

Minutes of: **OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

Date of Meeting: 4 June 2025

Present: Councillor D Vernon (in the Chair)
Councillors J Southworth, M Rahimov, A Arif, T Pilkington,
D Green, T Rafiq, E Moss, R Bernstein, G Marsden and
C Birchmore

Also in attendance: Councillor Thorpe (Cabinet Member for Finance and
Transformation)
Kate Waterhouse Executive Director of Strategy and
Transformation
Jacqui Dennis Director of Law and Governance
Julie Gallagher Head of Governance
Josh Ashworth Democratic Services

Public Attendance: No members of the public were present at the meeting.

Apologies for Absence:

OSC.47 APOLOGIES

No apologies were received.

OSC.48 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

OSC.49 PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

There were no public questions.

OSC.50 MEMBER QUESTION TIME

There were no Member questions.

OSC.51 MINUTES

That the minutes of the meeting held on 1st April 2025 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

OSC.52 CORPORATE PLAN 2025/26 AND QUARTER 4 PERFORMANCE REPORT

Councillor Sean Thorpe, Cabinet Member for Finance and Transformation, opened the meeting with a summary of the 2024/25 report. He described the year as one of both progress and disruption. A £2.5 million funding boost for Greater Manchester was secured to support infrastructure projects including a new tram stop, an interchange, and improvements to public transport. He also highlighted achievements in sustainable growth, such as affordable housing developments like Humphrey House, School Streets, and environmental initiatives like Pocket Parks.

In children's services, school attendance improved for the third consecutive year, and social worker caseloads decreased, enhancing support for families. These gains were made despite the disruption caused by a general election and a fast-tracked local election, which diverted resources.

Councillor Thorpe acknowledged that not all planned activities were delivered, largely due to time-consuming audits and inspections from Ofsted and the CQC. However, these helped the council refocus on its corporate plan and better understand its risks. He emphasised the strength of governance, supported by six boards and a Member Assurance Group. He also noted that workforce and communication strategies had been affected by resource constraints and delays from the Department for Education.

Councillor Moss raised concerns about the council's stance on academisation, questioning whether it truly improves outcomes for children. The response clarified that while education is vital, governance structures like academisation are less important than leadership and funding. Councillor Moss also questioned delays in the development of three special schools. Councillor Thorpe explained that the Department for Education's commissioning process is still ongoing and acknowledged the burden placed on families when children are sent to independent provisions outside the borough.

On EHCP performance, Councillor Thorpe reported that 94% of plans were completed within the 20-week target, though a few delays had temporarily affected the overall rating. He stressed that even a single delayed case could skew the data, but overall performance remained strong.

The LET'S DO IT strategy was discussed in detail. Councillor Moss asked whether it was being formally relaunched, and Councillor Thorpe confirmed a relaunch event was scheduled for 19th June. Moss also asked whether members would be reintroduced to the strategy, which Thorpe confirmed.

Councillor Rafiq praised the 2025/26 plan for being more focused and meaningful. He highlighted the importance of the workforce strategy, which had been delayed. Kate Waterhouse, Executive Director for Strategy and Transformation, explained that work was ongoing with the interim Assistant Director for HR to finalise the strategy, which would underpin the council's delivery plans.

Councillor Vernon asked how the new suite of performance indicators would improve reporting. Kate Waterhouse explained that the indicators were developed in collaboration with services and would be more visual and digital-friendly. Councillor Thorpe noted the difficulty in measuring real-world impact such as deprivation. Councillor Moss questioned the usefulness of KPIs without targets. Councillor Thorpe and Kate Waterhouse responded that benchmarking is used where possible, though some measures lack national comparators.

Councillor Bernstein welcomed Greater Manchester's 3.1% economic growth and asked how Bury compared. Councillor Thorpe said it was difficult to isolate Bury's data, but Kate Waterhouse explained that a basket of indicators such as earnings and business creation is used to assess local economic health.

Councillor Moss also asked about the indoor market strategy. Councillor Thorpe acknowledged the complexity of the issue, involving structural concerns and redevelopment plans. He assured members that traders were being supported, and discussions were ongoing.

Councillor Bernstein raised concerns about social cohesion, especially considering recent tensions and the upcoming 2026 elections. Councillor Thorpe said cohesion is not directly measured but is supported through partnerships with faith groups and the VCFA. Kate Waterhouse added that a cohesion strategy is included in the 2025/26 plan and that public perception will be tracked more explicitly.

Councillor Pilkington raised concerns about the accessibility of the Bury Directory for residents who are not digitally confident. Kate Waterhouse acknowledged the issue and confirmed a redesign is underway, with AI integration being explored.

Councillor Rahimov asked about the council's communication strategy. Councillor Thorpe said this is being led by Bridgette Aherne under the new cabinet structure. Kate Waterhouse added that sentiment analysis and impressions are being used to measure impact, and a recent recruitment campaign using billboards and buses had been successful.

Councillor Birchmore asked whether Humphrey House could be used for social housing rather than affordable housing. The matter was deferred to Paul Lakin, though Jacqui Dennis noted that land viability is a key factor. Councillor Thorpe added that the right-to-buy scheme complicates the issue, as housing benefits often fall back to government responsibility.

It was Agreed

- The report be noted

OSC.53 FORWARD PLANNER 25/26

There was a discussion around the forward planner for the municipal year going forward, suggested items for the year are below.

Forward Planner – Overview and Scrutiny

3rd July – Highways, Operations & Service Delivery

- Finance Update
- Operations Attendance (Highways Update)

9th September – Regeneration & Planning

- Local Plan
- Regeneration updates (potential site visit?)
- Strategic Additions and Updates

25th November – Audit, Finance & Community Safety

- Audit Overview
- Finance Strategy
- Community Safety Partnership (TBC)

5th February – Budget

- Budget Overview and Scrutiny (sole focus)

10th March – Innovation, Digital & Governance

- AI in Local Government – Governance and Ethics
- Progress on Bury Directory Relaunch
 - Communication Strategy
 - AI integration
- Workforce Strategy

OSC.54 URGENT BUSINESS

There was no urgent business.

COUNCILLOR D VERNON
Chair

(Note: The meeting started at 7.00 pm and ended at 9.15 pm)