

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 9th December 2025 at 6.30 pm.

Present:

Councillor Paul Gleeson, in the Chair.

Councillors , Richard Austin BEM, Anton Dani, Neil Drayton, Andy Izard, Ralph Pryke, David Scoot and Suzanne Welberry.

In attendance: Councillor John Baxter, Portfolio Holder for Housing.

Officers:

Assistant Director - Regulatory, Assistant Director - Communities and Housing Services, Safer Communities Service Manager, Housing, Homelessness and Wellbeing Service Manager, Housing Standards Team Leader, Communications Manager, Group Manager – Insights & Transformation and Democratic Services Officer.

61 Election of Vice-Chairman

The Chairman requested nominations for the role of Vice-Chairman.

Resolved:

That Councillor Suzanne Welberry be appointed Vice-Chairman of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee.

62 Apologies for Absence

Apologies were received from Councillors David Brown, Anne Dorrian, Stuart Evans, Patsie Marson and Barrie Pierpoint.

63 Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were made.

64 Minutes

The minutes and the exempt minutes of the previous meeting held on 6th November 2025 were agreed and signed by the Chairman.

65 Public Questions

No questions were received from the public.

66 Housing Standards Policies

The Committee received a report introduced by the Housing Standards Team Leader, supported by the Group Manager – Safer Communities, and the Assistant Director – Communities and Housing Services. The Portfolio Holder for Housing was also in attendance.

Members were reminded that the Council was responsible for ensuring robust policies were in place for dealing with Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs), Empty Homes, and Housing Standards Enforcement matters. The three draft policies had been fully reviewed and updated to ensure compliance with statutory requirements, including the Housing Act 2004, and to promote consistency across the South & East Lincolnshire Councils Partnership.

The Officer outlined:

- The draft Empty Homes Policy, HMO Licensing Policy, and Housing Standards Enforcement Policy, attached as Appendices 1 (Draft Empty Homes Policy), 2 (Draft HMO Licensing Policy) and 3 (Draft Housing Standards Enforcement Policy) within the report, set out clear processes for officers and stakeholders, supporting safeguarding and health and wellbeing responsibilities.
- Alignment of fees and charges would provide a transparent and proportionate approach to enforcement and licensing across the Partnership.
- The policies aimed to improve housing standards, bring empty properties back into use, and ensure enforcement practices were fair, open, and legally compliant.
- Civil penalties of up to £30,000 per offence could be issued as an alternative to prosecution, ensuring flexibility and proportionality in enforcement.
- The review also considered climate and energy efficiency implications, recognising that bringing empty homes back into use and improving housing standards could reduce environmental impact.

Members welcomed the clarity and alignment of the policies but raised concerns about enforcement challenges, particularly regarding empty homes and HMOs. Key points included:

- Consistency Across Councils: Members supported the move to a single set of policies across the Partnership to ensure fairness and clarity for residents and landlords.
- Empty Homes – Complexity and Impact: The complexity of addressing long-term empty properties and the need for proactive engagement with owners was highlighted. Members noted the impact of empty homes on housing supply and supported enforcement measures where properties cause environmental or social harm.
- Council Tax Surcharges: Officers confirmed that Council Tax surcharges applied to long-term empty properties, escalating up to 400% of the standard rate after extended periods. Owners were legally required to notify the Council Tax team when a property became vacant; failure to do so may lead to enforcement action.
- Monitoring Processes: Members requested sight of the Council Tax team's processes for monitoring empty properties and applying surcharges, noting that a briefing would assist understanding of current practice.
- HMO Licensing and Standards: Members queried the fee structure and whether it reflected property size and layout. Officers confirmed that fees had been revised to

ensure proportionality and transparency, with calculations based on dwelling size and complexity. Waste management and amenity standards in HMOs were discussed, with calls for stronger cross-departmental working and periodic inspections.

- Unlicensed HMOs: The importance of collaboration with residents and partners to identify unlicensed or poorly managed HMOs was stressed.
- Future Legislation: Members noted the potential implications of the forthcoming Renters Rights Act, including opportunities for improved investigatory powers and landlord registration.
- Safeguarding and Health: Members welcomed the inclusion of safeguarding and health considerations within the policies and stressed the importance of robust enforcement to protect vulnerable residents.
- Communication and Compliance: Members asked how landlords and tenants would be informed of the new policies. Officers confirmed that guidance would be published online and shared through landlord forums and stakeholder networks.
- Climate and Energy Efficiency: Members noted that improving housing standards and bringing empty homes back into use could contribute to energy efficiency and reduce environmental impact, supporting wider climate objectives.
- Monitoring and Reporting: Members requested that future reports included data on enforcement activity, including the number of civil penalties issued and outcomes achieved.

