

Council

A meeting of Council was held on Wednesday 22nd July 2026.

Present: The Worshipful the Mayor (Cllr Robert Cook)
Cllr Stefan Barnes, Cllr Jim Beall, Cllr Pauline Beall, Cllr Michelle Bendelow, Cllr Clare Besford, Cllr Marc Besford, Cllr Carol Clark, Cllr Nigel Cooke, Cllr John Coulson, Cllr Stephen Dodds, Cllr Richard Eglington, Cllr Lisa Evans, Cllr Kevin Faulks, 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 Tony Riordan, 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 Jim Taylor, Cllr Hilary Vickers, Cllr Marcus Vickers, Cllr Sylvia Walmsley, Cllr Alan Watson, Cllr Sally Ann Watson, Cllr Paul Weston and Cllr Barry Woodhouse

Officers: Tracey Carter, Clare Harper, Majella McCarthy, Angela Connor, Julie Butcher, Judy Trainer, Michael Henderson, Peter Bell, John Devine and Junita Agyapong

Also in attendance:

Apologies: Cllr Ian Dalgarno, Cllr Jason French, Cllr Nathan Gale, Cllr John Gardner, Cllr Elsi Hampton, Cllr Stephen Richardson and Cllr Katie Zagoria

COU/36/25 Livestreaming

The Worshipful the Mayor announced to those present that the meeting was being livestreamed.

COU/37/25 Welcome and Evacuation Procedure

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

COU/38/25 Declarations of Interest

In the interests of transparency, Councillor Tony Riordan and Councillor Norma Stephenson advised the meeting that they were veterans and Councillor Kevin Faulks advised that a number of his family members were or had serviced in the Armed Forces.

COU/39/25 Minutes

Consideration was given to the minutes of the meetings held on 20 May 2026 and 24 June 2026.

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meetings held on 20 May 2026 and 24 June 2026 be confirmed and signed by the Worshipful the Mayor as a correct record.

COU/40/25 Public Question Time

A public question had been submitted by Brian Wragg. However, the questioner was not present at the meeting therefore it was advised that a written reply would be sent to him.

COU/41/25 Appointments to Committees and Outside Bodies 2026/27

Consideration was given to a report asking Council to make nominations to the TVCA Investment Committee and note the changes to the TVCA Audit and Governance Committee.

The nomination to the remaining seat on the TVCA Investment Committee would be brought back to the next Full Council meeting.

RESOLVED

- 1) That Councillor Paul Weston be appointed to the TVCA Investment Committee.
- 2) That the following appointments be made to the TVCA Audit and Governance Committee:
 - Remove Councillor Mohammed Mazi – Replace with Councillor Niall Innes
 - Remove Councillor Niall Innes as substitute Member and replace with Councillor Hugo Stratton

COU/42/25 Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council Licensing Act 2003 - Statement of Licensing Policy Review 2026

Consideration was given to a report asking the Council to review and agree the proposed Statement of Licensing Policy.

RESOLVED That the Statement of Licensing Policy be agreed.

COU/43/25 Motions to Council

Motion 1

It was moved by Councillor Barbara Inman and seconded by Councillor Marc Besford:

“This Council notes:

- The increasing use of artificial intelligence to create realistic but false images of real individuals.
- Recent national concerns regarding the creation and circulation of AI generated imagery depicting women and girls in degrading, sexualised or otherwise inappropriate ways.

- That AI generated imagery can also be used to ridicule, humiliate or misrepresent individuals through the manipulation of their appearance, body shape, personal relationships or conduct.
- The growing concern that such behaviour may deter people from participating in public life, standing for election, or engaging in democratic debate.

This Council believes:

- Robust political debate is an essential part of democracy.
- Political disagreement should focus on policies, decisions and ideas rather than personal attacks on an individual's appearance or private life.
- Women and girls are disproportionately affected by online abuse, intimidation, misogyny and degrading portrayals.
- Those serving in public life should be able to do so without being subjected to manipulated imagery intended to humiliate, denigrate or undermine them.

This Council therefore:

- Condemns the use of AI generated imagery which seeks to degrade, intimidate, harass or misrepresent individuals.
- Reaffirms its commitment to respectful political discourse and democratic engagement.
- Encourages all elected representatives, political parties, campaigners and members of the public to engage in political debate responsibly and respectfully.
- Recognises the importance of creating an environment in which women, young people and people from all backgrounds feel able to participate in public life and consider standing for elected office.
- Resolves to support initiatives which promote civility, respect and participation in local democracy."

