

## **Cabinet**

A meeting of Cabinet was held on Thursday 17th July 2025.

**Present:** Cllr Lisa Evans (Leader), Cllr Pauline Beall (Cabinet Member), Cllr Clare Besford (Cabinet Member), Cllr Nigel Cooke (Cabinet Member), Cllr Richard Eglington (Cabinet Member), Cllr Paul Rowling (Cabinet Member) and Cllr Norma Stephenson OBE (Cabinet Member).

**Officers:** Mike Greene, Peter Bell, Julie Butcher, Tracey Carter, Angela Connor, Stephen Donaghy (DoA&H), Clare Harper, Laura Kelsey, Reuben Kench, Majella McCarthy, Neil Mitchell, Ged Morton, Iain Robinson and Marc Stephenson.

**Also in attendance:** Cllr Sylvia Walmsley, Cllr Marc Besford, Cllr Carol Clark, Cllr John Coulson, Cllr Lynn Hall, Cllr Niall Innes, Cllr Jack Miller, Cllr Tony Riordan, Cllr Andrew Sherris, Cllr Ted Strike and Cllr Marcus Vickers.

**Apologies:** None.

### **CAB/22/25 Evacuation Procedure**

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting and the evacuation procedure was noted.

### **CAB/23/25 Declarations of Interest**

Councillor Nigel Cooke declared an Other Registerable Interest with regard to agenda item 10 - Activ8 Billingham Forum Gym Expansion as he was a member of Tees Active Management Board. Councillor Nigel Cooke withdrew from the meeting and left the room during consideration of the item.

Councillor Pauline Beall declared an Other Registerable Interest with regard to agenda item 12 - Powering our Future - Transformation Review Children in our Care as she was a member of the Fostering Panel. Councillor Pauline Beall withdrew from the meeting and left the room during consideration of the item.

Councillor Tony Riordan declared a Non Registerable Interest with regard to agenda item 12 - Powering our Future - Transformation Review Children in our Care as he had a family member who was a foster carer. Councillor Tony Riordan withdrew from the meeting and left the room during consideration of the item.

Councillor Pauline Beall declared an Other Registerable Interest with regard to agenda item 14 - Schools Capital Investment Strategy SEND St Johns and Mill Lane as she was a member of the Governing Body at Mill Lane Primary School. Councillor Pauline Beall withdrew from the meeting and left the room during consideration of the item.

### **CAB/24/25 Minutes**

Consideration was given to the minutes of the meeting held on 12 June 2025.

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 12 June 2025 be approved.

#### **CAB/25/25 Minutes of Various Bodies**

In accordance with the Council's Constitution or previous practice the minutes of the meeting of the bodies indicated below are submitted to members for consideration:-

TSAB – 9 April 2025

TVCA Cabinet – 28 March 2025

RESOLVED that the minutes be received.

#### **CAB/26/25 MTFP Update (Outturn 2024/25)**

Consideration was given to a report that updated Cabinet on the draft financial performance and position as at 31 March 2025.

The overall financial position was similar to the position projected at the end of December 2024, as outlined in the Budget report in February 2025, with a variance of £69,000 from the previously reported position.

Actions taken to manage the overspend of £7m were agreed as part of the budget report, and the position was being carefully monitored.

Members were aware of the financial pressures going forward with the Powering our Futures Programme integral to identifying opportunities for resolving the gap. Significant progress had been made on this to date, and further reports would be presented throughout the year providing updates.

There had also been a notable movement in the Dedicated Schools Grant deficit, increasing to £6.7m as a result of growing numbers of children with Education, Health & Care Plans.

The Capital Programme had been updated to incorporate new schemes and reflect those schemes completed as at the financial year end.

RESOLVED that the outturn position for the year ended 31 March 2025 and the updated Capital Programme be noted.

#### **CAB/27/25 Xentrall Annual Report 2024/25**

Consideration was given to a report that reviewed the progress and performance of Xentrall Shared Services.

Xentrall Shared Services was a public sector partnership between Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council (SBC) and Darlington Borough Council (DBC). Established in May 2008, Xentrall was in its seventeenth year working jointly with both Councils supporting them in the delivery of their services.

The services delivered by the partnership were:

- a. Xentrall Design & Print (Printing Services, Design Services, Displays & Exhibitions)
- b. Xentrall Finance (Creditors, Debtors, Banking, Income, System Support & Development)
- c. Xentrall HR (Payroll, Pensions, Recruitment, System Support & Development)
- d. Xentrall ICT (Service Desk, End User Device Management, Platform, Applications, Architecture Strategy, Information Security)

The initial aim of Xentrall was to improve service performance and reduce the cost of the functions it delivers by £7.4m over the original ten-year period of the partnership. Xentrall surpassed this financial expectation by delivering £14m savings across the same period as reported to Members over previous years.

