

Minutes of: **OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

Date of Meeting: 10 February 2026

Present: Councillor D Vernon (in the Chair)
 Councillors J Southworth, M Rahimov, D Green, T Rafiq,
 E Moss, C Birchmore, G Marsden, J Harris and S Haroon

Also in attendance:

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

Apologies for Absence: Councillor A Arif and Councillor T Pilkington

OSC.86 APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Councillor Fitzgerald and Councillor A Arif.

OSC.87 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

OSC.88 MINUTES

That the minutes of the meeting held on 9 December 2025 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

OSC.89 PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

There were no public questions.

OSC.90 MEMBER QUESTION TIME

Councillor Berry asked a question about the cost of budget consultation and whether the response was poor and not value for money?

Councillor Thorpe responded stating that he didn't believe it was a poor consultation. 726 respondents was an improvement on the previous years consultation. Councillor Thorpe reminded member that the consultation is an exercise we undertake with the public and act as transparently as possible. He committed to getting back to Councillor Berry with cost information.

Councillor Berry asked a question about Elton Reservoir and whether the council will ensure all ecological surveys are acknowledged and protections put in place.

Cllr O'Brien responded confirming we could take confidence in the plan as it has been one of most scrutinised plans in country, in-depth and over a decade and has withstood the test at

public hearings. There is no dispute that this will cause an impact, however putting in as much protection as possible including mitigations around bio diversity net gain.

Councillor Mike Smith asked a question about budget and what exploration has been done on increasing rents will have on residents in general and especially those not in receipt of housing benefit. Councillor Thorpe responded confirming that we had followed national guidance on rent setting and an impact assessment had been carried out.

Councillor Mike Smith asked a question about the development frameworks and whether it is likely the requirements for PFE may make some schemes unviable or that developers can claim requirement for affordable housing is unviable?

Councillor O'Brien confirmed that developments are means tested through the planning applications and it is hard to pre-empt every question / application that comes forward having these frameworks in place is a way for the council to keep developers in check, Council has good reputation about going above and beyond requirements and delivering affordable housing he remains confident we can continue to deliver affordable housing

OSC.91 ANNUAL HRA BUDGET 2026/27 & RENT SETTING

Councillor Thorpe introduced the budget reports, noting that rental costs were increasing and that, following the budget-setting process, the Council faced a structural gap of just under £10 million. The priority remained to deliver a sustainable and legally compliant budget, as required by the Section 151 Officer. A zero-based budgeting exercise had been undertaken, which concluded that the authority was likely facing a deficit in the region of £14 million due to increased demand pressures, higher than expected pay awards, and inflationary costs.

Directorates had been challenged to identify savings, as discussed at the previous Overview & Scrutiny meeting. Some progress had been made, supported by an improved government settlement and a £1.6 million movement relating to the Greater Manchester pension fund. The remaining budget gap now stood at £3.9 million, reflecting significant progress, although the overall challenge was becoming increasingly difficult, particularly given rising demand in adult and children's social care and the increasing costs associated with meeting that demand. Work was ongoing to ensure that emerging pressures did not undermine the Council's future financial resilience.

The Chair, Councillor Vernon, noted that a substantial portion of the budget had been considered in December and acknowledged the delayed publication of the papers. The Director of Finance explained that the timing of the meeting had contributed to this, with Cabinet papers being published first, and confirmed that meeting cycles would need reviewing. Significant detail within the government settlement also required further analysis.

Councillor Birchmore asked questions regarding the highways budget (page 135), specifically the amount allocated for road resurfacing and the reason £9.5 million had been rephased. She also asked whether any staff redundancies were planned for the forthcoming year. Councillor Thorpe confirmed that project delivery was expected toward the latter part of the budget window, highlighting a maintenance allocation of £2.549 million, He confirmed that no redundancies were planned,

although reductions in agency staffing, improved management of sickness absence and exploring different ways of working would contribute to savings.

Councillor Moss raised a question about financial risks linked to school academisation. Councillor Thorpe explained that it was now easier to predict which schools might convert, with only a small number still outside trusts. Catholic and Church of England schools were under no pressure to academise, and any deficits would return to the Council upon conversion. He noted that a school could move between surplus and deficit within a year. The Director of Finance added that the Council had a clear understanding of school-related financial risks, particularly through services traded with schools, and confirmed that the Commercial Board monitored risks to ensure services remained cost-effective. Councillor Thorpe added that financial planning depended heavily on pupil numbers.

Councillor Moss also asked about the projected decline in reserves over the next three years and noted the absence of reference to the budget stabilisation reserve. Councillor Thorpe explained that the reserve covered both budget and business stabilisation but would not be sufficient to close the gap on its own. Detailed information was available in the annex, and Neil agreed to confirm its exact location. Councillor Green queried uncommitted reserves, and Councillor Thorpe said this work remained ongoing. The Director of Finance confirmed that some reserves had been identified and moved into the stabilisation reserve and that further review work across all reserves was underway.

Councillor Rahimov raised questions about proposed savings in temporary accommodation, acknowledging the difficulty of estimating demand. The Director of Finance noted that Cabinet had agreed a report in December outlining plans to purchase properties to support the service. Councillor Thorpe reiterated the importance of having a clear plan. Councillor O'Brien commented that demand projections were difficult due to national trends, but officers were reasonably confident in the planned savings even if demand continued to increase.

Councillor Birchmore raised further questions about leisure subsidies and rephasing of capital projects. Councillor Thorpe advised that leisure services were becoming more commercial, with growing membership and fee increases aligned to inflation, subject to consultation. Capital rephasing was monitored monthly by the regeneration board, with inflation factored into project planning and any additional cost requests requiring Cabinet approval.

Councillor Boles asked about preparations for recent changes to SEND funding. Councillor Thorpe welcomed the developments, including national funding to address local authority deficits, with an estimated 90% of Bury's deficit expected to be written off. Further changes were anticipated, and reforms to the wider SEND system were expected. The Director of Finance noted the announcement was very recent, with early indications that around £2 million of the deficit might remain, but councils would not be disadvantaged under the approach. Officers were working through contributions made to determine what could be offset, with the expectation that some funding could return to the stabilisation reserve.

Councillor Harris asked whether this would impact council tax levels. The Director confirmed that while it reduced financial risk on the corporate risk register, it would not directly reduce council tax.

Councillor Moss sought further assurances regarding the Council's financial resilience. Councillor Thorpe confirmed that several steps were in place before issuing a Section 114 notice and that the three-year settlement was an improvement on previous years. Over £100 million was spent on staffing and a significant sum on adult and children's social care. Demand reduction work was underway with InPower, initially in adult social care and now extended to children's social care. Examples included appropriate transitions from residential care to foster placements or family homes. All services would be expected to identify cost reductions in the new financial year, supported by new technology including AI. He noted the seriousness of the financial environment but remained confident that improved procurement and contract management would support value for money. Councillor Moss welcomed the activity underway.

Councillor Harris asked about greater in-house provision as an invest-to-save option. Councillor Thorpe explained that two accommodation projects were underway. While some children could be better placed in foster care, a shortage of foster carers remained. Others required residential care due to need levels. Ofsted registration processes took time, and although expanding in-house provision was important, it would not be achieved immediately. He noted the dynamic nature of children entering and leaving care.

Councillor Birchmore queried business rate multipliers, and Councillor Thorpe confirmed the Council was compensated. She also asked about the investment and debt portfolio, including risks associated with interest rate increases. Councillor Thorpe said this remained an ongoing issue, with ongoing work with treasury advisors. The Director of Finance confirmed borrowing had reduced by £1 million, that a mixed borrowing profile helped manage exposure, and that medium-term projections anticipated falling interest rates. Minimum revenue provision had been set aside accordingly.

Further questions were raised around levy assumptions and Council Tax collection, with the Director agreeing to verify figures referenced during the meeting. Councillor Marsden also asked about strategies to reduce sickness absence. The Executive Director outlined the positive attendance at work policy and support measures available to help staff return. Some roles required agency cover, but processes were in place for managing cases where staff could not return. The Chair asked whether a new plan was in place to ensure savings targets would be achieved. Councillor Thorpe confirmed that funding was secured for the next three years and that ongoing work in adult and children's services, temporary accommodation, technology investment, and procurement was focused on delivering value for money. The Director of Finance reinforced the need for focused delivery of savings plans, with work progressing on this. Councillor Thorpe acknowledged the challenge of reducing expenditure without impacting resident experience and stressed the limited options to increase income.

Members expressed thanks to officers, with Councillors Birchmore and Green noting the difficult circumstances under which staff were working and the commitment shown to providing quality services to residents.

The Director of Law & Governance provided clarification on income generation within cemeteries, noting increased demand for additional vaults and enhanced service offerings.

The Chair closed the discussion, echoed members' thanks to officers including Neil and his team.

It was agreed:

- to note the report and consider whether they wish to make any recommendations to Cabinet on the Annual HRA Budget 2026/27 & Rent Setting.

OSC.92 THE COUNCIL'S 2026/27 REVENUE BUDGET AND MEDIUM-TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY (MTFS) FOR 2027/28 THROUGH TO 2028/29

It was agreed:

- The Budget update be noted

OSC.93 WALSHAW DEVELOPMENT FRAMEWORK

Councillor Vernon recommended that the discussion should be on all three reports as a lot of the conversation would be relevant to each report. Members agreed with this approach.

Councillor O'Brien introduced the reports and thanked the team for all their hard work pulling the information together. Members were reminded that sites and frameworks being discussed have been a big issue in Bury over the last decade. The discussion at this meeting is not about rerunning those debates but about the reports presented.

There is a requirement to make sure there is the infrastructure to underpin each development including:

- Transport infrastructure such as appropriate new roads, tram stops, public transport, active travel
- Social infrastructure such as public services, schools, health, shops, local centres, recreation provision
- Green and blue infrastructure such as remining land nature parks, ecological mitigations, drainage

The frameworks seek to put in place the strongest possible safeguards to protect the infrastructure.

Subject to the decision taken at cabinet on 11 February 2026, the consultation around these frameworks will be launched. Welcome all constructive feedback, suggestions and opportunity to make these plans better, stronger and clearer.

Councillor Southworth asked a question around existing public rights of way and when these would be updated. Councillor O'Brien responded that this is an example where development can enhance some areas. Through planning conditions we can ensure that public rights of way are upgraded and made more accessible.

Councillor Southworth asked a further question regarding the ecology strategy plan and whether the council were going to purchase some of the open space specifically around the Walshaw site? Councillor O'Brien responded that the council would be looking to work with developers to ensure off road paths are maintained.

Councillor Harris asked a question around sustainability of the Walshaw site as well as existing issues with traffic, lack of school places and drainage. Councillor O'Brien responded that there will be new link roads and there is a separate report being taken to cabinet on the Bury West Transport Framework which looks in detail at the types of planning that goes into these schemes. Better public transport interventions especially connecting Atom Valley to Bury and a tram/train route between Bury and Heywood are being reviewed including making walking and cycling more accessible. Councillor O'Brien also highlighted the opportunities to fix some of the infrastructure around drainage and make it better than it is now including looking at sustainable drainage systems.

Councillor Harris queried the cost to upgrade water systems and Councillor O'Brien agreed that this would be an issue. It was highlighted that at planning application stage, they will need to be accompanied by sustainable drainage proposals.

Councillor Moss queried drainage issues at the Simister Bowlee site with increased hard surfacing from development that may exacerbate flooding on the existing area. Councillor O'Brien confirmed that the measures discussed regarding Walshaw will also be in place at Elton and Simister Bowlee.

Councillor Birchmore queried the term 'affordable housing'. Councillor O'Brien agreed it was a subjective word, there is a legal definition in the planning system. The exact tenure of properties at each site will be agreed at planning stage. A housing needs and demand assessment is being reviewed and will form part of the local plan. Members of Overview and Scrutiny will be able to review this at their next meeting.

Councillor Birchmore asked a further question around how affordable properties actually were, whether we should be clearer with the public about the cost and market rents, and whether we can include more detailed information in the consultation. Councillor O'Brien confirmed that the definition is subjective and that we would like to build more truly affordable housing. Councillor O'Brien agreed we could include a definition within the frequently asked questions.

Councillor Marsden queried whether there was the potential to be left with unfinished roads and what safeguards are in place to prevent this happening. Councillor O'Brien responded that we can be more confident on these sites than some other speculative sites. We have been working closely with the developers over a long period of time but there is always a risk and circumstances can change. There are safeguards in place and these will be reviewed on a regular basis.

Councillor Harris commented that house prices are only going to increase and developers are only out to make a profit and requested that before the

consultation opens could members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee see the questions and format so this can be scrutinised as well.

Councillor O'Brien confirmed that the documents that are before the committee are the documents to be consulted on. Questions will be open and chapter by chapter allowing all those responding to provide their feedback.

Councillor Harris queried whether the Council would take into account all comments received through the consultation and Councillor O'Brien confirmed this was the case.

Councillor Birchmore queried the in person consultations asking

- if we had a sample feedback form
- whether we would be recording the number of people attending the drop in sessions
- why there is no drop in session for the north of Elton site
- what information would be displayed at the drop in session

Councillor O'Brien confirmed that the frameworks would be available at all drop in sessions as well as the masterplan documents. Attendees would be able to discuss the frameworks with officers and residents can complete a paper form to submit their comments or submit them online. The number of people who attend each drop in session will be counted.

Councillor Vernon expressed concerns around the consultation and queried why we were doing it now. Councillor O'Brien confirmed he did not believe it was a short timescale and that he felt it was more important to hear from the public.

Councillor Green commented that over the last couple of years there has been similar consultation and her experience and feedback from residents was that it was a comprehensive consultation exercise. The views of residents were fed into process and changes made and it is key to ensure residents who will be impacted need to get the information, digest it, and feedback their thoughts.

Councillor Harris queried who would pay for the school and the upkeep and Councillor O'Brien confirmed it would be the developers. The day to day running costs for the school would be funded through the Department for Education.

Councillor Moss endorsed what Councillor Green had said and queried the access from Simister to Heywood Old Road. Councillor O'Brien advised that there is an existing traffic regulation order (TRO) in place. This is intended to reduce vehicle movement at peak time. The exact details regarding future TROs will be determined through the planning application process. However, the intention is that access on Simister Lane will remain restricted. There is an opportunity to use Simister Lane for public transport and active travel and one potential proposal could be that the existing restriction to be replaced by a 'bus gate'. This is a Traffic Regulation Order that would only allow buses, pedestrians and cyclists to pass through at certain times.

Councillor Moss asked a further question about why the Simister part of the allocation is being considered by Bury when the area is predominantly Rochdale. Councillor O'Brien advised that the allocation is split by administration boundaries

(the boundary being Heywood Old Road). Both Bury and Rochdale Councils have worked collaboratively with the site promoters to produce the draft Development Framework. New and improved access to existing local facilities in both Bury and Rochdale will need to be provided as part of any new development. New facilities provided within the site will be designed to be accessible to residents in both Bury and Rochdale. New residents will gravitate to whatever facilities or centres that they wish – whether this be Prestwich or Middleton (or elsewhere).

Councillor Birchmore queried the definition of high density, medium/high density, medium density, low density homes. Councillor O'Brien advised that a range of different house types and sizes will be provided across all parcels across the sites. The masterplans provide indicative densities to be achieved (i.e. the number of homes per hectare) but do not dictate how these densities will be delivered. This will be determined at the planning application stage.

It is likely that low density areas will be primarily houses (but this will include a mix of detached and semi-detached, as well as terraced houses and some flats), medium/high density is likely to be a mix of houses and apartments (likely to include more terraced properties and apartments, but also some semi-detached and detached), and high density is likely to be primarily apartments (but may also include terraced houses and semi-detached properties).

Councillor Birchmore requested these definitions are included in the documents and Councillor O'Brien confirmed they would be included within the frequently asked questions.

Councillor Birchmore queried the reference to Sites of Biological Importance (SBIs) and not priority habitats. Councillor O'Brien confirmed that the Development Frameworks refer to Sites of Biological Importance (SBIs) because they have defined boundaries for planning uses and are locally designated. SBI's are specifically designated as they have a high particular ecological value. This can include supporting priority habitats themselves, rare species or a range of habitat combinations. Priority habitats are broader ecological classifications, and they can relate to a range of ecological features. Some of these priority habitats are not always formally designated or precisely mapped for planning use. For example, hedgerows are a UK Priority Habitat, but it is unlikely that a hedgerow would be selected as an SBI in isolation. Nevertheless, the planning process needs to take account of SBI's and priority habitats, and any other ecological feature as part of mitigating for any loss. These will be taken into account as part of the statutory Biodiversity Net Gain requirements.

Councillor Birchmore queried what is meant by biodiversity net gain as referred to in all three planning frameworks? Councillor O'Brien confirmed that biodiversity net gain is an approach to creating and improving natural habitats introduced by Government in 2024. It means that development is required by law to have a measurably positive impact for biodiversity. Ecologists measure the baseline value of a site before development (including SBI's and priority habitats), and developers must then replace that loss through legal agreements. By law, they must deliver no less than a 10% increase in that baseline value. Councillor O'Brien also confirmed this would be included with the frequently asked questions.

Councillor Birchmore queried where it is proposed the additional secondary school provision will be provided if not by a new secondary school? Councillor O'Brien advised that financial contributions towards the cost of additional secondary school provision will be secured as part of relevant planning applications for each phase of development. Any financial contributions collected will be used to expand existing secondary schools in the area and will be determined through Bury Council's Education Needs and Demand Assessment, in accordance with evidence of need for provision generated by the development. There are a number of high schools in proximity of the site that could be expanded to cater for future demands. In terms of secondary school allocations for September 2026 indicative figures show that all Bury residents have currently been allocated a place and there are several vacancies across the borough.

Councillor Birchmore queried What safeguards are included within the plans to avoid the large sites being split into smaller sites in order to avoid the significant investment in infrastructure needed to properly service the sites and to avoid sufficient section 106 payments? Councillor O'Brien advised that by planning strategically across the site as a whole, the Development Framework will ensure that there will be a comprehensive and coordinated approach to the development of the whole site, including the delivery and location of supporting infrastructure and any necessary mitigation measures, design and placemaking principles.

The frameworks all specifically state that all development proposals on the three sites will need to contribute to site wide infrastructure, as well meet the needs within an particular parcel.

Councillor Birchmore expressed concern that there are a lot of things within the document that need explaining and is concerned that it is not fully understandable. Councillor O'Brien responded stating that everything that has been queried at this meeting would be picked up. The frequently asked questions would be live document and updated on a regular basis.

Councillor Rahimov asked for clarification that the amended frequently asked questions would be circulated to members before the consultation goes live and was assured they would be.

Councillor Vernon thanked members for their input into the scrutiny of the development frameworks.

An alternative motion was put forward to propose that the consultation does not proceed. The alternative motion was proposed by Council Birchmore and seconded by Councillor Harris.

On being put to the members of the committee, 4 members voting for the motion, and 5 members voting against the motion, the motion was lost.

It was agreed that Overview and Scrutiny:

- a. Note the content of the Walshaw Development Framework Supplementary Planning Document (Appendix 1) Classification: Open Decision Type: Key
- b. Provide feedback on the content of the Walshaw Development Framework Supplementary Planning Document (Appendix 1)

OSC.94 SIMISTER AND BOWLEE DEVELOPMENT FRAMEWORK

It was agreed that Overview and Scrutiny:

- i. Note the content of the Simister Bowlee Development Framework Supplementary Planning Document (Appendix 1);
- ii. Provide feedback on the content of the Simister Bowlee Development Framework Supplementary Planning Document (Appendix 1)

OSC.95 ELTON RESERVOIR DEVELOPMENT FRAMEWORK

It was agreed that Overview and Scrutiny:

- i. Note the content of the Elton Reservoir Development Framework Supplementary Planning Document (Appendix 1);
- ii. Provide feedback on the content of the Elton Reservoir Development Framework Supplementary Planning Document (Appendix 1).

OSC.96 URGENT BUSINESS

There was no urgent business.

COUNCILLOR D VERNON
Chair

(Note: The meeting started at Time Not Specified and ended at Time Not Specified)