Councillor Tony Riordan moved, seconded by Councillor Niall Innes that motion be amended as follows:

"This Council notes:

- That abusive behaviour towards those involved in public life can take many forms, including manipulated imagery, intimidation, threats, harassment, discriminatory language, personal abuse and the dissemination of false or misleading information.
- The increasing use of artificial intelligence and other digital technologies including photography to create realistic but false images, audio and video of real individuals.
- Recent national concerns regarding the creation and circulation of AI-generated imagery depicting individuals in degrading, sexualised, misleading or otherwise inappropriate ways.
- That advances in artificial intelligence and digital technology have increased the ability to create manipulated images, audio and video capable of causing distress, reputational harm and public misunderstanding.
- That AI-generated imagery and other digitally manipulated content can be used to create false impressions, misrepresent individuals or events, spread misinformation, cause personal or reputational harm, and undermine public confidence in democratic debate and public institutions.

- The growing concern that such behaviour may deter people from participating in public life, standing for election, or engaging in democratic debate.

This Council believes:

- Robust political debate is an essential part of democracy.
- Political disagreement should focus on policies, decisions and ideas rather than personal attacks on an individual's appearance or private life.
- Civility, mutual respect and high standards of behaviour are fundamental to maintaining public confidence in local democracy and encouraging people from every background to participate in public life.
- Everyone should be able to participate in public life without fear of intimidation, abuse, harassment, discrimination or the malicious manipulation or fabrication of images depicting them. While recognising that different individuals and groups may experience abuse in different ways, this Council believes every person is entitled to the same dignity, respect and protection regardless of gender, race, disability, religion, age, sexual orientation or background, and condemns abuse motivated by misogyny, misandry or any other form of prejudice.
- Those serving in public life should be able to do so without being subjected to manipulated imagery, threats, intimidation, harassment, discriminatory behaviour or personal abuse intended to humiliate, denigrate or undermine them.
- Respectful political debate should challenge ideas, decisions and policies rather than relying upon personal abuse, ridicule, threats, discriminatory language or misleading representations of individuals.
- The standards expected of elected members apply equally within the Council Chamber, on social media, in public meetings and in all forms of political campaigning and communication.

This Council therefore:

- Condemns the use of all imagery generated which seeks to degrade, intimidate, harass or misrepresent individuals.
- Reaffirms its commitment to respectful political discourse and democratic engagement.
- Encourages all elected representatives, political parties, campaigners and members of the public to engage in political debate responsibly and respectfully.
- Recognises the importance of creating an environment in which everyone, regardless of their background or protected characteristics, feels able to participate in public life and consider standing for elected office.
- Resolves to support initiatives which promote civility, respect and participation in local democracy, including the promotion of the Members' Code of Conduct and guidance on respectful behaviour in public life.
- Reaffirms the expectation that all elected members, political parties, candidates, campaigners and supporters conduct themselves in a manner that promotes respectful debate, demonstrates mutual respect and maintains public confidence in local democracy.
- Condemns intimidation, threats, harassment, discriminatory language and abusive behaviour directed at any individual involved in public life, whether in person, in correspondence, online, through social media or by any other means.
- Encourages all elected members to consider the impact of both their words and actions, recognising that the tone and conduct of political debate can either encourage or discourage wider public participation in local democracy.

- Supports the consistent application of the Members' Code of Conduct, the Council's Constitution and the Nolan Principles of Public Life in promoting respectful behaviour and maintaining the highest standards of conduct expected of elected representatives.
- Recognises that maintaining a respectful, welcoming and inclusive democratic environment is a shared responsibility of all elected members, irrespective of political affiliation, and encourages members to lead by example both within and outside formal Council meetings.
- Requests that the Monitoring Officer circulate to all Members the relevant provisions of the Members' Code of Conduct relating to respect, bullying, harassment, discrimination, the use of social media and conduct likely to bring the office of councillor into disrepute, together with any existing guidance on maintaining respectful standards of behaviour both within the Council Chamber and in public.
- Establishes a cross-party working group, supported by the Monitoring Officer, to review the Members' Code of Conduct and bring forward recommendations to Council to ensure it remains fit for purpose in promoting civility, respect, accountability and high standards of conduct, including in relation to emerging technologies, online behaviour, any form of image alteration, intimidation, harassment and maintaining public confidence in local democracy."