The quality and performance of services had also improved over the lifetime of the partnership through a range of past and continuing service improvements and developments.

This was a significant achievement for a public / public partnership and it compared very well to other private sector partnerships many of which had failed over the same period or been brought back in-house and for a variety of reasons.

In recognition of the on-going success of the partnership, in 2015 Members agreed to amend the original ten-year period into an on-going rolling agreement which continues to this day.

The partnership was governed by the Xentrall Executive Board, namely the Director of Finance, Transformation & Performance (SBC) and Executive Director – Resources and Governance (DBC), and was managed by the Assistant Director (Xentrall Shared Services).

Xentrall continued to perform very well and deliver developmental projects alongside its day-to-day services to both Councils and external customers.

Looking forward, activities would include:

- a. Xentrall Design & Print will continue to support both Councils, working closely with their respective Communications Teams and other services to ensure they all receive the solutions they need. The service is looking to reduce the number of prints produced on the printer/copier fleet at both Councils by using alternative bulk printing methods.
- b. Xentrall Finance will continue to work with both Councils have a number of projects planned or underway which include; implementing the migration of the main finance system and income management systems to a cloud-hosted solutions
- c. Xentrall HR will continue to work with both Councils and external academy customers in the exploitation of the HR/Payroll system and the MyHR employee interface and app. Legislative changes will continue to be applied to the system in a timely manner, as will the application of any pay awards as and when agreed.
- d. Xentrall ICT will continue to support both Councils and external customers with information and technology solutions. The service is planning to implement further cyber security measures and planning further exploitation of the ICT service desk system to improve services to customers.

In addition to the above programme and as with previous years, the continual service improvement mentality within Xentrall would be applied to leverage any further service improvements and/or savings for both Councils where possible. Outside of this programme, Xentrall would continue to assess new business opportunities should these arise as this approach aligns with the Xentrall business model of tactically growing the business, which in turn helps to support both Council's Medium Term Financial Plans.

## **CAB/28/25 Treasury Management Practices Update**

Consideration was given to a report that provided an update to the delegations for treasury management activities included within the Treasury Management Practices.

In accordance with CIPFA's Code of Practice for Treasury Management in the Public Services the Council has regard to the key recommendations when determining the current Treasury Management Strategy.

Accordingly, the Council creates and maintains, as the cornerstones for effective treasury management:-

- A treasury management policy statement, stating the policies, objectives and approach to risk management of its treasury management activities.
- Suitable Treasury Management Practices (TMPs), setting out the manner in which the Council will seek to achieve those policies and objectives, and prescribing how it will manage and control those activities.

The Council (i.e. full Council) will receive reports on its treasury management policies, practices and activities including, as a minimum, an annual strategy and plan in advance of the year.

The Council delegates responsibility for the implementation and monitoring of its treasury management policies and practices to the Audit and Governance Committee and for the execution and administration of treasury management decisions to the nominated Section 151 Officer (the officer with Responsibilities under Section 151 of the Local Government Act 1972) will act in accordance with the organisation's policy statement and TMPs and CIPFA's Standard of Professional Practice on Treasury Management.

The Council's Treasury Management Strategy was last approved by Council in February 2025 as part of the Medium Term Financial Plan Update and Strategy Report.

The Treasury Management Practices were last approved by Council as part of the Medium Term Financial Plan Update and Strategy Report in February 2023 and cover the following topics

TMP 1 - Risk management

TMP 2 - Performance measurement

TMP 3 - Decision-making and analysis

TMP 4 - Approved instruments, methods and techniques

TMP 5 - Authority, clarity and segregation of responsibilities and dealing arrangements

TMP 6 - Reporting requirements and management information arrangements

TMP 7 - Budgeting, accounting and audit arrangements

TMP 8 - Cash and cash flow management

TMP 9 - Anti Money laundering

TMP 10 - Staff training and qualifications

TMP 11 - Use of external service providers

TMP 12 - Corporate governance

TMP 5; Authority, clarity and segregation of responsibilities and dealing arrangements, delegates responsibility for day to day treasury management activities to nominated officers within the finance service. Following the retirement of the Council's existing Section 151 Officer (the officer with responsibilities under Section 151 of the Local Government Act 1972), the delegations had been updated. The updated TMP5 was attached to the report at Appendix A.

