

## **Executive Scrutiny Committee**

A meeting of Executive Scrutiny Committee was held on Tuesday 18th November 2025.

**Present:** Cllr Sylvia Walmsley (Chair), Cllr Kevin Faulks (Vice-Chair), Cllr Jim Beall, Cllr Marc Besford, Cllr Carol Clark, Cllr Diane Clarke OBE (sub for Cllr Tony Riordan), Cllr Lynn Hall, Cllr Shakeel Hussain, Cllr Mrs Ann McCoy, Cllr Sufi Mubeen, Cllr Marilyn Surtees and Cllr Marcus Vickers (sub for Cllr Niall Innes)

**Officers:** Reuben Kench, Neil Mitchell, Majella McCarthy, Ged Morton, Julie Butcher, Jonathan Nertney, Geraldine Brown, Judy Trainer, Gary Woods and Junita Agyapong

**Also in attendance:** Cllr Clare Besford, Cllr Nigel Cooke, Cllr John Coulson, Cllr Barbara Inman, Cllr Mohammed Mazi, Cllr Norma Stephenson OBE and Cllr Sally Ann Watson

**Apologies:** Cllr Niall Innes and Cllr Tony Riordan

### **ESC/24/25 Evacuation Procedure**

The evacuation procedure was noted.

### **ESC/25/25 Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interests.

### **ESC/26/25 Minutes**

AGREED that the minutes of the meeting on 23 September 2025 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

### **ESC/27/25 Call in Meeting Procedure**

The Committee noted the meeting procedure.

### **ESC/28/25 Call In Outdoor Play Provision**

The Head of Democratic Services presented a report setting out the background to the call-in and supporting documents.

The decisions taken by Cabinet, taken on 16 October 2025, in relation to outdoor play provision had been subject to a valid call-in. The call in applied to the following decisions:

RESOLVED

1. The Strategy for Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council Outdoor Play Provision 2025 be approved.

2. The site-specific recommendations, subject to financial approvals of the additional £150,000 pa contained within the 2026/27 MTFP report to be presented in February 2026 be approved. This would enable 23 Council-owned play areas to be prioritised for retention, development or redevelopment, ensuring high maintenance standards and delivering good play value. A further 9 play areas will also be retained subject to availability of resources, while 11 sites would be subject to phased decommissioning and repurposing.

3. The series of additional cross-cutting actions relating to the development, design and management of play provision be noted.

The following Members and officers attended the meeting:

- Councillor Nigel Cooke, Cabinet Member for Environment, Leisure and Culture
- Ged Morton, Director of Corporate Services (Monitoring Officer)
- Reuben Kench - Director of Community Services, Environment and Culture

In addition, Members who had signed the call-in request had been invited to attend the meeting.

The following documents has been included with the agenda for the meeting for consideration by the Executive Scrutiny Committee:

- Call in Form
- Cabinet Report
- Cabinet Decision Record
- Report of the Monitoring Officer

On behalf of the Councillors who had submitted the call-in request of the Cabinet decision, Councillor Shakeel Hussain urged the Committee to refer the matters back to Cabinet for reconsideration, explaining the rationale for the call-in, which related to:

- The decision had not been made in accordance with the Council's decision-making principles
- No consultation had been carried out with ward Councillors, Parish Councils and families affected
- The financial rationale was unclear
- Cabinet's decision ignored the Select Committee's recommendation which gave a clear instruction to consult and engage

Questions from Committee Members and responses included:

1. Why was there no consultation and engagement prior to Cabinet making the decision?

The Cabinet Member commented that the Cabinet Report had been based on the work of the Community Safety Select Committee undertaken during 2024. He felt that there seemed to be some confusion about the process and that the decision was not to close the play areas. The proposals would be subject to phased decommissioning. Once a play area was nearing decommissioning, timescales and consultation and engagement would take place. This might result in the play area being transferred to local ownership at that time or being re-purposed. Only one site was scheduled for

decommissioning during the next four years. This process met the principles set out in the Cabinet report in July 2025.

2. If a decision had already been made, it didn't matter if a site was scheduled for decommissioning tomorrow or in five years' time. Should not consultation and engagement have taken place prior to the decision being made?

The Cabinet Member commented that the decisions taken were in line with the Select Committee's report and reflected fairness and affordability. There was never a presumption that all play areas would remain. There would also be an impact assessment to guide the decisions.

