

Boston Borough Council

Minutes of a meeting of the **Overview & Scrutiny Committee** held in the Committee Room - Municipal Buildings, West Street, Boston, PE21 8QR on Tuesday 17th June 2025 at 6.30 pm.

Present:

Councillor Paul Gleeson, in the Chair.

Councillors Neil Drayton (Vice-Chairman), Alison Austin, Anton Dani, Mike Gilbert, Andy Izard, Patricia Marson, Lina Savickiene, David Scoot, Helen Staples and Suzanne Welberry.

In attendance:

Councillors Anne Dorrian (Leader), John Baxter (Portfolio Holder - Housing), Richard Austin BEM and Stephen Woodliffe.

Officers:

Deputy Chief Executive (Programme Delivery) and Assistant Director - General Fund Assets, Director of Economic Development, Safer Communities Service Manager, Housing Standards Team Leader, Democratic Services Team Leader and Democratic Services Officer.

8 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Stuart Evans and David Middleton.

Apologies were also received from the Portfolio Holder for Housing, Councillor John Baxter.

9 Declarations of Interest

Councillor Mike Gilbert declared that he worked for a company which managed HMO's.

10 Minutes

The Minutes of the meeting held on 29th May 2025 were agreed and signed by the Chairman.

11 Public Questions

No questions were received from the public.

12 Plan for Neighbourhoods

At the discretion of the Chairman, this item was brought forward on the agenda and considered prior to the HMO Update item.

The Committee received a detailed presentation from the Director of Economic Development, regarding the Government's "Plan for Neighbourhoods" initiative.

Boston has been selected as one of 75 towns nationally to receive £20 million in funding to be delivered over a 10-year period, equating to approximately £2 million per year. The funding allocation comprised 75% capital and 25% revenue.

Members were informed that the funding was contingent upon the submission of a ten-year vision and a four-year investment plan, with the deadline for submission now brought forward to the end of November 2025. The plan was to be community-led, with the Boston Town Board responsible for leading engagement and shaping priorities. The Council's role was to support and facilitate, rather than to author the plan.

The Director of Economic Development outlined that engagement activities had already commenced, building upon previous consultations undertaken for the Boston Plan, Towns Fund, Levelling Up Partnership, and other initiatives. The Town Board had approved, in principle, the use of capacity funding totalling £450,000 to support engagement, project development, and early delivery.

Members discussed the report and commented as follows:

- There was concern regarding the composition and transparency of the Town Board, with a view that its membership should better reflect the diversity of the local community. It was suggested that the Board's decision-making processes should be subject to greater scrutiny to ensure fairness and accountability.
- The importance of Council oversight was highlighted, with a request that the Overview & Scrutiny Committee be given the opportunity to review the draft plan prior to its submission. Members also sought clarity on how projects would be selected and how they would align with the town's broader economic and social priorities.
- It was noted that projects should aim to stimulate economic activity and increase local spending power, rather than simply delivering capital improvements. There was a desire to ensure that investments had a tangible and lasting impact on the town centre and its residents.
- The potential use of revenue funding to support enforcement against dilapidated private sector properties was discussed. Members expressed concern about the visual impact of poorly maintained buildings and the need for action to improve the appearance of key streets.
- The absence of education and infrastructure from the current scope of the plan was raised. It was felt that education should be recognised as a key driver of integration and opportunity, and that the Council should explore how it could be incorporated into the plan's priorities.
- Concerns were expressed about the long-term value of the funding in light of inflation. It was proposed that the Leader of the Council write to the relevant Minister to request that the £20 million funding be index-linked or otherwise protected against inflationary pressures.
- Members welcomed the emphasis on community engagement and suggested a range of methods to ensure broad participation, including ward surgeries, market stalls, and door-to-door outreach. Parish councils were identified as important partners in the consultation process.

The Committee was advised that the Town Board was undergoing a transition to broaden its membership and improve community representation. The Government had reaffirmed its commitment to the funding following the change in administration, albeit with a shift in

emphasis from town centres to neighbourhoods. It was confirmed that the Council would bring regular updates to the Committee and that Members would be encouraged to support and participate in engagement activities.

The Committee noted the update and agreed that the draft plan should be brought back for scrutiny prior to submission in November 2025. The Chairman thanked the Director of Economic Development and the Leader for their contribution.

Resolved:

- 1. That the update be noted; and**
- 2. That the draft plan would be brought back to the Overview & Scrutiny Committee for review prior to submission in November 2025.**

[Councillor Helen Staples entered the meeting at 6.32 pm, during consideration of the above item.]

[The Leader of the Council and the Director of Economic Development left the meeting at 7.09 pm, following consideration of the above item.]

13 H.M.O. Update

The Committee received a comprehensive update from the Safer Communities Service Manager and the Housing Standards Team Leader regarding the Council's approach to regulating Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs), including current enforcement practices and anticipated legislative changes under the forthcoming Renters' Rights Bill.