RECOMMENDED to Council that the updated TMP5 included at Appendix A of the report, including the updated officer delegations relating to treasury management activities be approved.

## **CAB/29/25 Powering our Future - Regeneration Mission Update**

Consideration was given to a report that provided an update on activity across the Powering Our Futures Regeneration mission with updates on the delivery of the Central Stockton and North Thornaby Blueprint, namely progression of key work strands linked to Care Health Innovation Zone and steps to bring about increased residential development across key sites and initial work to bring about the long term redevelopment of Tees Marshalling Yards under the new term for the area, Tees Central. The report included updates across the existing committed wide ranging regeneration programme and sought decisions to enable the demolition of Golden Eagle in Thornaby, future opportunities for use of existing assets in Stockton town centre and progress on agreements to bring about redevelopment of Billingham town centre.

In July 2024, Cabinet approved a Blueprint which set out an exciting and innovative vision for the future development of Central Stockton and North Thornaby Areas. The blueprint outlined transformational change over the next 25 years by creating prosperous, vibrant places, fit for future generations by delivering modern, mixed-use neighbourhoods and a thriving town centre, helping to make sure it was a safe and welcoming place where people want to work, live and visit. It focused on eight key intervention areas in Central Stockton and North Thornaby as illustrated within the report.

The report provided an update on interventions across the blueprint area and set out next steps to progress specific sites and opportunities in relation to the redevelopment of the Tees Marshalling Yards, the delivery of Tees Valley Care and Health Innovation Zone and the delivery of town centre living and commercial opportunities for existing council land and assets.

Given the scale and significance of this regeneration opportunity, and to raise its profile at both a regional and national level, it was proposed that all future work would be delivered under the name 'Tees Central', which reflected both its geographic location and the scale of inclusive growth opportunity in the heart of the Tees Valley.

The report gave detail on the following areas of activity:-

- Tees Marshalling Yards
- Tees Valley Care and Health Innovation Zone (TVCHIZ)
- Stockton Waterfront
- Town Centre Living
- Stockton Town Centre Commercial opportunities
- The Shambles
- Stockton Town Hall
- Debenhams
- Splash
- Billingham – Levelling Up Fund
- Thornaby Pavillion Pool, Gym and Golden Eagle
- Cycleways
- NETA
- North Thornaby
- Yarm, Eaglescliffe and Preston Park – Levelling Up Fund
- Norton High Street

Following discussion Cabinet agreed to remove recommendation 4 that was contained within the report.

RESOLVED that:-

1. Recommendation 4 as set out in the report be deferred.
2. The initiation of the Tees Central project be approved as part of the Powering our Future Placemaking mission and the use of previously approved funds of £450,000 allocated to Municipal Quarter to support works to develop proposals within Tees Central project and the delivery of the Central Stockton and North Thornaby Blueprint be approved and the reciprocal reallocation of previously approved £450,000 by Tees Valley Combined Authority for the same purpose be noted.
3. The use of £550,000 of previously approved funding to support delivery of Stockton and North Thornaby Blueprint to support development of proposals within Tees Central be approved.
4. Authority be delegated to the Director of Regeneration and Inclusive Growth in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Regeneration and Housing to approve the allocation of the budget of £1.45m set out in recommendation 1&2 to deliver the Central Stockton and North Thornaby Blueprint and Tees Central.

5. The use of up to £1.34m Indigenous Growth Fund (IGF) be approved for the demolition of the Golden Eagle and authority to negotiate, agree the terms of and enter, all necessary contracts to enable the demolition of the Golden Eagle be delegated to Director of Regeneration and Inclusive Growth in consultation with Cabinet Member for Regeneration and Housing.

6. The detail of Yarm public realm scheme and programme as set out in paragraphs 74-80 of the report be noted.

7. The change in commercial approach to the acquisition and demolition of Queensway South in Billingham town centre as set out in para 51-52 of the report be noted.

## **CAB/30/25 Activ8 Billingham Forum Gym Expansion**

Consideration was given to a report that sought approval for the redevelopment and expansion of the Activ8 gym at Billingham Forum. The proposal included increasing gym capacity, upgrading facilities, and improving service quality to meet growing demand. The expansion was critical to sustaining Activ8's financial performance and supporting public health objectives.