Councillor Barry Woodhouse suggested that the wording of the amendment be further amended by the insertion of the words "AI generated imagery and" into one of the proposed bullet points so that it would read:

- "Condemns the use of AI generated imagery and all imagery generated which seeks to degrade, intimidate, harass or misrepresent individuals."

Councillor Tony Riordan agreed to incorporate this additional wording into his amendment and it was:

RESOLVED

This Council notes:

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- The increasing use of artificial intelligence and other digital technologies including photography to create realistic but false images, audio and video of real individuals.
- Recent national concerns regarding the creation and circulation of AI-generated imagery depicting individuals in degrading, sexualised, misleading or otherwise inappropriate ways.
- That advances in artificial intelligence and digital technology have increased the ability to create manipulated images, audio and video capable of causing distress, reputational harm and public misunderstanding.
- That AI-generated imagery and other digitally manipulated content can be used to create false impressions, misrepresent individuals or events, spread misinformation, cause personal or reputational harm, and undermine public confidence in democratic debate and public institutions.
- The growing concern that such behaviour may deter people from participating in public life, standing for election, or engaging in democratic debate.

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respectful behaviour and maintaining the highest standards of conduct expected of elected representatives.

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Motion 2

It moved by Councillor Marcus Vickers, seconded by Councillor Niall Innes and

RESOLVED

The Council notes:

- The courageous and profound contribution made by members of the Armed Forces community to the safety and security of the United Kingdom.
- The physical and mental health benefits of regular exercise, which is vital for veterans transitioning to civilian life or managing service-related injuries and PTSD.
- That there are approximately 8,200 veterans living within the borough of Stockton-on-Tees (UK armed forces veterans, England and Wales - Office for National Statistics)

The Council further notes:

- That Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council is a signatory of the Armed Forces Covenant, a pledge that those who serve or have served, and their families, should be treated with fairness and respect.
- That several other local authorities, including Manchester, Bolton, and Wigan, have already successfully implemented free leisure access schemes for veterans.
- That while concessions currently exist for those on War Disablement Pensions, many veterans fall outside these specific criteria but still face financial barriers to accessing leisure facilities.

The Council believes:

- That cost should not be a barrier to physical activity for those who have courageously served their country.
- That providing free access to council-operated gyms, swimming pools, and fitness classes is a tangible way to demonstrate our commitment to the Armed Forces Covenant.

- That such an initiative has the potential to reduce the long-term burden on local social care and health services by improving the overall wellbeing of our veteran population.

The Council resolves to:

- 1) Request the Cabinet to undertake a feasibility study into providing free gym, swim, and fitness class memberships for all veterans residing in the borough in line with current provider Tees Active.
- 2) Request that the feasibility study consider:
 - a) eligibility criteria;
 - b) the financial implications, sustainability and funding options;
 - c) operational and administrative arrangements;
 - d) potential partnership arrangements with Tees Active and other providers;
 - e) equality and legal implications; and
 - f) any other matters Cabinet considers relevant.
- 3) Request Cabinet, as part of the feasibility study, to engage with Group Leaders; Shadow Portfolio Holders; Tees Active and any other relevant partners to explore how such a scheme could be integrated into existing leisure provision, having regard to affordability, contractual arrangements and the continued sustainability of existing services.
- 4) Cabinet to consider the outcome of the feasibility study and report back to Council on its findings and any recommendations within six months. Ensure that any such scheme is accessible via the HM Armed Forces Veteran Card or other recognised service ID.
- 5) Should Cabinet resolve to introduce a scheme, it be requested to work with Tees Active, local leisure providers, veterans' organisations and community groups to promote the scheme and maximise awareness and uptake.
- 6) Should Cabinet determine that a scheme is appropriate following the feasibility study, Cabinet be requested, where practicable, to seek implementation in time for Armed Forces Day on 26 June 2027.

COU/44/25 Members' Question Time

Question 1

The following question was submitted by Councillor Ted Strike:

"On Saturday 20th June I attended the opening of the Riverside Urban Park. I would like to congratulate everyone involved from the Funding Grants to the team working on the design and the contractors as well as SBC Officers. This is a wonderful area and hopefully it will be well used and increase footfall into Stockton High St and lead to new businesses opening in the empty shops.

I would like to encourage the cabinet members to go even further.

My question to the cabinet member for regeneration is:

Will Cabinet look into the feasibility and costings of relocating the Police Station onto the High Street on the SBC owned land where The Post Office and The Mall were located? I believe this will encourage more people to come to the High Street as the Police presence will remove the fear many currently have of coming to the High Street, especially on an evening.

If they will not relocate the Police station here can you please advise me what the cabinet intend to do with this large piece of land?"

The Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Resources and Regeneration (Councillor Paul Rowling) responded with:

"I would like to thank Councillor Strike positive words about the waterfront development, even in the short time it has been open it is clear it is going to have a huge impact on the High Street, riverside and the wider central Stockton and North Thornaby area.

On his specific point regarding the police station in Stockton, I'm sure he appreciates that this not decision for this Council but rather one for Cleveland Police themselves. We are, however, working closely with the police on the future use of their assets across the Borough including the current police station which is already situated very close to the High Street and waterfront development

From a community safety perspective, Stockton Town Centre has seen significant improvements in recent years through the delivery of Operation Shield, a highly successful partnership initiative between Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council and Cleveland Police. Through targeted enforcement, visible patrols, intelligence-led activity and problem-solving interventions, the operation has delivered substantial reductions in crime and anti-social behaviour within the town centre. This work has played a key and important role in changing public perceptions of the High Street and strengthening confidence in the town centre as a safe and welcoming place to live, work and visit.

The successful opening of the Waterfront Urban Park has been supported by this strong partnership approach, with robust operational plans in place to ensure the park remains a safe, attractive and well-used space. Looking ahead, the Council and Cleveland Police will continue to build on the success of Operation Shield through the delivery of priorities set out within the Community Safety Strategy, including further work to reduce crime and anti-social behaviour, enhance feelings of safety, and support the continued regeneration of Stockton Town Centre over the coming years

In terms of the land in question, the Council has been reviewing its assets within the Town Centre to understand how they can be best used to deliver the objectives of the Central Stockton and North Thornaby Blueprint. This land will form a key part of the areas future so it is important that any development aligns with our objectives and we have already seen interest as a result on initiatives like the Care & Health Innovation zone and the waterfront development. In due course Cabinet will receive a report and will consider the future of the site."

Councillor Ted Strike asked the following supplementary question:

“Having spoken with my fellow Ingleby Barwick North Ward Councillor to the Police a number of years ago, they advised me that the current Police Station is about three times bigger than their needs. If they were to relocate that would release a prime piece of land right on the riverside front, which would be ideal for redevelopment. If that were to happen, would Cabinet consider going into a partnership with a builder to build high quality apartments and split the profits 50-50 to bring money into the Council.”

The Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Resources and Regeneration (Councillor Paul Rowling) responded with:

“The estate of the police is ultimately theirs to consider. Like many public sector organisations, their requirements have changed over the years, but ultimately, it is a decision for them. We are, however, a willing partner and work very closely with Cleveland Police.

From our perspective, we will always do whatever we can to facilitate them being in the correct location. And that just doesn't mean Stockton Town Centre, that means all of our town centres across the Borough. In terms of your specific request, if you look at the Central Stockton and North Thornton blueprint, you will see what our long-term aspirations are and in due course, you will see reports coming to Cabinet about those. Ultimately, in terms of the Stockton Police Station that is a police asset, and it is up to them what they do with it.”

Question 2

The following question was submitted by Councillor Marcus Vickers:

“How many tree-related issues or service requests were reported to the council during the last financial year 2025/26 and what is the exact number of outstanding or backlogged tree maintenance requests currently on file?”

The Cabinet Member for Environment, Leisure and Culture (Councillor Nigel Cooke) responded with:

“Our records indicate that in financial year 2025/2026, we received a total of 552 tree related service requests and currently have 136 requests pending. The Arboriculture team prioritise urgent, weather related and other works associated with the health of the tree initially although are also busy working their way through service requests and other works which have arisen as part of our tree inspection regime which is on a 1-3 year frequency depending upon location.”