3. Some of the sites were in village locations with no public transport. Should not consultation and engagement have taken place with these communities?

The Cabinet Member commented that the Cabinet report contained detailed information about the size of the play areas and the quality and maintenance of equipment and a spread of provision. The strategy also sought to invest in bigger destination parks and there was an expectation that residents would travel to those destination parks. He reminded the Committee that open spaces were valuable for recreation even where there was no play equipment. Significant engagement would take place prior to any planned decommissioning.

4. When did consultation become engagement? The Select Committee report did not identify specific locations. Why are we identifying sites without consultation?

The Cabinet Member commented that the Council was investing in sites going forward and reiterated that engagement would take place at the appropriate time. Engaging now would be inadvisable. The decision had been in line with previous reports to Cabinet, a Member Briefing and progress updates to Community Safety Select Committee.

5. Communities deserved play provision on their doorsteps. Should we not prioritise neighbourhood play over expensive town centre schemes? Why was the Council spending £300,000 on the opening of the Waterfront Urban Park in Stockton at the same time cutting local provision?

The Monitoring Officer reminded the Committee that discussion needed to be confined to the subject of the call-in and the opening of the Waterfront Urban Park was not part of the Cabinet decision.

A Member of the Committee commented that there were options for local communities to retain play areas through transfer and Ward Councillor budgets for example.

6. How did the decommissioning of 11 local play parks correspond with the maintenance costs of the Stockton Waterfront Urban Park? What were the ongoing maintenance costs and why were these not included in the Cabinet report? We have never had a clear answer and have been advised that meetings are ongoing to agree the scope and duration of the maintenance package with Timberplay.

The Cabinet Member commented that the strategy was evidence based. Many Councils were closing a significant number of play areas. The strategy agreed by Cabinet was investing in quality provision with destination schemes and, where

possible, local sites. It would be impossible to determine future maintenance costs but the well-informed strategy was focusing on retaining quality provision.

The Director of Community Services, Environment and Culture advised that the previous budget for play areas had been combined with the cemetery and allotment budgets and had been insufficient. For the first time, a discretionary play area maintenance budget had now been identified in the MTFP. The maintenance set aside for the Waterside Urban Park was for the whole site and not just for the play area.

7. Would there be an advanced timeline for consulting with Town and Parish Councils prior to any decommissioning as their budgets were set well in advance?

The Cabinet Member advised that Town and Parish Council were to be emailed with the strategy but this had been put on hold due to the call-in. He confirmed that engagement would take place once timeframes were known.

8. The wording of the strategy between the Cabinet reports in July and October altered from “consultation” to “engagement”. In the Long Newton area there was no provision for miles.

The Cabinet Member commented that the Council could not prioritise every local play area but the principles within the strategy would be applied fairly. In the Long Newton area, there was a low number of households and low play need and the current play area would cost thousands to replace. However, there was opportunity for engagement about re-purposing the site.

9. Did Cabinet reject the Select Committee proposals on consultation?

The Cabinet Member commented that the Cabinet decisions were within the spirit of the Select Committee report.

It was proposed by Councillor Ann McCoy and seconded by Councillor Jim Beall that the decision was taken in accordance with the decision making principles as set out in the Councils Constitution and that no further action be taken.

On being put to the vote, the motion was CARRIED (7 Councillors voting in favour and 5 Councillors voting against).

AGREED That no further action be taken.

## **ESC/29/25 Call In Children's Residential Homes**

The Head of Democratic Services presented a report setting out the background to the call-in and supporting documents.

The decisions taken by Cabinet, taken on 16 October 2025, in relation to the Powering our Future -Transformation Review: Children in our Care -Therapeutic Residential Care for Children Experiencing Mental Health Challenges and Behavioural Distress had been subject to a valid call-in. The call in applied to the following decisions:

RESOLVED

1. Inclusion in the Capital Programme be approved of a scheme to deliver two Council-run children's homes (one solo and one dual) providing three places in total, based on current estimated total capital costs of £1.467 million.
2. The Council's match-funding requirement of £733,500 be met from the existing Council Wide Investment Fund approved by Council in February 2025, utilising prudential borrowing already authorised within that approval, with associated borrowing costs to be met from within Children's Services budgets through reduced reliance on external placements.
3. The Director of Children's Services, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Children and Young People, the Director of Regeneration and Inclusive Growth, the Chief Financial Officer, and the Director of Corporate Services be authorised to:
  - a) identify and acquire two suitable properties within the approved budget envelope;
  - b) procure and let contracts for design, refurbishment, fit-out and equipment; and
  - c) take all necessary steps to register and operationalise the homes in line with the grant conditions and regulatory requirements.