The Council had leisure facilities across the Borough; Billingham Forum, Billingham Forum Theatre, Thornaby Pavilion, Thornaby Pool, Splash and Ingleby Barwick Leisure Facility, Tees Barrage International White Water Course Centre. These were managed and operated on behalf of the Council by the Leisure Trust; Tees Active Limited. Activ8 Health and Fitness is the membership name operated by Tees Active Limited.

These assets offer a varied range of activities and experiences to local residents and visitors including swimming, ice skating and gym provision.

The UK fitness sector had shown strong post-COVID recovery, with Activ8 outperforming national trends. Billingham Forum was a very well used and highly valued asset by local residents, however the gym was constrained by gym capacity. Billingham Forum gym was operating at full capacity. The current Members Per Station (MPS) ratio would limit further and impact upon service quality.

The gyms across all of the Council's leisure facilities were well used and highly regarded by residents and visitors. The Council had a proven track record of investing in leisure assets to maintain and improve high quality assets for the local community. The Council was investing in Stockton Splash and Thornaby Pavillion. Options had been considered to address the capacity and improve the gym provision at Billingham Forum.

Three options were detailed within the report.

The preferred option was a full expansion of the gym into underutilised areas (Studio 3 and dry-side changing rooms) to increase gym floor space and equipment provision. The new layout included:

- Additional exercise stations
- Two free weight/plate-loaded zones
- Upgraded cardio and resistance equipment

- Dedicated small group training and personal training areas

The estimated total project cost was £900,000, comprised of £650,000 relating to the internal building works and £250,000 relating to new equipment. The Council would fund the works to the internal fit out at an estimated project cost of £650,000 and TAL would fund the new equipment.

It was proposed that the Council's investment would be funded by up to £650,000 of prudential borrowing, drawn down from the £20m Council Wide Investment Fund approved by Council as part of the Medium Term and Financial Plan Update and Strategy Report in February 2025, with allocations from that fund delegated to Cabinet.

The prudential borrowing repayments (£48,000 p.a.) would be covered by Tees Active Limited through the additional income generated.

Billingham Forum had a proven history of successful expansions, with income growing by 41% and 35% in 2017 and 2020 after previous expansions. Since opening Ingleby Barwick leisure Facility the gym had also been hugely popular here too.

This proposed expansion would increase the number of exercise stations as well as introducing new training zones aligned with current fitness trends.

The proposal was in line with the Stockton on Tees Plan, in particular aligning with the Healthy and Resilient Communities priority. It also supports Tees Active's long-term growth strategy to meet community needs, and mitigates financial risk from rising operational costs and competition from other privately operated facilities.

The redevelopment would create additional capacity with minimal disruption, leading to a very brief gym closure period, planned for when the facility is traditionally at its quietest period of the year.

The project was expected to grow membership by around 20% over a 5 year period, with additional income generated used to fund the prudential borrowing. The investment would greatly enhance a prominent and well loved asset, contributing to the wider regeneration of Billingham town centre.

The full expansion option would offer the an improved and larger gym facility within Billingham Forum, allowing more local residents to enjoy access to the gym, as well as improved experience for existing gym members.

The proposed timeline for the Billingham Forum gym expansion was strategically designed to ensure completion by mid-December, enabling a pre-Christmas reopening and promotional launch. This timing was critical to capitalise on the annual January surge in gym memberships, which was consistently the busiest period for new member sign-ups across the fitness industry.

RESOLVED that:-

1. The proposed redevelopment of the Billingham Forum gym be approved.



2. The use of prudential borrowing of up to £650,000, from the £20m Council Wide Investment Fund approved at Council in February 2025 be approved.

3. Authority be delegated to the Director of Community Services, Environment and Culture to make the specific contract award decision and any subsequent contract variations as necessary to support effective delivery of the project.

## **CAB/31/25 Strategy for Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council Outdoor Play Provision 2025**

Following the Scrutiny Review of Outdoor Play Provision, in April of 2024, the Crime and Disorder Select Committee (now renamed) recommended that officers should prepare a strategy (later approved by Cabinet) which included the following elements:

- The Council's aims in relation to the provision of outdoor play spaces.
- The locations and assessments of existing and outdoor play provision, as well as any planned developments.
- The key challenges associated with providing these spaces.
- How the Council will seek to address these key challenges (including guiding principles).
- Timelines for action and who will be accountable.

Following extensive consultation with officers and evidence gathering the initial sections of the Strategy for Council Outdoor Play Provision 2025 had been prepared and was attached to the report.

The Borough had 56 play areas which were available for the public to use free of charge at all reasonable times:

- 40 were owned and managed by Stockton Borough Council,
- 9 were owned by town / parish councils but managed by the Borough Council.
- 7 were owned and managed by housing developers / management companies.

