

## Council

A meeting of Council was held on Wednesday 19th November 2025.

**Present:** The Worshipful the Mayor (Cllr Stephen Richardson)  
Cllr Jim Beall, Cllr Pauline Beall, Cllr Michelle Bendelow, Cllr Clare Besford, Cllr Marc Besford, Cllr Carol Clark, Cllr Robert Cook, Cllr Nigel Cooke, Cllr John Coulson, Cllr Ian Dalgarno, Cllr Richard Eglington, Cllr Lisa Evans, Cllr Kevin Faulks, Cllr Nathan Gale, Cllr Ray Godwin, Cllr Lynn Hall, Cllr Stefan Houghton, Cllr Shakeel Hussain, Cllr Barbara Inman, Cllr Niall Innes, Cllr Eileen Johnson, Cllr Mohammed Mazi, Cllr Mrs Ann McCoy, Cllr Jack Miller, Cllr Mick Moore, Cllr Sufi Mubeen, Cllr Steve Nelson, Cllr Ross Patterson, Cllr David Reynard, Cllr Paul Rowling, Cllr Vanessa Sewell, Cllr Andrew Sherris, Cllr Norma Stephenson OBE, Cllr Mick Stoker, Cllr Hugo Stratton, Cllr Ted Strike, Cllr Marilyn Surtees, Cllr Emily Tate, Cllr Hilary Vickers, Cllr Marcus Vickers, Cllr Sylvia Walmsley, Cllr Alan Watson, Cllr Sally Ann Watson, Cllr Katie Weston, Cllr Paul Weston and Cllr Barry Woodhouse

**Officers:** Mike Greene, Majella McCarthy, Carolyn Nice, Marc Stephenson, Tracey Carter, Clare Harper, Roisin McKenzie, Aishah Waithe, Ged Morton, Julie Butcher, Jonathan Nertney, Kirsty Grundy, Judy Trainer, Peter Bell, Sarah Whaley, John Devine and Junita Agyapong

**Also in attendance:** Press and Public

**Apologies:** Cllr Stefan Barnes, Cllr Diane Clarke OBE, Cllr Dan Fagan, Cllr Jason French, Cllr John Gardner, Cllr Elsi Hampton, Cllr Tony Riordan and Cllr Jim Taylor

### **COU/56/25 Welcome and Evacuation Procedure**

The Worshipful the Mayor welcomed everyone and outlined the arrangements for the meeting.

### **COU/57/25 Declarations of Interest**

Councillor Shakeel Hussain declared an Other Registerable Interest in item 6 as Chair of Eid Fusion Committee and withdrew from the meeting for that item, taking no part in the discussion and voting.

Councillor Ted Strike declared an Other Registerable Interest in item 6 as Chairman and Founder of Ingleby Barwick Community Partnership and withdrew from the meeting for that item taking no part in the discussion and voting.

Councillors Michelle Bendelow, Clare Besford, Marc Besford, Ann McCoy and Mick Stoker declared an Other Registerable Interest in item 6 as Members of Billingham Town Council and withdrew from the meeting for that item taking no part in the discussion and voting.

Councillor Richard Eglington declared an Other Registerable Interest in item 6 as a Member of Thornaby Town Council and withdrew from the meeting for that item taking no part in the discussion or voting.

Councillors Sylvia Walmsley, Ray Godwin, Ian Dalgarno and Mick Moore declared a non-prejudicial interest in item 6 as Members of Thornaby Town Council.

## **COU/58/25 Minutes**

Consideration was given to the minutes of the meeting held on 24 September 2025.

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 24 September 2025 be confirmed and signed by the Worshipful the Mayor as a correct record.

## **COU/59/25 Public Question Time**

### *Question 1*

A Public Question had been submitted by Robert Bussey and subsequently withdrawn.

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### *Question 2*

A Public Question had been submitted by Alan Snead. However, Mr Snead was not present at the meeting therefore it was advised that a written reply would be sent to him.

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### *Question 3*

The following question was submitted by John McDermottroe:

“What due diligence, if any was carried out before purchasing Debenhams on the high street? Was a survey carried out? Was an appraisal of refurb costs done? Was a GDV sought from a suitable professional? Is this building to become yet another money pit for the Tax payers of the Borough of Stockton?”

