holidays are Fun along with an update on the summer programme.

The Select Committee received presentations from Kerry Coe, Headteacher, St John the Baptist Primary and Andrew Murphy, Senior Executive Principal, North Shore Academy on their experiences of moving to Additionally Resourced SEND Provision (ARP). Site visits had been arranged to four schools with ARP provision.

The Government's SEND White Paper was expected to be released in autumn 2025, outlining the intended approach to Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) reform. The White Paper was significant as it came amid increasing calls for action regarding the rising number of registered SEN pupils and the associated challenges faced by councils. It was therefore proposed that the Select Committee's review should be paused to understand the implications of the White Paper with work resuming in the New Year.

In the meantime, work would commence on the Select Committee's second in depth review of Children Not in School.

Community Safety Select Committee

With regard to the Select Committee's previous review of outdoor play provision Members asked whether a response had been received as to why maintenance costs had not been included in the original negotiations with the contractor for the Stockton Waterfront Park. The Chair undertook to share the response with the Committee.

People Select Committee

Members noted the update from the People Select Committee.

Place Select Committee

Members noted the update from the Place Select Committee.

AGREED that the updates be noted.

AGREED that the Chair's Update and Executive Scrutiny Committee Work Programme be noted.

Chair: