People Select Committee

A meeting of People Select Committee was held on Monday 7th September 2026.

Present: Cllr Marilyn Surtees (Chair), Cllr Paul Weston (Vice-Chair), Cllr John Gardner, Cllr Niall Innes, Cllr Eileen Johnson, Cllr David Reynard, Cllr Hugo Stratton and Cllr Barry Woodhouse

Officers: Kellie Wigley (Children's Services), Neil Mitchell (Neighbourhoods), Martin Skipsey, Ian Coxon and Michelle Gunn (Corporate Services)

Also in attendance:

Apologies: Cllr Sylvia Walmsley

PEO/21/26 Live Streaming

The Chair announced to those present that the meeting would be live streamed.

PEO/22/26 Evacuation Procedure

The Committee noted the evacuation and housekeeping procedure.

PEO/23/26 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

PEO/24/26 Minutes

AGREED the minutes of the meeting on 6 July be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

PEO/25/26 Progress Update- Scrutiny Review of Partnership Working in Early Help

The Committee considered a progress update including assessments of progress for implementation of the recommendations from the Scrutiny Review of Partnership Working in Early Help. This was the first update to be presented to the Committee, noting that significant progress had been made and all recommendations were on track.

Key points highlighted were:

- The Family Help point was launched in April 2026, along with a self-navigation online triage tool for partners and families, supported through external briefing sessions on referral processes and communications and engagement sessions to raise awareness and promote consistent use.
- Quality assurance activities were also taking place on referrals to be confident in the application threshold.
- Requests for early help increased by 29% from the same time the previous year, referrals to partner agencies increased by 94%, and the number of contacts progressing to statutory assessment reduced by 61%.

- The triage tool had been accessed 1,800 times and 5,400 referrals had been made through the new digital portal platform.
- This data indicated that support was being provided to families far sooner, decreasing the demand on the local authority, and preventing the escalation to statutory assessment.

It was noted that the there was duplication within the actions for each recommendation, and therefore it was agreed that recommendations would be combined when the next update is presented, in six months.

AGREED the Progress Update be noted, and the assessment of progress be confirmed. The next progress update would be presented in six months.

PEO/26/26 Xentrall Annual Report

The Committee received the Xentrall Annual Report 2025/26. Xentrall operated design and print services, processing and systems for finance and HR, and ICT services for both Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council (SBC) and Darlington Borough Council (DBC).

The report outlined how the service had performed, key achievements, and future work for the service. Key points highlighted were:

- SBC and DBC had maintained a rolling annual agreement with Xentrall since 2015, following exceeding its original cost reduction target when established in 2008.
- While SBC and DBC where the two main customers of Xentrall, they also had external customers which generated £1.2million in business.
- Short term staff issues led to a dip in performance for payment of creditor invoices at the start of 2025-26, however this was recovered and performance standards regained by Quarter 3.
- The service had achieved green assessment in the Red/Amber/Green rating system in most of the control checks undertaken by Internal Audit
- It had also maintained certification in the ISO Standards 27001 (Information Security Management) certification and 9001 (Quality Management), and the BACS Accredited Bureau status was maintained. It also was re-certified for continued access to the Government's Public Services Network (PSN).

Members questioned the measurable continued savings to the Council. It was explained that Xentrall was funded through a management fee shared between the two councils, with SBC contributing approximately 60% and DBC 40%. A specific figure for continuing savings was not available as savings were achieved by avoiding the costs that would be incurred if each council operated these services independently. Since the delivery of the initial £14 million savings, the management fee had effectively remained frozen, with annual increases limited to staff pay awards, while the impact of inflation has been absorbed by Xentrall.

The cost of ICT hardware and software was discussed. It was noted that there had been a global shortage of components for ICT due to the demands of creating Artificial Intelligence (AI), and this had driven up prices not only for laptops, but other items required for infrastructure. Members questioned what was being done to mitigate the risks of rising costs and were informed that design work had been ongoing on the replacement of the platform hardware (servers), which was replaced every five years reflecting the industry standard. In addition, procurement to buy new kit was brought

forward before prices increased further, and some kit was repurposed by upgrading the components within. This had saved approximately £500,000 on what it would possibly have cost over a five-year period.

Members raised cybersecurity, and the officer noted that there was a dedicated cybersecurity team in place as well as a contract with a security company to provide 24-7 monitoring service of the whole network. The company either blocked any attacks at source or alerted the team who were on call. Xentrall also worked with the Governance team to carry out phishing simulations to increase awareness with staff of some of the issues the network was facing.