The Cabinet Member for Regeneration and Housing responded with:

“The High Street portion of the former Debenhams store (150-152 High Street) was made available for acquisition through auction in 2023, with a limited information pack on the building issued by the seller at the time. Whilst the building was acquired outside of an auction process, the timescales involved in securing the building and approach taken by the seller meant that there wasn’t opportunity to undertake any surveys of the building prior to acquisition, beyond the information offered by the seller at the time. The power, intruder alarm and fire alarm controls for the entire building are located in the front half of the former Debenhams meaning that control of the front portion of the building was critical for any occupation and indeed safe access to the rear portion.

Since acquisition the Council has undertaken measured surveys of the entire building, Mechanical and Electrical Surveys and an Asbestos Survey. Cabinet have agreed funds to develop long term options for the future use of Debenhams which will explore the potential for Debenhams to once again play an important role in the high street. Ideas are being developed that will realise the potential for Debenhams to play a crucial role at the heart of the health pathfinder and Pride in Place trailblazer which will breathe new life into Stockton Town Centre. When these proposals have been fully developed, they will be considered by the Council."

John McDermottroe asked the following supplementary question:

"Given that rules of property investment have not been carried out, will the Council take advice from professionals in the future?"

The Cabinet Member for Regeneration and Housing responded with:

"Due diligence was carried out as far as we could."

#### **COU/60/25 Consent Street Trading - Petition - Exemption of Local and Community Markets**

Consideration was given to a petition calling for exemptions from the requirement to apply for a street trading consent.

It was moved by Councillor Norma Stephenson, seconded by Councillor Niall Innes and

RESOLVED

That the petition be referred to General Licensing Committee for further consideration.

#### **COU/61/25 Appointments to Council Committees/ Panels**

Consideration was given to a report asking the Council to approve the appointments to Committees which remained with the Conservative Group's entitlement following the resignation of a Council member. The report also highlighted a vacancy on Place Select Committee. The Ingleby Barwick Independents Society were entitled to the seat but would not be taking up their entitlement at the present time.

RESOLVED

1) That Council confirms the following appointments to vacancies as nominated by the Conservative Group:

- Executive Scrutiny Committee – Councillor Hugo Stratton
- Audit and Governance Committee – Councillor Niall Innes
- Members' Advisory Panel – Councillor Niall Innes

2) That Councillor Ted Strike be appointed to the vacancy on Place Select Committee.

#### **COU/62/25 Appointment of Chief Financial Officer (Section 151 Officer)**

Consideration was given to a report asking Council to make a permanent designation to the statutory officer responsible for the proper administration of the authority's financial affairs.

RESOLVED that Council:

- 1) Note that interim arrangements were approved by Council on 21 May 2025, designating Clare Harper as Acting Section 151 Officer.
- 2) Approve the permanent designation of Clare Harper as the officer responsible for the proper administration of the Council's financial affairs in accordance with Section 151 of the Local Government Act 1972.
- 3) Confirm that the post shall be styled Chief Finance Officer and that the role shall continue to report directly to the Chief Executive, with access to the Leader, Cabinet Member for Finance, the Chair of Audit and Governance Committee and the Monitoring Officer.
- 4) Authorise the Chief Executive to make any consequential amendments to the Council's officer structure, constitution and published organisational charts to reflect this appointment.

#### **COU/63/25 Anti Racism Charter**

Consideration was given to a report recommending the adoption of the Anti-Racism Charter and inviting the Mayor, Leader and Chief Executive to sign the Charter on behalf of the Council, together with the Lead of the Employee Race Equality Network and Trade Union representatives signing on behalf of employees.

An addendum to the report was circulated to Members with an additional recommendation from Cabinet proposing that all Members complete Equality, Diversity and Inclusion training at least once every two years, or more frequently if required under the Council's mandatory training policy for Members.