There were plans for a further 12 play areas to be delivered over the next few years (3 to be provided by the Council and 9 to be provided by housing developers) although this was subject to change.

The Strategy aimed to:

- Maintain a range of good quality play areas and informal sport facilities
- Achieve a fair and equitable distribution of outdoor play provision across the Borough
- Deliver welcoming, accessible and inclusive play spaces, while acknowledging that not all sites can cater for all needs and abilities
- Ensure the overall scale of provision is at a level which is sustainable in terms of Council resource

By allocating an additional £150,000 pa to the parks, open spaces, cemeteries and allotments budget, the council will be able to retain approximately 30-35 play areas in addition to the new play provision planned for the Stockton Waterfront urban park. Approximately 7-12 sites would be subject to phased de-commissioning.

Recommendations for specific sites would be included in the final version of the strategy following detailed analysis of play provision using data referenced in Chapter 6 (page 19) of the first stage strategy document.

RESOLVED that:-

1. The first stage strategy document including the principles set out in Chapter 5 of the strategy document be approved.
2. The requirement of additional revenue funding of £150,000 per annum from 2026/27 onwards be noted. This would enable the Council to retain approximately 30-35 play areas in good condition, in addition to the new play area at Stockton Waterfront urban park. Approximately 7 to 12 play areas would be subject to removal of play equipment at end of life and repurposing of sites for recreational open space. Funding would be considered as part of the Medium Term Financial Plan Update & Strategy report to Council in February 2026.
3. Cabinet agree to consider, at a later stage, a second report and final version of the strategy. This will include an assessment of play provision (adopting the principles and overall approach outlined in this first stage strategy) and make recommendations for specific sites.

**CAB/32/25    Powering our Future - Transformation Review: Children in our Care - Fostering Service**

Consideration was given to a report that presented a proposal for modernising the fostering service in Stockton-on-Tees following a comprehensive review, options appraisal and development of a business case. The objective was to address the declining number of foster carers and the increasing number of children in external private provider care, to support better outcomes for children in care, and help give them the best start in life. The proposal aimed to build sufficiency within the mainstream fostering service by encouraging new foster carers, retaining existing ones, and meeting the diverse needs of children in care.

Proposals in the report were an important part of the approach to reduce inequality by prioritising Early Help and Prevention, supporting more children to live within safe and inclusive communities.

The Council's Mission Statement and wider Powering Our Future Programme, prioritised Early Help and prevention, supporting more children to live in safe and inclusive communities that provide them with opportunities to thrive. This means working differently with communities, to harness the strengths that exist to build resilience and independence.

In April 2024, Cabinet agreed to a review of Children in our Care as part of phase 1 of the Transformation Programme. This provided clarity on the scope and objectives for the review, in alignment with the Council's Mission Statement.

The review had led to a comprehensive understanding of challenges making use of research, data and intelligence. Findings and drivers for change along with options and proposals were summarised as follows:-

- Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council faces challenges with a high number of children in care (564 as at 10.04.25) and a reducing number of in-house fostering households (81 as at 10.04.25), This has led to a reliance on Independent Fostering Agencies (IFAs) and external residential care, which are costly and often place children outside the borough.

- The costs associated with using external providers are extremely high compared to mainstream fostering. Additionally, the lack of local placements means social workers must travel long distances to visit children, increasing workloads and reducing the frequency of contact. External providers often serve short notice on placements, causing instability and escalating children's needs, which leads to a cycle of increasingly complex needs and higher costs.

- Due to the shortage of foster placements, emergency placements sometimes result in unregulated care arrangements, which are unlawful and require additional risk management. This practice has brought scrutiny from Ofsted, the Department for Education, and the Children's Commissioner, highlighting the urgent need for more regulated foster care options.

- As of 10th April 2025, 69% of the 564 children in care were in foster care placements, with 104 children placed with SBC Foster Carers, 102 with Independent Fostering Agencies (IFA's) and 183 with Connected Carers. The remaining 173 children were in residential care, regulated supported accommodation or other placements.

- The number of mainstream foster carers has steadily decreased since 2019, with 70 leaving the service and only 40 approved to replace them. The main reasons for resignations include retirement, ill health, and foster carers entering paid employment.

- The current profile of in-house foster carers is insufficient, with difficulties in recruiting individuals who can develop the requisite skills to care for children with complex needs. Our payments to foster carers are lower than those offered by neighbouring Councils and IFAs, leading some carers to seek paid employment, reducing their availability. The proposal suggests introducing a new fee structure to encourage foster carers to improve their skills and care for children with more complex needs, making our offer more competitive.