Members also raised the use of AI. Officers noted that Customer Services systems used an element of AI and some social work teams had been testing AI transcription tools, such as Magic Notes, to assist with their note taking and improve efficiency. However, there were limitations to these, and AI would not be making decision on the care of adults and children. The Microsoft applications used by the Council also had AI built into them which staff were able to use to improve efficiency, however some elements had been turned off by Xentrall and boundaries had been drawn to mitigate any risks to information.

AGREED the Xentrall Annual Report be noted.

PEO/27/26 Scrutiny Review of Procurement and Tendering Processes

The Committee received a presentation from the Assistant Director of Procurement and Governance, outlining Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council's procurement arrangements. The presentation included:

- The Council used a Hybrid Model covering Construction and ICT procurement systems and responsibilities, and General goods and services. Service departments identified requirements, while Procurement Service managed compliance, tendering processes and monitoring of social value.
- Procurement processes were defined based on level of expenditure, reflected the legal requirements within the Procurement Act, and were set out in the contract procedure rules within the Constitution:
    - Contracts under £15,000 required demonstration of value for money, goods and services between £15,001 and £179,087 required quotations from four suppliers, one of which had to be a local supplier, and goods and services above £179,087 required a formal tender process, with contracts advertised on the governments Central Digital Platform. Alternatively, contracts could be called off under framework agreements.
    - Construction contracts had significantly higher thresholds, with quotations permitted up to £1million before a full tender process was required. Alternatively, contracts could be called off under framework agreements.
- Framework agreements were in place to pre-select one or more suppliers. For each framework a procurement process had taken place and terms set during this period, which included pricing and/or call off terms. Framework agreements could operate with single supplier or multiple suppliers that were ranked or where further competitions took place.
- Exceptions to following Contract Procedure Rules were recorded.
- Officers could approve contracts up to £500,000 under delegated powers, with contracts over £500,000 requiring Cabinet approval. This was for the total

contract figure, e.g. if the contract was for a set amount each year over several years. Procurement decisions were made generally by directors and had to be recorded through Delegated Decision Records and were subject to consultation with Finance and Procurement Services.

- A public contract register was maintained and available online. The Council managed 551 live contracts at the time of the meeting and contract management was based on risk and value, with varying levels of oversight.

It was noted that the procurement of non-social care services was part of a transformation review to assess how money could be saved in the process, and the findings from this would be brought to the Committee.

The Committee questioned the quotation threshold for construction contracts. It was explained that construction projects were generally of a higher value, often of £100,000 or above, and competition was still achieved through quotations and framework agreements. However, the £1million threshold was locally determined and could be reviewed.

The level of officer delegated decision was also questioned, and it was noted that this had been determined by Full Council previously and included in the Constitution. Procurement controls, finance consultation, and delegated decision recording still applied below the threshold.

Contracts for health and social care long-term placements were discussed. It was noted that decisions for these placements were considered by officer panels, chaired by senior managers, recorded formally and regularly reviewed. These arrangements were often rolling placements rather than traditional fixed-term contracts and notice could be given at any point.

Members also raised examples of low value works and projects where quality concerns had arisen.

The following further information was requested:

- Detail and value of contracts awarded via exceptions to contract procedure rules.
- Detail regarding the construction quotations sought for £15,001 - £1million threshold, including frequency and supplier participation.
- Detail of officer delegated decisions over the previous two years below the £500,000 threshold, including number of contracts approved, total value, and background information on how the limit was established.
- Findings from the transformation review of procurement processes.

AGREED the information provided be noted and information requested be sought.

PEO/28/26 Chairs Update and Work Programme 2026 - 2027

Consideration was given to the Committee's work programme.

AGREED the work programme be noted.

PEO/29/26 Exclusion of the Press and Public

RESOLVED that under Section 100A(4) of the Local Government Act 1972 the public be excluded from the meeting for the following items of business on the grounds that they involved the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in paragraphs 1 and 4 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Act.

PEO/30/26 Review of Catering - School Delivery

The Committee received a report following a Powering Our Future Transformation review of catering, which focused on school catering, before it was considered at Cabinet.

Following discussion, the Committees comments would be forwarded to Cabinet.

AGREED that the Committees comments be included in the Cabinet Report.

Chair: .....