Members were provided with an overview of the Housing Health and Safety Rating System (HHSRS), which underpinned the Council's enforcement powers. Officers explained the distinction between Category 1 hazards, which required mandatory intervention, and Category 2 hazards, which allowed for discretionary enforcement. The range of available enforcement tools included improvement notices, prohibition orders, and emergency remedial action.

It was noted that HMOs present heightened risks due to shared living arrangements and the potential for overcrowding, fire hazards, and poor property conditions. Officers outlined the criteria for mandatory licensing, which applied to properties occupied by five or more individuals forming two or more households. The Council also monitored non-licensable HMOs to ensure compliance with minimum standards.

The Committee was informed of the challenges in identifying unlicensed HMOs and the limitations of current legislation. Officers explained the potential benefits of additional and selective licensing schemes, which had been adopted in other local authorities to address concentrations of poor-quality housing and anti-social behaviour. However, it was acknowledged that such schemes required a robust evidence base and significant financial investment to implement.

The forthcoming Renters' Rights Bill was highlighted as a major reform, introducing a national landlord database, enhanced investigatory powers, increased civil penalties, and extended rent repayment orders. The Bill also proposed new offences, including unlawful eviction, and aimed to improve tenant protections across the private rented sector. Officers advised that statutory guidance was expected later in the year, with implementation anticipated in 2026.

Members discussed the report and commented as follows:

- It was noted that the number and concentration of HMOs in certain areas of the borough had increased significantly, leading to concerns about overdevelopment, loss of community cohesion, and pressure on local infrastructure such as parking.
- Members suggested that the Council should explore the introduction of planning controls, such as Article 4 Directions, to manage the proliferation of HMOs and ensure that new developments were appropriately located and balanced within the wider community.
- The importance of maintaining the external appearance of HMO properties was highlighted. It was observed that poor maintenance and visual dilapidation negatively affected the character of neighbourhoods. While internal conditions were regulated, it was acknowledged that external standards were more difficult to enforce.
- Concerns were expressed about the role of letting agents, particularly where they acted as intermediaries between landlords and tenants. It was felt that agents should be held accountable for property standards where they had management responsibilities, and that enforcement should reflect this.
- The issue of overcrowding was raised, particularly in cases where extended families or multiple households occupied a single property. Members questioned how such situations were assessed and what enforcement options were available when properties were technically compliant but clearly unsuitable for the number of occupants.
- The Committee discussed the challenges of identifying unlicensed HMOs and the limitations of current legislation. It was noted that some properties operated below the licensing threshold but still posed risks to occupants and the wider community.
- The forthcoming Renters' Rights Bill was welcomed as a significant step forward in improving standards and accountability in the private rented sector. However, concerns were raised about the Council's capacity to implement and enforce the new provisions, particularly in the absence of additional resources.
- Members supported the continuation of proactive inspection work and welcomed the collaborative approach taken with Lincolnshire Fire and Rescue and Lincolnshire Police. It was suggested that further investment in enforcement capacity would be necessary to meet future demand.
- The potential for using revenue funding from other programmes, such as the Plan for Neighbourhoods, to support housing enforcement and neighbourhood improvement initiatives was also discussed.

The Committee acknowledged the complexity of the issues and the need for a balanced approach that supported responsible landlords while protecting tenants and the wider community. It was agreed that further consideration should be given to the potential for additional licensing schemes and planning controls, and that the matter should be revisited following the publication of statutory guidance under the Renters' Rights Bill.

The Chairman thanked officers for providing members with a very detailed report.

Resolved:

That the update be noted.

[Councillor Suzanne Welberry left the meeting at 8.01 pm, during consideration of the above item.]

[The Councillor Stephen Woodliffe, the Safer Communities Service Manager and the Housing Standards Team Leader left the meeting at 8.17 pm, following consideration of the above item.]

14 Work Programme

The Committee considered its current work programme and noted the upcoming workshop scheduled for 3 July 2025. The purpose of the workshop was to provide Members with an opportunity to reflect on the Committee's priorities and to identify areas for future scrutiny.

During discussion, Members emphasised the importance of using the workshop to raise ward-level concerns and to explore issues that may benefit from more detailed examination. It was noted that the session would be informal, without the constraints of committee procedure, and would allow for open discussion and early identification of emerging matters.

Suggestions were made to ensure that Members could submit topics in advance, particularly where officer input or background information might be required. It was also confirmed that the workshop would be open to all non-executive Members, including those not currently serving on the Committee, and that executive Members could attend at the beginning of the workshop if they wished to raise specific local issues.

The Committee discussed the potential inclusion of topics such as:

- The development and delivery of the Plan for Neighbourhoods.
- The regulation and impact of Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs).
- Waste management and the storage of bins in public areas.
- The condition and safety of alleyways, particularly in relation to rough sleeping and anti-social behaviour.
- The responsiveness of highways maintenance and communication with the County Council.

Members welcomed the opportunity to shape the Committee's work programme and agreed that the workshop would be a valuable forum for collaborative agenda-setting and early scrutiny engagement.

The Meeting ended at 8.19 pm.