

Place Select Committee

A meeting of Place Select Committee was held on Monday 9th June 2025.

Present: Cllr Jim Beall (Chair), Cllr Stefan Barnes (sub Cllr Kevin Faulks), Cllr Robert Cook, Cllr Stefan Houghton, Cllr Sufi Mubeen, Cllr David Reynard, Cllr Marilyn Surtees, Cllr Hilary Vickers and Cllr Sylvia Walmsley

Officers: Jane Edmonds (R&IG), Dale Rowbotham, Erin Evans, Darren Robinson (CESC), and Michelle Gunn (CS)

Also in attendance: Paul Thwaites (Middlesbrough Council), Aleem Hussein, Haji Jabar (Thornaby Funeral Services), Imam Waleid Allam (Abu Bakr Mosque), Sumair Masood (Maryam Mosque)

Apologies: Cllr Kevin Faulks

PLA/13/25 Evacuation Procedure

The Committee noted the evacuation and housekeeping procedure.

PLA/14/25 Declarations of Interest

Cllr Sylvia Walmsley declared a personal/non prejudicial interest as she was close personal friends with a contributor.

PLA/15/25 Minutes

AGREED the minutes of the meeting held on 19 May 2025 be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

PLA/16/25 Scrutiny Review of Affordable Housing

The Assistant Director for Housing and a Fairer Stockton-on-Tees presented an action plan setting out how the agreed recommendations from the Scrutiny Review of Affordable Housing would be implemented and target dates for completion. The overall aim of the review had been to explore potential options for how Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council as a non-stock holding authority could increase the supply of affordable rented housing in the borough and thereby address the housing need.

It was noted that the Affordable Housing Option Appraisal supported in *Recommendation 1* would be presented to Cabinet for approval on 12 June 2025. The Common Allocation Policy referred to in *Recommendation 4* had been approved by all partnering Authorities and therefore would be implemented on 7 July 2025.

Discussion took place regarding Local Housing Allowance Rates, with members expressing concern that these did not match the rising cost of private rent and had a considerable impact on residents' budgets. Members felt that the letter to Central Government regarding this matter under recommendation five should be sent by the end of June 2025.

The Committee thanked the officer for the action plan and suggested that an update on progress be brought back before the next 12 months, at a date to be determined.

AGREED that the Action Plan be approved with an amendment to the date of completion for *Recommendation 5* to end of June 2025, and a progress update be provided in due course.

PLA/17/25 Scrutiny Review of Muslim and Faith Burial Services

The Committee received verbal evidence from representatives of Thornaby Funeral Services, along with the Imam of Abu Bakr Mosque and chair of Maryam Mosque in Acklam. They explained burial chambers/rings were a preference, not a requirement, in the Muslim faith, and that the majority of the community that they served did not want a burial chamber but wished their casket to be placed in to a soil plot. It was noted that some Muslims did not wish to be buried in a casket but placed in the grave in only a shroud, however this was not practiced locally.

Concern was raised by Thornaby Funeral Services and the representatives of the Mosque that the concrete burial chambers and rings filled with water due to the climate of the country and terrain in the local cemeteries. It was noted that they had undertaken three burials outside of the Borough where the sides of the plot were lined with breezeblocks on the family's request which acted as a trench and caused problems. They believed that the majority in their community would not wish their family members to be buried in such conditions.

It was noted that some members of the Maryam Mosque were choosing to bury their family members in Thornaby cemetery incurring extra cost rather than a Middlesbrough cemetery as they did not wish to be buried in a burial chamber which Middlesbrough used for Sunday burials.

In response to a question whether it would cause any offence by offering a choice of burial chambers or rings, both the Imam and the funeral directors confirmed that they wouldn't be. If it was a choice available they would work with the family of the deceased to carry out their wishes. However, they advised that there was a comparatively small population of Muslims in the Borough, and in their experience it was a minority of Muslims who wished to be buried in burial chambers. Concern was raised by the representatives of the extra cost of chambers being passed on to families at a time of grief and loss.

A member of the Committee noted that there were different branches of Islam, and for some branches chambers were preferred. It was noted the current practice in the Borough was to place the casket into a wooden frame, and they believed that a concrete ring would be an improvement on this structure.

Members questioned if there were any other issues within burials services for the Muslim Community and informed by the Funeral Directors that they would like to see the timings for burials extended, noting that in some areas of the country they buried up to 8pm.

The Committee also received evidence from Middlesbrough Council Burial Services regarding their use of burial chambers. Middlesbrough carried out approximately 60 Muslim burials per year and they had installed 38 concrete burial vaults approximately

25 years ago. There had been no demand for the vaults and they were not used until approximately three years ago when the decision was made to reexamine the use of vaults to respond to request for same day burials more quickly. When the vaults were opened it was found that they were full of water and mud. They were therefore modified into burials rings by breaking out the bottom of the vaults, but water was still coming up from the soil.

The vaults had been used for weekend burials only, and families did not have an option of a standard plot on a weekend. Only 12 vaults had been used and they had not been popular, with the service receiving comments that they were too close together. The service skipped vaults to give more space between plots however the service had received requests to revert back to no vault burials. Middlesbrough Burial Services were reconsidering if there was a demand for burial vaults, and if so would install new vaults.

The terrain at Middlesbrough cemeteries was discussed. It was noted that the service had invested significantly in drainage and the water levels would be much worse if the work had not been done, however there was not a big improvement the water levels. Members asked if the terrain was similar in Stockton-on-Tees and informed that it was and the water table was very high in this area. The teams were working with water pumps up to the burial time.

Drawing the session to a close, the Committee thanked the representatives from Thornaby Funeral Services, Abu Bakr Mosque, Maryam Mosque, and Middlesbrough Council for their contributions.

AGREED the information be noted.

PLA/18/25 Chair's Update and Select Committee Work Programme 2025-2026

Consideration was given to the Work Programme.

AGREED that the Work Programme be noted.

Chair: