

SPECIAL SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Tuesday, 14th October, 2025

Present: Councillor Kate Walsh (in the Chair),
Councillors Josh Allen, Bernard Dawson MBE, Zak Khan, Clare Yates and
Mohammed Younis
Co-optees: Shahed Mahmood

In Attendance:

Councillor Clare Pritchard and Councillor Munsif Dad
Steve Riley – Executive Director, Environment
Kirsten Burnett – Head of Policy and Organisational Development

Apologies Councillors Heather Anderson, Mike Booth and Clare McKenna

176 Apologies for Absence and Substitutions

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillors Booth and Anderson.

Councillor Dawson acted as substitute representative for Councillor Booth.

177 Declarations of Interest and Dispensations

There were no declarations of interest or dispensations made at the meeting.

178 Minutes of the last Meeting

The Minutes of the Special Overview & Scrutiny Committee held on 16th July 2025 were submitted for approval as a correct record.

Resolved - That the Minutes be received and approved as a correct record.

179 Chair's Update

The Chair informed the meeting that the vacant co-optee post had been advertised on social media but there had been no applications received. As such, she advised that it would be ineffective to try to fill the vacancy at this time as the process of appointment was time consuming and would potentially mean that any appointed co-optee would only be able to attend one further meeting before the period of the post was due to finish, by the end of the municipal year 2025-26.

180 Plan for Neighbourhood Funding

The Leader of the Council, Councillor Munsif Dad, updated the Committee on the Plan for Neighbourhoods funding awarded to Accrington and the work of the Neighbourhoods Board. He referred to the opportunities that the funding provided for the future, with a 10 year vision and 4 year investment plan.

He introduced Sami Smithson, the newly appointed Independent Chair of the Board and indicated that the Board was working hard to identify its priorities. He thanked all involved and indicated that he was looking forward to seeing how the Board developed proposals.

In addition, he informed the Committee that a further £1.5m had been received by Hyndburn via its new Impact Fund.

The Head of Policy and Organisational Development referred to previous proposed Government funding under the then Long Term Plan for Towns which had been administered by the Towns Board. She indicated that this had now been replaced. She reported that:

- The 'Long-Term Plan for Towns fund' had been replaced by the 'Plan for Neighbourhoods fund'. Plans for Neighbourhoods guidance still applied to Accrington.
- The Pride in Place Strategy and Programme was recently announced by Government and extended this investment to additional areas.
- There had been a further allocation of £1.5m to Hyndburn via the Impact Fund. This was separate from the £20m fund and was not administered by the Neighbourhoods Board.
- The £20 m funding would be managed through the Council, as the accountable body, working with the Neighbourhood Board and the local community.
- Pride in Place Strategy and Programme extends investment to additional areas. The delivery of payment was due to start in April 2026 and would be split 25% capital and 75% revenue.
- Capacity funding was available for governance and planning and £50k had been spent in 2024 by the previous Towns Board. Additional funds were now funding a part time Democratic Services Officer to serve the Board and some senior management advisory input. She also referred to their intentions to allocate funding to a Project Director role, that would give specialist support to take the project forward.
- Funding had been received of around £20m over a 10 year period, which would be released from April 2026. The funding would be used to regenerate communities, strengthen social infrastructure and empower local decision-making. A regeneration plan would need to be submitted to Government covering the first four years of the programme would need to be approved by Government before funding was redeemed. She informed the meeting that a masterplan was already in place for Accrington and the Board had identified some indicative project ideas.
- Board Membership would consist of an independent Chair, and four mandated Board members: the MP, a representative of the Police and Crime Commissioner, a local district Councillor and a LCC Councillor. There were also a number of other Board members in place or being recruited, with a view to representation from a range of sectors including youth, health and education sectors, community, voluntary and faith sector, environmental and commercial and business.
- The plan put forward would be submitted to Cabinet for endorsement.

The Independent Chair of the Board, Sami Smithson, referred to the importance of ensuring the draft plan was the best they could achieve and to the necessity of appointing the right skill sets to the Board.

Members requested that membership of the Board was made up of people across a diverse range of people, including young people, representatives of small businesses and even from different political parties. This should be done to ensure that there was no bias in decision making.

The Leader of the Council informed the Committee of the stipulations in the adverts for the posts and pointed out that 19 applications had been received. Sami Smithson reported that although there was not a cap on the number of people making up the Board, they intended to appoint people from various community backgrounds and different aspects of life.

Several questions were submitted to Committee members prior to the meeting and responses were provided as follows:

1. Why does the geographical boundary split some wards?

The geographical boundary for Accrington's Plan for Neighbourhoods is based on built-up area boundaries (BUA). The BUA are boundaries used by government bodies and policymakers to inform decisions related to housing, economic development, and urban planning. The Accrington BUA crosses 10 Hyndburn wards (Altham, Barnfield, Baxenden, Central, Church, Huncoat, Milnshaw, Peel, Spring Hill and St Andrews), ranging from a small estate in Altham to the whole of the Peel ward.

2. An additional funding stream of £1.5 m, called 'the Pride in Place Strategy and Programme, has recently been announced. Which areas does the funding apply to?

This funding is allocated at local authority level so can be spent anywhere in Hyndburn. It is separate from the Plan for Neighbourhoods Funding (which is also now being referred to as Pride in Place phase 1 funding).

3. Can the additional funding be used to meet any shortfalls from LUF funding and what restrictions are in place for the use of the funding?

For clarity, I understand that this question relates to the £1.5M Impact Fund, rather than the Plan for Neighbourhoods fund which is the subject of the report. The Impact Fund is capital funding and must be spent by March 2027. The Council is currently pulling together potential capital projects for further consideration. While there may be overlaps with other capital projects, including those funded from the LUF fund or – going forward – the Plan for Neighbourhoods Funding – this is a separate pot of money.

Members asked if:

- the Plans for Neighbourhoods Fund and the extra £1.5 m funding could also be used on the Market Chambers and the Dome or if this was heritage funding.
- what consultation was taking place on the draft plan
- suggested that the Project Director role was given to an external person rather than someone connected with the Council.
- asked what would happen if there was a change in political power and reference was made to a change in vision potentially wasting the time and money already invested.

The Leader of the Council pointed out that the £1.5 m funding could be used for projects across Hyndburn.

The Head of Policy and Organisational Development outlined some progress on the Market Chambers 'Dome' project and future plans for a delivery stage bid to National Lottery Heritage Fund for works on the building. She briefly outlined the extent, demand and risks of the project.

Sami Smithson stated that she believed considerations should be given to appointing the Project Director role externally. She explained that the draft plan would be consulted on before being submitted to Cabinet, in line with government deadlines.

The Leader of the Council referred to the issue of any possible change of political power in the future and indicated that the Chair of the Board had been appointed for a four year period and any plans to change this would require a good reason. In addition, the Head of Policy and Organisational Development pointed out that funding was provided over a 10 year period rather than as a one-off payment and was secured for Accrington and no other areas.

Resolved:

- 1) That the Board share the draft plan with Members of the Special Overview & Scrutiny Committee before being submitted to Cabinet;**
- 2) That the Board give priority to appointing an external person as the Project Director;**
- 3) That the Board provide updates on the Dome and the Market Chambers at future meetings of the Special Overview & Scrutiny Committees; and**
- 4) That the Board gave assurance that a code of conduct would be in place for members of the Neighbourhood Boards.**

181 Town Centre Levelling Up Project Progress

The Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Transformation and Town Centres, Councillor Clare Pritchard, submitted a report to provide the Committee with an update on the Council's Levelling Up funded (LUF) town centre projects. She provided an overview of the report.

The Chair of the Committee established key dates of the project including the start date and who had been the Cabinet Portfolio holder responsible at the time.

Members of the Committee submitted the following questions and comments:

- When were Burton's Chambers and the Market Hall were due to open.
- Had there been negotiations with the new operator of the Market Hall to ensure that all stalls would be filled on the opening day.
- The market traders would be spending a further winter on stalls outside in the square, were the market traders happy with that?
- Were there plans to keep the stairs in the Market Hall?
- Was funding allocated for contingency work, being taken from this year's Council budget or from next year's Council budget?
- What action was the Council taking to reduce the chance of any further shortfalls next year?

- What communication methods were the Council using to ensure that the public were kept informed of progress with Levelling Up projects?
- Information was requested about the tender process and the award criteria.
- What provisions are in place if an Operator went out of business?
- In respect of traders returning to the Market Hall, had there been an increase in the price of leases and what incentives were there for traders to return to the Market Hall?
- There was a request to define the extent and influence of the Market Hall Operator in the contract before it was signed and that a market strategy was created.

The Cabinet Portfolio Holder responded that:

- Whilst it was unlikely there could be further delays during the Winter, it was anticipated that Burton's Chambers and the Market Hall would be opening at the same time in late Summer 2026.
- She reported that the lease for the new operator for the Market Hall had not yet been signed so discussions were ongoing and the Council hoped all market stalls would be filled on the opening day.
- There had been some changes in the market traders on the town square but most were the same. She reported that the Market Manager and his team of porters were in constant contact with the traders and pointed out that some traders had enjoyed working outside.
- The stairs in the Market Hall would be remain in place but the plans allowed for them to be refurbished with new finishes.
- The contingency fund would be taken out of existing Council reserves but would only be authorised for emergency purposes.
- Krol Corlett had been appointed through a rigorous tender process and the criteria for selection had included social values.
- The Committee was referred to the website created specifically to keep the public updated with matters in Accrington Town centre – <https://accringtontownsquare.com>
- The £450k figure highlighted was a budget the Council had set aside to ensure it had sufficient funding to cover any of the legal required operator's Management Agreement costs during the first 2 years of Burton's Chambers operations where they could not be met by the income generated. The funding had already been allocated from the Council's reserves.
- She explained that a report would be presented to the next Cabinet meeting requesting agreement to allocate funding from the Council's reserves to meet the project budget pressures since the bid was submitted and the project team's recommendation to create a client contingency.
- In respect of traders returning to the Market Hall, she reported that the Council intended to remain competitive but that, ultimately, it was the responsibility of the Market Hall Operator. She confirmed that the cabins in the square would not remain on the square after the Market Hall had re-opened.
- She reported that social media would be used to attract young people to the Market Hall

The Executive Director, Environment explained the tender process and pointed out that it had been an open and transparent competitive flexible tendering process. He referred to the importance of social value being part of the criteria in awarding the

The Cabinet Portfolio Holder pointed out that there had been misinformation on social media about projects taking place in Accrington Town Square and requested that Members of the Committee ensured that all information made public was factual.

Resolved - **That Member comments and the report be noted.**

Signed:.....

Date:

Chair of the meeting
At which the minutes were confirmed