RESOLVED that Council:

- 1) Adopt the Anti-Racism Charter (attached at Appendix 1 to the report) as a statement of the Council's corporate commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion.
- 2) Authorise the Mayor, Leader of the Council and Chief Executive to sign the Charter on behalf of the Council at the meeting of Full Council, alongside the Lead of the Employee Race Equality Network and Trade Union representatives signing on behalf of employees.
- 3) Note that implementation of the Charter will be overseen through the officer led Colleagues Powering Our Futures Board, with progress reported to Cabinet after twelve months.
- 4) Ensure that all Members of the Council complete Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) training at least once every two years, or more frequently if required under the Council's mandatory training policy for Members.

## **COU/64/25 Corporate Parenting Pledge**

Consideration was given to a report seeking Council approval to reaffirm its collective commitment to the Stockton-on-Tees Corporate Parenting Pledge – “Our Promise to You”. The Pledge outlined the promises made by the Council to children in our care and to care leavers, reflecting the Council’s shared responsibilities as corporate parents.

The Leader joined the Mayor in the signing of the Pledge and all Members would be invited to sign the Pledge following the meeting.

**RESOLVED**

That Council re-endorses the Stockton-on-Tees Corporate Parenting Pledge (Our Promise to You) and confirms its ongoing collective commitment to the promises made to children in our care and to care leavers.

## **COU/65/25 Motions to Council**

It was moved by Councillor Ted Strike and seconded by Councillor Niall Innes:

“Council notes that the former Debenhams building was acquired at auction as part of the town-centre regeneration programme, and that essential mechanical, electrical, and asbestos-related works have been identified following structural surveys.

Council further notes that the total cost of refurbishment will depend on the nature of future occupiers and intended uses for the building. Cabinet has authorised from the allocation of £6.5 million from the Powering Our Future regeneration fund approval to create an enabling budget to develop options and engage the market in opportunities to bring the former Debenhams building back into occupation.

In addition, whilst Council notes that decisions regarding expenditure and redevelopment of the building fall within the remit of executive functions given the building’s prominence and the scale of potential investment, Council believes that Members and residents should be provided with clear, timely information about the financial implications and associated risks as these proposals progress.

Council recalls the experience of the Globe Theatre project, where costs escalated significantly over time, and emphasises the importance of applying lessons learned, particularly around cost control, transparency, and governance to the Debenhams scheme.

Council also notes that the relevant Place Select Committee will be undertaking a review of Capital Programme Governance. Council believes this review presents a valuable opportunity for constructive challenge, assurance, and learning in relation to the management of major capital projects.

Council therefore resolves to request that Cabinet:

- 1) Give full consideration to the findings and recommendations of the Place Select Committee’s review before making any final decisions on significant capital investment in the former Debenhams building;

- 2) Provide a formal public update to Full Council outlining emerging options, indicative costs, and associated risks once feasibility work has progressed;
- 3) Ensure that Members' views expressed in Full Council are actively considered in the development and delivery of the project, and that progress updates are brought back to Full Council at key milestones, enabling further debate and scrutiny by elected Members;
- 4) Recognise that Full Council sets the Council's overall budget, and that understanding how that budget is being deployed, particularly in relation to major regeneration schemes, is a vital part of democratic oversight and accountability.

Council further resolves to request that:

- 5) The Place Select Committee be invited to undertake a focused review of the financial implications and governance arrangements for the Debenhams project and report its findings to Cabinet and Full Council to inform future decision-making.”

On being put to the vote, the motion was not passed.

## **COU/66/25 Members' Question Time**

### *Question 1*

The following question was submitted by Councillor Carol Clark:

“Does the Leader agree with me that the several national awards the council has been nominated for this year is a testament to the hard work and dedication of our staff?”

The Leader of the Council responded with:

“Thank you for your question Cllr Clark.

Whether it is national award recognition, our Stars Awards or our Annual Council Awards, we need to celebrate our staff achievements. Our staff are our greatest asset. They do an excellent job and their commitment, passion and dedication to our residents cannot go unnoticed.

This year we were lucky to be shortlisted for three national awards as Council of the Year. This gave us national recognition and an opportunity to thank our staff. We have then had individual members shortlisted and where our staff or services are nominated for awards, we do support their attendance.

The costs are modest but the benefits are significant both in recognising the contribution of the workforce and also supporting recruitment and retention in a very challenging market.