The following Members and officers attended the meeting:

- Councillor Clare Besford, Cabinet Member for Children and Young People
- Ged Morton, Director of Corporate Services (Monitoring Officer)
- Majella McCarthy, Director of Children's Services

In addition, Members who had signed the call-in request had been invited to the meeting.

The following documents has been included with the agenda for the meeting for consideration by the Executive Scrutiny Committee:

- Call In Form
- Cabinet Report
- Decision Record
- Report of the Monitoring Officer

On behalf of the Councillors who had submitted the call-in request of the Cabinet decision, Councillor Shakeel Hussain urged the Committee to refer the matters back to Cabinet for reconsideration, explaining the rationale for the call-in, which related to:

- The decision had not been made in accordance with the Council's decision-making principles
- Expenditure was not proportionate to the issue
- There were no clear aims or information
- The options appraisal was weak

Questions from Committee Members and responses included:

1. How could £1.4m be justified for such a small number of children when there were 25 children in unregulated care?

The Cabinet Member commented that some of the children cost that much in revenue so it was proportionate to provide accommodation in-house with the wide range of services in place.

2. Could the Cabinet Member confirm that children with complex needs would be served by this proposal and that the expenditure was therefore justified?

The Cabinet Member commented that the proposals were trauma informed and there was place based evidence that we would deliver better outcomes in Stockton. She stressed that there was an aspiration to look after our children in the Borough. However, this was just one part of the puzzle; research also showed that the need for complex care could have been reduced in 20% of cases with earlier intervention.

3. Why were children being placed in un-regulated residential provision?

The Cabinet Member advised that Councils were forced to use unregulated residential provision as they had a statutory provision to provide care. However, when those provisions were used there were additional monitoring requirements and the Council worked with unregulated providers to get them Ofsted registered. Unregulated providers were not automatically unlawful and were often in adjoining Council areas.

4. Why would it be two more years before the houses were identified?

The Cabinet Member commented that purchase could be problematic for a number of reasons including finding the right property, obtaining planning permission, building works and registration requirements.

5. There was no clear business plan and lack of a clear strategy to deal with other children out of Borough.

The Cabinet Member reiterated that there were a range of measures being put in place including other residential provision, edge of care provision and measures to increase fostering capacity. She was confident that there was a clear strategy.

6. How will the proposals reduce our expenditure?

The Cabinet Member commented that the numbers of children in our care and their particular needs was ever changing. Doing nothing would not be an option and increasing capacity was essential. The Cabinet report did not, however, guarantee savings and the Council was more likely to have to use unregulated provision if they didn't have their own in-house provision.

7. It was crucial that there was engagement with Members and communities where homes were being identified. Would there be early engagement?

The Cabinet Member confirmed that there would be early engagement with Ward Councillors if there were plans to purchase a home in their ward.

It was proposed by Councillor Jim Beall and seconded by Councillor Carol Clark that the decision was taken in accordance with the decision making principles as set out in the Councils Constitution and that no further action be taken.

On being put to the vote, the motion was CARRIED (7 Councillors voting in favour and 5 Councillors voting against).

AGREED That no further action be taken.

**ESC/30/25 Stockton-on-Tees Plan - Progress 2025**

Following Council agreement of the Stockton-on-Tees Plan in 2024, it was agreed that Executive Scrutiny would receive bi-annual performance updates of the Tier 1 outcomes.

The indicators presented provided Executive Scrutiny Committee with an update on the Council's progress against the high-level outcomes identified in the Stockton-on-Tees Plan.

AGREED that the report be noted.

**ESC/31/25 Forward Plan**

AGREED that the Forward Plan be noted.

**ESC/32/25 Chairs' Updates**

AGREED that the progress updates be noted.

**ESC/33/25 Chair's Update and Executive Scrutiny Work Programme**

AGREED that the work programme be noted.

Chair: .....