The Committee agreed that the updated policies provide a clear framework for enforcement and recommended them to Cabinet for approval.

The recommendation was moved by Councillor Anton Dani and seconded by Councillor Neil Drayton.

Resolved:

That the Empty Homes Policy (attached as Appendix 1), HMO Licensing Policy (attached as Appendix 2) and Housing Standards Enforcement Policy (attached as Appendix 3) be recommended to Cabinet for approval.

67 Revised Housing Allocations Policy BBC/ELDC

The Committee received a report presented by the Group Manager – Housing Services, supported by the Assistant Director – Communities and Housing Services. The Portfolio Holder for Housing was also in attendance.

Members were advised that recent changes in national guidance and legislation, including the Allocation of Housing (Qualification Criteria for Victims of Domestic Abuse and Care Leavers) (England) Regulations 2025, required updates to ensure compliance. The review had taken a comprehensive approach to improve fairness, transparency, and operational efficiency while aligning with statutory requirements. The Housing Allocation Policy 2021 was attached as Appendix 1 and the Housing Allocation Policy 2025 was attached as Appendix 2 within the report.

The Officer outlined:

- Removal of local connection requirements for victims of domestic abuse and care leavers up to age 25.
- Introduction of clearer banding criteria, including time-based progression for Band 1 after 120 days of homelessness duty, additional preference for Armed Forces members, terminally ill applicants, and exceptional risk cases.
- Financial resource limit of £60,000 and a £500 housing-related debt threshold, with nuanced consideration for domestic abuse-related debt.
- Strengthened provisions for sensitive lettings, medical evidence requirements (including acceptance of GP patient summaries), and non-cooperation rules.
- Structured penalties for refusal of offers to reduce delays and void periods.
- Integration of equality commitments, including the Armed Forces Covenant and monitoring of demographic impacts. The policy had undergone an Equality Impact Assessment to safeguard protected characteristics.
- Consultation undertaken with housing providers, Lincolnshire County Council, housing consultants, and specialist agencies to ensure the policy is legally robust and operationally effective.

Members welcomed the clarity of the revised policy and raised the following points:

- Fairness and Transparency: Members supported the removal of local connection requirements for vulnerable groups and noted the importance of clear communication to applicants.
- Operational Impact: Questions were raised about how the new banding criteria would affect waiting times and whether additional resources were needed to manage assessments. Officers confirmed that streamlined processes would reduce assessment times and improve customer experience.
- Financial Thresholds: Members queried the £60,000 financial resource limit and £500 debt threshold, asking how exceptions would be applied. Officers confirmed that discretion would be exercised for applicants with disabilities or older persons housing needs.
- Domestic Abuse and Care Leavers: Members welcomed the strengthened protections for these groups and asked about engagement with support agencies. Officers confirmed ongoing collaboration with specialist services.
- Sensitive Lettings and Local Lettings Policies: Members emphasized the need for ongoing collaboration with housing associations to address tenancy management and neighbourhood issues, and supported the use of local lettings policies and sensitive lettings where appropriate.
- Avoiding Clustering: Members discussed the importance of engagement with housing providers and support services to prevent clustering of vulnerable households on new developments. Officers confirmed that registered providers had been consulted extensively.
- Future Monitoring: Members requested that performance data on allocations, banding decisions, and appeals be included in future reports to ensure transparency.
- Legislative Compliance: Members noted the importance of keeping the policy under review to reflect any further changes in national legislation.

The Committee agreed that the revised policy provided a robust framework for allocations and supported its recommendation to Cabinet.

The recommendation was moved by Councillor Anton Dani and seconded by Councillor Andy Izard.

Resolved:

That the revised Housing Allocations Policy, attached as Appendix 2 within the report, be recommended to Cabinet for adoption.