Ultimately it is an opportunity for us to demonstrate our appreciation and pride in our staff.”

Councillor Carol Clark asked the following supplementary question:

“Does the Leader agree that with the considerable workload and pressures on our staff, the awards provide an opportunity for us to show our staff how valued they are?”

The Leader of the Council responded with:

“It is important to show our appreciation and thanks to staff as often as we can. This week I have spent time with staff individually and every time that I am in the office, I go out of my way to walk through the different neighbourhoods to ensure that our staff see me on a regular basis. We need to show our appreciation for what they do every day in these difficult and challenging times.”

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### *Question 2*

The following question was submitted by Councillor Barbara Inman:

“Can the Cabinet Member update the Council on the regeneration scheme in Yarm following the announcement that it will be paused for further consultation?”

The Cabinet Member for Regeneration and Housing responded with:

“Consultation on the proposed works will be undertaken to establish a final position on local views of the scheme. This will commence on the 24 November and run for a month. Residents will be able to express their views using online paper and in person consultation. Once complete, the results will be considered by Cabinet before any decision is made on delivery.

I want to confirm that local views will be listened to and I reiterate the commitment made previously that works will not proceed if this is something that local people do not want.”

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### *Question 3*

The following question was submitted by Councillor Marc Besford:

“Following the publication of the CQC Report rating this council’s adult services as ‘Good’, will the cabinet member join me in commending the hard work of all our staff which has been recognised in the report?”

The Cabinet Member for Health and Adult Social Care responded with:

“Thank you for your question.

I am delighted that the Care Quality Commission Inspectors recognised amongst other factors in their report the dedication of our Adult Social Care staff, and what is being done well to support residents across the Borough.

As you are aware our Adult Social Care Service provides a range of support to residents and carers whose needs arise from, or are related to, a physical or mental impairment or illness which makes them unable to manage daily life and is likely to impact on their wellbeing.

To have our Adult Care assessment services recognised as being good is indeed testament to the hard work of all our staff the leadership team and partners to ensure people are well supported and kept safe. The report acknowledged the staff's dedication and commitment, alongside a clear vision through Powering our Future, strong and visible leadership and strong partnership working together for the people of Stockton on Tees.

We are immensely proud of this official recognition, but we, and this includes the staff, are not complacent. We knew there were areas where we needed to do more work and had already, in some cases instigated by members of staff, introduced plans to address these. We are moving on quickly in our continuous journey of improvement, taking into account comments in the report.

In summary, I am exceptionally proud of our staff, the comments in the report and gladly join you in commending their hard work. There is much to celebrate and be proud of including the many external awards staff get nominated for whilst ensuring they continue the hard work, they do to deliver good outcomes for local people when they need it most."

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#### *Question 4*

The following question was submitted by Councillor Nathan Gale:

"Can the cabinet member update the council on the ongoing review into car parking in Stockton and Yarm?"

The Deputy Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Resources and Transport responded with:

"Thank you for your question.

One of the strengths of our Borough is the unique towns that make it up. As an administration, we are committed to ensuring that every penny of taxpayers' money is spent wisely, whilst doing all that we can play our part in promoting and supporting local businesses. This is why we have invested in our town centres in recent years and continue to do so.

Stockton High Street and Yarm High Street both have a proud history and continue to provide a unique offer today. In Yarm there are many unique small shops alongside many great food and beverage outlets. In Stockton you can find outstanding micropubs, several fantastic entertainment venues and businesses that offer a range of goods and services. As we approach the opening of the Riverside Urban Park, this nationally recognised trailblazing scheme will offer something new.

Many visitors of Yarm and Stockton travel there by car therefore it is vital that we provide a competitive car parking offer. As Members will be aware, car parking in Yarm and Stockton was reviewed last year as part of the Council's transformation programme. A series of reviews needed to deal with 14 years of cuts by the previous Conservative government that resulted in a loss of over £1 billion of funding in real terms.

Parking charges were changed in Stockton and Yarm to £1.50 for 3 hours, a competitive price when compared to other High Streets and equivalent locations. At the time of the decision, the then Cabinet agreed that the decision would be reviewed within 12 months. Earlier this year, following the instruction of the Leader of the Council, Cabinet brought this forward and agreed to a wide-ranging review of the impact.