- Recent national, regional and local research by Newton Europe validates the need for additional fostering placements, especially for children with complex needs. The average weekly cost for residential care has increased significantly between 2020 and 2024 from £4,000 per week to £6,000 per week, while external fostering costs increased by 20%. The proportion of children in residential care has risen, and there is a notable increase in children entering care aged 10 and older. Most children currently in residential care were previously supported in fostering, indicating a need for more suitable foster carers.

- The findings of the review and appraisal of options highlight the urgent need for modernising the fostering service to address the declining number of foster carers, high costs, placement instability, and the need for enhanced support and training.

Several options were appraised as detailed below:

#### Option 1: Do Nothing

This option involves continuing without investment therefore risks fewer carers, higher costs, unstable placements, and poorer outcomes for children

#### Option 2: Modernise the Current Fee Structure and Support Package (Recommended Option)

This option proposes introducing a new, tiered fee structure for foster carers, particularly those caring for children with complex needs. It includes an enhanced support package with additional training (e.g., DDP), a new Mockingbird constellation, therapeutic services via CAMHS, and an extra social worker to support increased demand. It also introduces an annual appreciation fee. This option is expected to improve recruitment and retention, reduce reliance on external providers, and has the potential to generate savings. The annual cost of the proposal will depend upon the actual number of new foster carers recruited and the needs of the children. Financial modelling has been undertaken and the estimated additional cost based on current numbers is £770,000 per annum.

#### Option 3: Align with a Neighbouring Local Authority's Fee Structure

Similar to Option 2, this option involves modernising the fee structure and support offer but aligns specifically with the higher rates offered by an outstanding neighbouring authority. It includes the same support enhancements as Option 2 but requires a larger investment (£1.6 million per annum). While it offers a competitive package, the higher cost makes it less financially favourable than Option 2.

#### Option 4: Partnership with an Independent Fostering Agency (IFA)

This option explored forming a strategic partnership with an IFA to leverage their expertise in recruitment, training, and support. While it could bring in specialist knowledge and resources, it presents significant risks, including potential legal challenges, loss of control over placement quality, and complications with existing foster carers and staff. It also raises concerns about long-term sustainability and alignment with the council's values and goals.

The options were evaluated based on their potential to address the key issues, financial implications, and overall impact on the fostering service and outcomes for children. Option 2: To modernise the current fee structure and support package is recommended as the proposed option due to its balanced approach to investment, support, and expected savings for the following reasons:

- An improved package of fees for all carers that moves us closer to the fees paid by NE Local Authorities. This will encourage our current cohort of foster carers to remain with the council and attract new foster carers to the service.
- More children will be supported in family-based care that meets their needs.
- Offers a competitive fee for either existing or new carers to foster children with complex needs providing two higher fee rates than is currently available. To offset the introduction of these new fees, the council intends to undertake intensive recruitment campaigns to target new foster carers through the profiling of individual children to ensure long term matches are achieved based on their needs.
- The introduction of an appreciation fee, paid on an annual basis, will reinforce the council's commitment to its current and future cohorts of foster carers. Knowing they are valued and respected for their commitment to children in our care will help to retain existing and future foster carers.
- Provides a comprehensive package of support. Whilst our current cohort of foster carers rate the support and training offered by the council highly (foster carer consultation feedback), the complexity of needs of some children in care are challenging and can risk placements breaking down without having recourse to a proficient level of support. The introduction of an additional Mockingbird constellation, therapeutic responses from CAMHS and the opportunity to access DDP training with residential care staff will help build resilience of foster carers to enable them to conduct their fostering role.

- An additional social worker post will provide capacity within the team to address the expected increase in the number of referrals, applications, and approvals for new foster carers.
- Whilst the introduction of these new measures to recruit and retain foster carers will require investment, this will be offset through savings made from the re-unification of children from external residential and from IFA placements back into mainstream foster care. The financial savings associated with this reduction on expensive external placements is estimated to be £2.5 million per annum by year 4. It will also achieve better outcomes for those children who are currently in residential care despite their permanence plans identifying that the most appropriate placement to meet their needs is in a fostering placement. Further savings should also be achievable through cost avoidance of future placements, where children are supported in in-house fostering rather than external placements, modelling has indicated this could be a further £990,000 by year 4.