68 Social Media Policy

The Committee received a report by the Group Communications and Engagement Manager on the draft Social Media Policy, which had been developed as an addendum to the South & East Lincolnshire Councils Partnership Communications Strategy. The policy, attached as Appendix 1 within the report, set out a consistent approach to the use of social media across the three councils and aimed to strengthen engagement with residents while ensuring clarity, security, and accountability.

Members were advised that the policy:

- Established house rules for public interaction on council social media channels, including standards of behaviour and moderation protocols.
- Defined response protocols for service-related and non-service-related queries, ensuring timely and consistent communication.
- Provided guidance on content strategy, underpinned by audience insights and analytics, to improve reach and engagement.
- Included security and housekeeping measures, such as password management and access controls, to safeguard corporate accounts.
- Confirmed that while AI may be used for research purposes, AI-generated images or artwork would not be used in council posts.

The Group Communications and Engagement Manager also highlighted the scale of social media activity across the Partnership, recent engagement trends, and the need for a unified approach to comment moderation and crisis communication.

Members welcomed the draft policy and raised several points for consideration:

- House Rules and Moderation: Members stressed the importance of clear and accessible house rules for residents, ensuring that expectations around respectful engagement were well communicated. It was agreed that these should be prominently displayed on all platforms.
- Response Protocols: Questions were raised about how quickly service-related queries would be addressed and whether the proposed three-day response time was sufficient. Officers confirmed that the Communications Team would work closely with PSPS Customer Contact colleagues to maintain consistency and escalate complex queries promptly.
- Emerging Platforms and Flexibility: Members queried how the policy would adapt to changes in the social media landscape, such as the decline in X (formerly Twitter) and the rise of new platforms like Threads and Bluesky. Officers confirmed that the policy included flexibility for periodic review and adjustment.
- Use of AI and Content Standards: Concerns were expressed about the use of AI in content creation. Officers clarified that while AI may be used for research and analytics,

AI-generated images or artwork would not be used in Council posts, and any third-party AI content shared would be clearly acknowledged.

- Security and Access Controls: Members emphasised the need for robust password management and account security to prevent unauthorised access. Officers confirmed that the Communications Team maintained a secure, password-protected register of all corporate accounts and that passwords were changed quarterly.
- Resource and Training: Members asked whether staff training would accompany the policy to ensure consistent application across departments. Officers confirmed that training sessions would be delivered to relevant teams and that guidance would be available for officers managing sub-group pages.
- Managing Negative or Misinformed Posts: Members discussed the importance of protocols for handling misinformation and inflammatory comments. Officers outlined the approach of responding promptly, moving detailed conversations offline, and escalating safeguarding or legal concerns immediately.

The Committee agreed that the policy provided a strong framework for managing social media activity and supported its adoption, subject to the inclusion of clear review mechanisms and ongoing staff training.

The recommendation was moved by Councillor Anton Dani and seconded by Councillor Neil Drayton.

Resolved:

That the Social Media Policy, attached as Appendix 1 within the report, be recommended to Cabinet for approval.

69 Tree & Hedgerows Strategy Action Plan

The Committee received a report from the Environment and Sustainability Officer on the draft Action Plan to support delivery of the South & East Lincolnshire Councils Partnership Tree and Hedgerow Strategy. A copy of the Action Plan was attached as Appendix 1 and the Strategy was attached as Appendix 2 within the report.

Members were reminded that the Strategy, adopted in 2022, set out the vision to Protect, Plant and Participate, aiming to enhance green infrastructure, improve biodiversity, and contribute to climate resilience across the sub-region.

The Officer outlined:

- Baseline data showing tree canopy cover in South and East Lincolnshire at approximately 6.5%, compared to an England average of 12.8%, and hedgerow cover at 1.5%.
- Woodland opportunity mapping indicating significant potential in East Lindsey (908 hectares), with more limited opportunities in Boston (11 hectares) and South Holland (less than 1 hectare) due to fenland landscape character.
- Proposed actions including robust biosecurity measures, sourcing native species, developing long-term management plans, and engaging communities through initiatives such as Tree Warden networks and community orchards.

- The importance of aligning the Action Plan with the Local Nature Recovery Strategy and national targets for hedgerow creation (30,000 miles by 2037).
- Officers confirmed that the plan set out short, medium, and long-term targets for managing, protecting, and enhancing trees and hedgerows across the sub-region, with tree planting targets to be agreed as part of short-term actions.
- Emphasis was placed on the principle of “right tree in the right place” and the need for ongoing maintenance to ensure longevity. Boston’s fenland landscape was noted as an important characteristic to maintain. Delivery would align with the Local Nature Recovery Strategy for Lincolnshire, expected in late 2026, with a review to ensure complementarity.

Members welcomed the comprehensive nature of the Action Plan and raised the following points:

- Local Landscape and Character: Members emphasised the need to balance tree planting with the preservation of fenland character and avoid the loss of valuable grassland habitats.
- Community Engagement: Strong support was expressed for reinvigorating the Tree Warden network and expanding community orchard schemes, recognising their health and wellbeing benefits.
- Funding and Delivery: Members asked about external funding streams and carbon offsetting opportunities. Officers confirmed that grant funding options and partnerships would be explored to support delivery.
- Biosecurity and Provenance: Members stressed the importance of sourcing UK-grown stock and implementing strict biosecurity measures. Officers confirmed that procurement would prioritise native species and consider establishing community tree nurseries.
- Climate Resilience: Questions were raised about species diversity and resilience to future climate conditions. Officers advised that guidance would be sought from national bodies to ensure appropriate species selection.
- Monitoring and Reporting: Members requested measurable targets for tree and hedgerow planting and annual progress updates in future reports.
- Engagement with Partners: Members supported engagement with Boston Woods Trust and other partners to assist delivery and secure funding opportunities.
- Site Selection: Clarification was sought on the 11 hectares identified by Friends of the Earth, with confirmation that site selection would be informed by biodiversity mapping in the Local Nature Recovery Strategy.
- Tree Management Policy: Calls were made for a tree management policy and regular inspection regime for Council-owned trees. Officers confirmed this was being developed and was an objective within the proposed annual delivery plan 2026/27.
- Long-Term Strategies: Members stressed the importance of including thinning and felling plans in long-term planting strategies.
- Planning and Biodiversity: Concerns were raised about bright security lighting on new developments harming biodiversity, urging integration of ecological considerations across planning policies.
- Maintenance Responsibilities: Questions were asked about trees owned by Lincolnshire County Council and the Environment Agency. Officers confirmed engagement would be needed but responsibility remained with those bodies.
- Support for Local Planting: Members expressed strong support for community engagement and grant schemes to encourage local tree planting and stewardship.

The recommendation was moved by Councillor David Scoot and seconded by Councillor Anton Dani.

Resolved:

That the Tree & Hedgerows Strategy Action Plan, attached as Appendices 1 and 2 within the report, be recommended to Cabinet for adoption.

70 Annual Scrutiny Report 2024/2025

The Committee received a report presented by the Democratic Services Team Leader on the Annual Scrutiny Report for 2024/2025, a copy of which was attached as Appendix 1 within the report.

Members were reminded that the Council's previous scrutiny committees, the Environment & Performance Committee and the Corporate & Community Committee, were required by their Terms of Reference to report annually to Full Council on their work programme activities undertaken during the previous municipal year.

The Officer outlined:

- The Annual Report provided an overview of the work completed by both committees during 2024/2025, including policy reviews, performance monitoring, and task and finish group activity.
- The report served as a record of scrutiny contributions to policy development and accountability prior to the establishment of the new Overview & Scrutiny Committee in May 2025.
- Following consideration by this Committee, the Annual Report would be presented to Full Council on 12 January 2026.

The Committee agreed that the report accurately reflects the work undertaken and supported its submission to Full Council.

The recommendation was moved by Councillor David Scoot and seconded by Councillor Anton Dani.

Resolved:

That the Annual Scrutiny Report 2024/2025, attached as Appendix 1 within the report, be presented to Full Council.

71 Quarter 2 25/26 Performance Report

The Committee received a report by the Group Manager – Insight and Transformation on Quarter 2 Performance, covering the period to the end of September 2025. Details of the performance indicators were listed in Appendix A within the report.

Members were reminded that the performance framework included 92 indicators for Boston Borough Council, aligned to the Sub-regional Strategy. Of these, 27 were targeted

measures using a red, amber, and green rating system, and 65 were trend indicators providing contextual insight.