A widely publicised public consultation was carried out over the summer and winter. In total we received 5,169 responses. Of the respondents, 18% visited just Stockton, 29% just Yarm and 51% both. The responses to the consultation came from both users of the high streets, and the businesses that trade there. The Leader and I have met with a range of stakeholders including visitors, business owners, leisure groups, residents and local ward councillors in both wards impacted.

In addition to the public consultation, other information has been collected including footfall, dwell time and ticket sales. All of which has been included in the review. The information collected is currently under discussion and we are working towards recommendations. As things stand, we are on track to bring a report to Cabinet next month.

Can I also take the opportunity to remind all Members and the public that a free one-hour parking period has been reintroduced for the Christmas period beginning next week until the end of January giving support to businesses in Stockton and Yarm throughout the busiest trading period of the year.”

Councillor Nathan Gale asked the following supplementary question:

“Thank you for the update on car parking charges, however, this is just one piece of the puzzle. Can the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member confirm that the Council will continue to invest in our Town Centres?”

The Deputy Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Resources and Transport responded with:

“We are committed to investing in our Town Centres and have created a dedicated budget to achieve this.”

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#### *Question 5*

The following question was submitted by Councillor Eileen Johnson:

“Recently I read a post from the management of the Hampton by Hilton Hotel in Stockton that they have just had their busiest September since opening with over a 90% occupancy rate. Does the cabinet member agree with me that the hotel is a fantastic asset for the town, and one that keeps going from strength to strength?”

The Cabinet Member for Regeneration and Housing responded with:

“Thank you for your question and, yes, I completely agree that the Hampton by Hilton Hotel is a fantastic asset for our Borough and indeed the wider Tees Valley. As we set out to achieve when we first made the decision to make such bold investment in Stockton Town Centre, the hotel has filled a huge gap that existed in the market. The

business community have been consistent in their positive feedback of the hotel and the standard of service received and that is reflected in those impressive occupancy figures. In addition, the hotel's impact on the Town Centre both economically and in support of the events programme and cultural offering is equally pleasing to see."

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#### *Question 6*

The following question was submitted by Councillor Ann McCoy:

"Could the Cabinet Member please provide an update on the progress being made in Stockton Town Centre, particularly in relation to the transformation programme, recent community safety initiatives, and the positive feedback received from residents, businesses and partners?"

The Cabinet Member for Access, Communities and Community Safety responded with:

"Thank you for your question.

I am pleased to provide an update on the progress being made to ensure Stockton Town Centre is a safe and welcoming place both to visit and to do business.

The regeneration of Stockton Town Centre remains a key priority for the Council. Significant progress has been achieved under the Powering Our Future transformation programme, which is focused on creating a vibrant, welcoming environment for residents, businesses, and visitors. Recent work has included improvements to public spaces, enhanced accessibility, and preparations for the delivery of the new Urban Park, scheduled to open in Spring 2026. This project will provide a high-quality, inclusive space that supports community activity and economic growth.

Alongside the opening of the urban park, we recognise that the key to the success of this development will be ensuring those visiting and using the space feel safe. Our Community Safety Team along with our partners already undertake a significant amount of work in this area, as is the case across all of our communities. A key development has been Operation Shield (Op. Shield)—a multi-agency initiative designed to co-ordinate town centre safety in Stockton-on-Tees. Over the first six months of Op. Shield, we have achieved a reduction in reported crime and anti-social behaviour along with a 18% reduction in shop theft, contributing to a safer and more welcoming environment for visitors and local businesses.

Under Op. Shield, the 'Reducing the Strength' scheme was also launched to tackle alcohol-related harm and anti-social behaviour. This voluntary initiative asks retailers to stop selling high-strength beers, lagers, and ciders (above 6.5% ABV). To date, nine premises initially signed up, including major retailers such as Iceland, B&M Stores, Heron Foods, and local convenience stores, with additional businesses joining since launch. This strong level of participation demonstrates the commitment of local businesses to improving public safety.