RESOLVED with regard to Annexe 1 of the report

To exclude the press and public from the meeting pursuant to section 100A(4) of the Local Government Act 1972 during the consideration of Annexe 1 to the report due to the likelihood that if members of the public were present during that item there would be disclosure to them of exempt information and

The information is exempt information because it is information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information) under Paragraph 3 of Part One of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972 and the public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighs the public interest in disclosing the information.

As no member wished to discuss Annexe 1 the public were not excluded from the meeting.

RESOLVED that:-

1. A New Fee Structure be introduced for Foster Carers: The proposed new fee structure for foster carers includes four levels ranging from £100 per week to £450 per week for carers providing care for children with the most complex needs. This structure aims to make our offer more competitive, attract new foster carers, and retain existing ones by recognising and rewarding the varying levels of care required. The maximum current fee a foster carer can receive is £125 per week. The new fee structure will be implemented from September 2025.

In addition, the introduction of an annual appreciation fee to recognise and reward foster carers for their commitment and efforts. This is subject to a successful annual review and the completion of a minimum of three training courses. The fee is set at £500 per household, aiming to show appreciation and encourage continuous professional development among foster carers. The new annual appreciation fee will be implemented from September 2025.

2. An Enhanced Package of Training and Support be introduced: Provide a wider training offer, including Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy (DDP) training, establish an additional Mockingbird constellation to support foster carers, commission therapeutic services from the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) and increase capacity within the fostering team by appointing an additional social

worker. The enhanced package of support will commence from October 2025, in a staged process.

3. Targeted Recruitment Campaigns take place: Conduct intensive marketing campaigns to recruit specialist foster carers for children with complex needs and profile individual children to ensure long-term matches based on their needs. Campaigns will commence in September 2025.

4. The Reunification of Children takes place: Reunify children from external residential and Independent Fostering Agency (IFA) placements back into mainstream foster care. The process of matching children with long term foster carers will begin once specialist foster carers have been identified to meet their needs.

## **CAB/33/25 Schools Capital Investment Strategy - Northfield and Oxbridge**

Consideration was given to a report that sought approval for the allocation of capital funding to support two priority projects under the Council's School Investment Strategy: the refurbishment of pupil toilet facilities at Northfield School and funding for final stages of the development at Oxbridge Primary School.

In October 2022, Cabinet approved the revised proposals relating to the school investment strategy of unallocated funds to support investment in Oxbridge Lane Primary School and Bishopton Centre Pupil Referral Unit. Whilst the works on Bishopton Centre completed in April 2024, with the introduction of 20 additional places for children who require alternative provision, the outlined works at Oxbridge Primary School require further investment prior to completion. Further agreed investment at that time, for SEND Provision at Abbey Hill at North Shore and Ash Trees at Billingham South are now complete, operational and running at capacity.

In Spring 2025, following allocation of funding by the Department for Education and further funding being obtained, the Council had £9.31m of unallocated capital funding from a range of sources (a summary is provided below). Whilst a separate report was being prepared in respect of proposed capital investment relating to required SEND provision, a further request was being made to invest in completion of the Oxbridge Lane Primary School works and for consideration of investment in Northfield School.

- £1.56m Unallocated Basic Need Grant
- £3.87m Unallocated High Need Capital Funding
- £3.88m of Developer Contributions towards education

A significant amount of this was proposed to be invested into SEND provision in Stockton and a separate report would be presented to Cabinet to this effect. However, there was sufficient funds available within the £9.31m available to deliver the £1.66m worth of proposals in this report.

There were no cost saving or cost avoidance attached to this investment.

**RESOLVED that:-**

1. An additional £500,000 of capital funding be agreed to complete the building works at Oxbridge Primary School.

2. £1.16m of capital funding be invested to install additional toilet block facilities at Northfield School & Sports College.

3. Authority be delegated to the Director of Children's Services, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Children and Young People, to take all necessary steps to deliver the projects within the approved budgets.

4. The transfer of budget caused by cost variations within the approved programme be delegated to the Section 151 Officer and the Director of Children's Services in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Resources and Transport and the Cabinet Member for Children's and Young People.

#### **CAB/34/25 Schools Capital Investment Strategy - SEND St. John's and Mill Lane**

Consideration was given to a report that sought approval for capital investment in the development and enhancement of Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) provision across the Borough. This funding would support two planned projects aimed at increasing local capacity and ensuring the Council meets its statutory obligations to children and young people with SEND.

The two planned projects were at St John the Baptist Primary School and Mill Lane Primary School. The report contained the full details of the planned projects.