The report highlighted that overall performance was broadly on track, with remedial actions in place for off-target indicators. Commentary was provided for red-rated measures, including:

- Industrial Unit Occupancy – Two units were vacant at the end of Q2, with new tenants expected in Q3.
- Homelessness Decisions – Timeliness of decisions had improved following recruitment and restructuring, with performance now above target.
- Recycling – The annual recycling rate remained below the 45% stretch target; seasonal trends and contamination rates were noted, and Members requested updates on food waste initiatives and compliance with the Environment Act.

Members emphasised the importance of using quarterly data to identify emerging issues early. Several Members expressed concern about the continued gap in recycling performance and questioned whether the 45% target was realistic given current infrastructure. Officers advised that the target aligned with regional benchmarks and was intended to drive improvement rather than reflect current capacity.

Questions were raised about homelessness prevention outcomes, particularly the proportion of cases resolved through sustaining existing tenancies versus securing alternative accommodation. Officers confirmed that while overall prevention rates were high, more work was needed to increase in-situ prevention to reduce costs and pressure on temporary accommodation.

The Committee also discussed the value of trend indicators, noting that while they did not have targets, they provided useful context for policy decisions. Members agreed that homelessness, recycling, and industrial unit occupancy should remain priority areas for potential scrutiny and requested that future reports include commentary on workforce capacity and any financial implications linked to underperformance.

Members welcomed the clarity of the dashboard and raised several points for inclusion in future reports:

- Industrial Unit Data: Members requested that data on industrial unit occupancy and performance be included in the Quarter 3 report to allow comparative analysis.
- Temporary Accommodation Figures: Members asked for a detailed breakdown of families and children in temporary accommodation, including bed and breakfast placements.
- Fly-Tipping Trends: While collection rates were high (95%), Members expressed concern about increasing fly-tipping incidents across the borough and requested an update on hotspot areas and enforcement measures. Officers confirmed that monthly fly-tipping figures were published on the Council's website.
- Battery Disposal Incidents: Members highlighted recent national reports of fires caused by batteries in waste streams and asked for confirmation of any local incidents and steps being taken to raise public awareness.

- Target Review: Members queried whether performance targets could be reviewed before the Council's abolition. Officers confirmed that targets were reviewed annually and could also be adjusted quarterly if required.

Resolved:

- 1. That the report be noted; and**
- 2. That the requested updates, outlined above, be incorporated into future reports.**

72 Work Programme and Forward Plan

The Committee considered its current Work Programme and the Council's Forward Plan.

Members were reminded that the Work Programme was scheduled through to May 2026 but contained flexibility for additional scrutiny items. Officers emphasised the importance of aligning scrutiny activity with performance reporting and encouraged Members to use quarterly performance data proactively to identify topics for deeper investigation.

The Assistant Director – Regulatory outlined:

- The Forward Plan provided visibility of key policy decisions scheduled for Cabinet consideration, including significant matters such as the Destination Management Plan, Housing Standards Policies, and Tree & Hedgerow Strategy Action Plan.
- Members were invited to review the Forward Plan and suggest items for pre-decision scrutiny where appropriate.
- The Committee was updated on pending matters, including the Town Centre Task and Finish Group, which is expected to report early in the new year.

Members noted:

- The value of quarterly performance reports as a strategic tool for identifying emerging issues and shaping future scrutiny topics.
- Areas highlighted for potential scrutiny included homelessness performance, recycling targets, and industrial unit occupancy, reflecting concerns raised during consideration of the Quarter 2 Performance Report.
- The importance of maintaining flexibility to respond to emerging issues, particularly in light of forthcoming legislative changes and partnership priorities.
- Members requested that the Work Programme include updates on the Community Governance Review, Local Government Reorganisation implications, and progress on the Boston Town Centre Strategy.
- Officers confirmed that the Forward Plan would continue to be reviewed regularly, and that Members should notify Democratic Services of any items they believe warrant scrutiny.

The Committee agreed that the Work Programme and Forward Plan provide a clear framework for future scrutiny activity.

Resolved:

That the content of the current Work Programme and Council Forward Plan be noted.

73 Exclusion of Public and Press

Due to the Committee's approval of the exempt minutes under the Minutes item, this item was not required.

74 Exempt Minutes

Due to the Committee's approval of the exempt minutes under the Minutes item, this item was not required.

The Meeting ended at 8.24 pm.