While most businesses have embraced the scheme, we have taken robust enforcement action against those failing to align with licensing principles of public safety, ensuring compliance and protecting our residents.

Our Civic Enforcement Service continues to work closely with partners through a harm-reduction model, balancing enforcement with support for individuals facing complex needs, including substance misuse. This integrated approach is supported by outreach services and multi-agency collaboration.

So far feedback from residents and local businesses has been encouraging although we recognise that there is always more to do. Community engagement sessions and social listening indicate strong support for measures that improve safety and enhance the town centre experience. Initiatives such as CCTV deployment, improved cleansing, and community-led events have been well received, helping to build confidence and create a more welcoming environment. Partners have also expressed their commitment to working with us to deliver these improvements and ensure the town centre remains a thriving hub for all.

We will continue to work closely with stakeholders to deliver on our shared vision for Stockton Town Centre to be a safe, inclusive, and vibrant space that reflects the needs and aspirations of our communities.

We are currently reviewing the PSPO's for Stockton Town Centre and Norton. We are currently briefing partners on the proposals and will be briefing all Members in the near future."

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#### *Question 7*

The following question was submitted by Councillor Ted Strike:

"At the last council meeting a motion regarding the Shambles was passed unanimously asking the cabinet to consider future investment in the building, including refurbishment of the toilets. I appreciate that this motion will come back to cabinet in due course Could the Cabinet Member confirm that the motion will be taken into account at the appropriate point, and offer an indication, if possible of when cabinet will consider the Shambles so that the Council's resolution is not overlooked?"

The Cabinet Member for Regeneration and Housing responded with:

"I can confirm that this motion is currently being considered. The Council's recently approved Strategic Asset Management Plan (SAMP) sets the strategic direction for the management of the Council's land and property assets which includes both future maintenance and investment. I'm sure members will agree with me that the Shambles is a key part of the Town Centre offer and therefore needs to be considered alongside other assets. This Council has a long history of supporting local independent businesses in the Town Centre including through the funding Cabinet recently made available to provide smaller retail units and the on-going support for Fountains Shopping Mall featuring the Enterprise Arcade. In that context, future investment in the Shambles building, including the provision of the toilets, will be considered in due course by Cabinet alongside other appropriate measures."

Councillor Ted Strike asked the following supplementary question:

"The businesses in the Shambles received a bombshell letter a month ago. Since then the situation has changed dramatically. Have the Council informed them that their businesses are now safe?"

The Cabinet Member for Regeneration and Housing responded with:

“Both the Leader and Deputy Leader phoned each business individually. Further dialogue and support will continue to be offered.”

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*Question 8*

Councillor Jim Taylor had submitted a question but as he was absent from the meeting, under the Constitution, the question would be referred to the next Council meeting.

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*Question 9*

Councillor Tony Riordan had submitted a question but as he was absent from the meeting, under the Constitution, the question would be referred to the next Council meeting.

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*Question 10*

The following question was submitted by Councillor Shakeel Hussain:

“Between September 2024 and June 2025 almost 40,00 prisoners have been released early from their sentences under the present governments scheme. Further, in the year to March 2025, 262 prisoners have been released by mistake.

Can the Cabinet Member inform me how many of those prisoners, who were convicted of sex related offences, are now living in the Borough of Stockton-on-Tees?”

The Cabinet Member for Access, Communities and Community Safety responded with:

“Thank you for your question.

In England and Wales, the management of sexual offenders released into the community is governed by Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPA). These arrangements were established under the Criminal Justice Act 2003 and involve a statutory partnership between the Police, Probation Service and the Prison Service. Whilst the Local Authority has a duty to co-operate with our partner agencies, we do not have access to the information requested.”

Councillor Shakeel Hussain asked the following supplementary question:

“Do we have measures in place to ensure that prisoners are not housed next door to vulnerable residents.”

The Cabinet Member for Access, Communities and Community Safety responded with:

“That is the responsibility of the Probation Service. We do not have access to that information.”

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### *Question 11*

The following question was submitted by Councillor Niall Innes:

“Does the Leader agree that it is the residents and Council Taxpayers of Stockton who are the true judge of this Council’s performance?”