RESOLVED that:-

1. £5.35m of capital funding be invested at St John the Baptist Primary School, to undertake necessary building work and essential works to the school to maintain the 24 SEND Unit places and allow for the displaced early years provision to be reunified in the main school building.

2. £1.7m of capital funding be invested at Mill Lane Primary School, to create a SEND Unit for children with Speech, Language and Communication Needs.

3. Authority be delegated to the Director of Children's Services, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Children and Young People, to take all necessary steps to deliver the projects within the approved budgets.

4. The transfer of budget caused by cost variations within the approved programme be delegated to the Section 151 Officer and the Director of Children's Services in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Resources and Transport and the Cabinet Member for Children's and Young People.

5. Authority be delegated to the Director of Children's Services, in consultation with the Section 151 Officer and Cabinet Member for Children and Young People, to allocate the contingency of £600,000 if required within the approved programme.

#### **CAB/35/25 Air Quality Strategy 2025-2030**

Consideration was given to a report on Air Quality Strategy 2025-2030.

Poor air quality was one of the largest risks to public health and DEFRA required all Local Authorities to produce an Air Quality Strategy. The purpose of this was to

ensure air quality was at the forefront of Council decision making whilst also protecting the health and well-being of those who live and visit our borough.

Within Stockton-on-Tees, Environmental Health were responsible for monitoring the levels of air quality using two automatic sites and 15 diffusion tubes strategically placed throughout the Borough in areas of high volumes of traffic or in locations where concern about the air quality had been raised. The Air Quality levels within Stockton-on-Tees were better than the national standard which meant the Council did not need more stringent measures seen in other areas of the country such as Air Quality Management Areas. In fact, over the past five years, since 2019, there had been continuous improvement in air quality levels each of the monitoring locations.

Even though the Council was seeing improvements locally, it was known there was more to do to protect local communities. The purpose of the report was for Cabinet to approval of the draft Air Quality Strategy for Stockton-on-Tees which would be in place from 2025 until 2030. The strategy contained 42 measures which aimed to improve air quality levels further, whilst encouraging behavioural changes from Council operations, residents, businesses and visitors to the Borough.

RESOLVED that the draft Air Quality Strategy for Stockton-on-Tees 2025-2030 be approved.

#### **CAB/36/25 Hotel Company Report**

Consideration was given to a report that sought approval to update the governance arrangements for the Council's wholly owned hotel company, Stockton Hotels Company Ltd, and its parent company, Stockton Borough Holding Company Ltd. The proposed changes were intended to update the Council's role as shareholder, further strengthen board composition through the introduction of independent expertise and establish a single, Shareholders' Agreement to codify key controls and expectations.

The measures would reinforce oversight and reflect good practice in the governance of local authority trading companies.

RESOLVED that:-

1. The development of a new Shareholders' Agreement covering both Stockton Borough Holding Company Ltd (HoldCo) and Stockton Hotels Company Ltd (HotelCo) be approved.
2. The Council's shareholder representative shall continue to be the officer exercising the statutory Section 151 responsibilities, following the retirement of the previous postholder.
3. The proposed enhancement of the HotelCo board through the appointment of independent non-executive directors with relevant commercial or hospitality experience be approved.
4. Tracey Carter, Director of Regeneration & Inclusive Growth be appointed as a council appointed director of each company.



5. Authority be delegated to the Director of Corporate Services, the Section 151 Officer and the Chief Executive to finalise the Shareholders' Agreement in consultation with the Leader of the Council.

## **CAB/37/25 Car Parking Charges**

Consideration was given to a report on car parking charges in the Yarm and Stockton.

In October 2024, Cabinet made the decision to remove the first free hour of car parking across Council owned car parks in Stockton and Yarm. The decision to remove the free hour was taken with the aim of balancing the need to cover the costs of maintaining and managing car parking, with the desire to ensure our town centres remain attractive to shoppers.

At that October meeting a commitment was also made to reviewing the new arrangements to consider the impact on residents, visitors, and council finances.

At the May 2025 Full Council meeting, a motion was passed which recommended that Cabinet consider reversing this decision in respect of Yarm. As the policy decision applies to both Stockton and Yarm, and as there was an earlier Cabinet commitment to review the impact across both towns, the report set out the suggested scope for the review of charges, including consideration of impacts to businesses and residents.

The report also outlined the actions taken to mitigate any negative impact and the initial findings in relation to car park occupancy and footfall, as context for the review.

**RESOLVED** that the initial data in relation to parking in Yarm and Stockton be noted and the scope of the review of car park charges set out in the report be approved.