Councillor Marcus Vickers asked the following supplementary question:

“I am sure all Members regularly get many concerns raised by residents. Therefore, would the Council commit to reviewing its tree management policy again to ensure it is effectively addressing resident concerns and reducing response delays?”

The Cabinet Member for Environment, Leisure and Culture (Councillor Nigel Cooke) responded with:

“Like all policies of the Council, there are natural points when these are reviewed, and amended, if needed. My personal view is that there is not too much wrong with the

current policy. Like Councillor Vickers, and probably every other elected member in this chamber tonight, we all get our share of emails with regard to tree related issues.

There are currently 136 pending requests; this is made-up of works deemed appropriate and those works picked up through the programmed inspections. I think that's something that that we should be really pleased with. We do have a small team of staff, and the service has been the subject of a scrutiny review in the past two years. That scrutiny review did not flag any major areas of concern. We do receive a high number of requests for work, many of which come from ward members for non-actionable works, such as shade, overhanging and satellite signal interference. These do not meet the criteria for intervention."

COU/45/25 Forward Plan and Leader's Statement

"We last met as full Council on 24 June. Since then, Cabinet met on 16 July and, as always, the papers and minutes are available on the Council's website.

Our next scheduled Cabinet meeting will take place on 17 September. As the next Forward Plan has not yet been published, I am not able to provide members with a detailed update this evening on the matters that Cabinet will be considering. Members will, of course, be able to access the Forward Plan through the Council's website and Modern.gov as soon as it is updated.

As we move through the remainder of the year, we know there will be challenging decisions ahead as we continue to manage the significant financial pressures facing local government. These challenges are being felt across the country, and Stockton-on-Tees is no exception.

However, we are fortunate to have committed councillors and dedicated staff across the Council. By continuing to work together, I am confident we can meet those challenges while maintaining our ambition for the Borough and delivering the best possible outcomes for our residents.

There is certainly plenty to be positive about.

Last month, Stockton Waterfront welcomed its first visitors during our Armed Forces Day celebrations. This marked an important milestone in the transformation of Stockton Town Centre and the work to reconnect our High Street with the River Tees.

It was fantastic to see residents and visitors enjoying this impressive new public space. The Waterfront is a major investment in Stockton's future, but it is also a place for our communities to enjoy, and I hope people from across the Borough will continue to make full use of it.

That success was followed by the excellent news that Stockton has been shortlisted as one of just 15 places in the running to become the UK Town of Culture 2028, from almost 400 expressions of interest.

This is a tremendous achievement and a reflection of Stockton's cultural heritage, the ambition behind our town centre transformation, and the contribution of local communities, businesses, cultural organisations and partners. While there is still work to do in the competition ahead, we should all be proud that Stockton is receiving national recognition for its cultural offer and its future potential.

I would also like to congratulate the young people recently elected to our Youth Council and as Members of Youth Parliament, as well as recognising the excellent presentation from BMBF at Cabinet last week. It is important that young people have meaningful opportunities to influence decisions and help shape the future of the place where they live, and I look forward to seeing the contribution they make.

On the subject of national representation, England did not quite manage to go all the way in the World Cup following their semi-final defeat to Argentina. Nevertheless, they provided plenty of entertainment and gave many of us an excuse to discuss tactics, or lack of.

The end of the tournament will also come as a relief to anyone who spent the last few weeks convincing themselves that a 2am kick-off was a perfectly sensible idea before a working day.

Fortunately, there is still plenty to look forward to closer to home.

The Stockton International Riverside Festival returns from 31 July to 2 August and, for the first time, will make use of the new Waterfront alongside the town centre and riverside.

This year's programme will feature around 100 performances from 42 companies, bringing together street theatre, dance, circus, music and art from across the UK and beyond. As one of the country's largest free outdoor arts festivals, SIRF remains one of the highlights of our cultural calendar and a tremendous source of pride for the Borough.

I am sure the festival will once again provide plenty of spectacle, enjoyment and, in some cases, complete bafflement as we all try to work out exactly how some of the performers manage what they do.

The Community Carnival on the Sunday afternoon remains a personal highlight for me, and I look forward to seeing the town filled with residents and visitors enjoying everything the festival has to offer.

The next meeting of Cabinet will take place on 17 September, and the next meeting of full Council will be held on 23 September."