The Leader of the Council responded with:

“Thank you for the question.

I absolutely agree that the residents and council taxpayers of Stockton are the ultimate judges of how well the Council performs. Their experience of our services, and the outcomes we deliver for the borough, are what matter most.

In forming that judgement, it is important that residents have access to a full and balanced picture. Commentary on social media or in political debate can sometimes give only a partial view. Independent assessment therefore plays a huge role in helping the public understand how their Council is actually performing.

External validation can come in different forms. Sometimes it is through national or professional awards, where the Council, its services or its staff are shortlisted or recognised for good practice. On other occasions it is through formal accreditation or inspection by regulatory bodies – for example, the Care Quality Commission independently assessing the quality of our adult social care practice.

Whether it is award recognition or regulatory endorsement, these are not promotional exercises. They provide objective evidence about the standard of work the Council is delivering, and they help residents form an informed view of performance.

Where staff or services are nominated for awards, we do support their attendance. The costs are modest, but the benefits are significant: recognising the contribution of our workforce, supporting recruitment and retention in a very challenging labour market, and showing that the work undertaken on behalf of residents meets high professional standards.

Ultimately, independent validation complements – but does not replace – the views of residents, who are and remain the most important judges of this Council’s performance.”

Councillor Niall Innes asked the following supplementary question:

“The cost of attending award ceremonies of £7,000 is not a modest amount. We see from the award ceremonies that officers on the ground are barely recognised. How can you justify attending?

The Leader of the Council responded with:

“Attendance is worth every penny. The feedback that I receive from our valued staff about attendance at awards is incredible. I hope that I demonstrate my appreciation every day but this is a special opportunity for them and, as Leader, I act on behalf of all Members in representing them. As mentioned before, the benefits are considerable and I would hope that if you ever lead this Council, you would give them the same courtesy of the same praise and commitment that I have. Many of our staff and their families are also our residents.

We have significantly reduced the costs of attending these events by getting our proud partners from across the Borough to sponsor tables. We have even travelled on a very early train and come back on a very late train to reduce costs – a very long but rewarding day.”

## **COU/67/25 Forward Plan and Leader’s Statement**

“Colleagues, thank you for attending Council tonight.

Our next Cabinet meeting is on 11 December, where the central item will be the Medium Term Financial Plan. Like councils across the country, we are awaiting the Government’s settlement and further detail on the fair funding formula. We welcome the continued move towards a fairer and more transparent approach, but we are also realistic: it will not remove every pressure. We will still need to cut our cloth according to our means, manage costs responsibly, and protect the services our residents value most.

Those pressures are particularly acute in children’s services and SEND, where demand continues to rise and where councils nationally are facing unprecedented challenges. We will continue to make the case for the resources our young people need and deserve.

At the same time, there is important good news. The CQC has assessed our adult services as Good overall — a significant achievement under a demanding inspection framework. It reflects the dedication and professionalism of our officers, our partners, and the Members who support and scrutinise this work. It is something the Borough can be proud of.

It is also good, on evenings like this, that we come together to reaffirm our collective commitment to our young people. The signing of the Corporate Parenting Pledge is a clear demonstration of that commitment — especially to those young people to whom we owe a particular duty as their corporate parent.

I also want to update Members on the work to live-stream our meetings. Full Council has already resolved to support live-streaming, Cabinet has endorsed that direction of travel, and we have now referred the proposals to the cross-party Members Advisory Panel. MAP will work through the remaining implementation details, particularly how we ensure compliance with the legal duties we hold — including the requirement to make our meetings accessible to all. I look forward to seeing this in place in the near future.

I am also looking forward to attending and presenting an award at the North East Culture Awards next week. This fabulous event showcases the infrastructure and diversity of our proud region. The awards are presented in partnership with the TVCA and I am delighted that these prestigious awards are being held in the equally

prestigious Globe Theatre in Stockton which will showcase our fabulous venue to people from across the North East.

Finally, Stockton Sparkles begins on 27 November from 5pm, with the Christmas lights switch-on at around 6.30pm. I hope many of you will be able to experience the wonderful events we have on offer, as we begin the festive season together."