



South Tyneside Council

item 2

Our Place Scrutiny Committee 25 September 2025

Our Place Scrutiny Committee Minutes

17 July 2025

Present: Councillors: Brenen (In the Chair), Coombes, Cunningham, S Dean, N Maxwell, Oliver, Porthouse and Taylor.

Neil Govett (Senior Building and Compliance Manager), Phil Dixon (Head of Strategic Housing and Assets), James Maughan (Senior Manager - Public Protection), Samantha Pitt (Business Support Officer), Samantha Jobson (Operations Manager - Environmental Protection), Alex Carr (Technical Assistant), Dawn Rowland (Operations Manager - Private Sector Housing in Environmental Health), Sandra McGurk (Community Safety and Tenancy Enforcement Manager), Laura Turvey (Head of Strategic Transport and Environment), Joanne Chastney (Service Lead - Environmental Health), Tristram Gray, Senior Tree Officer, Jonathan Lunness (Scrutiny and Democracy Officer), Leah Stafford (Democracy Support Officer).

Independent Scrutiny Representatives in attendance: David Hern and Michael Maughan

Also in attendance: Cllr Gibson, Lead Member for Neighbourhoods and Climate Change.

There was 5 member of the public in attendance at the meeting.

1. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

2. Minutes of the Scrutiny Committee Meeting held on 12 June 2025

The minutes of the last meeting were agreed.

Agreed: That the minutes of the previous Committee Meeting be accepted as a true and accurate record.

3. Anti-Social Behaviour Policy

Submitted: Report of Public Protection

James Maughan, Senior Manager - Public Protection, provided the Committee with the updated South Tyneside Council ASB Policy. The policy outlined the Council's strategic approach to tackling anti-social behaviour, harassment, and hate crime across all tenures in the Borough. It emphasised early intervention, victim support, and proportionate enforcement, with a focus on safeguarding vulnerable individuals.

It was noted that the policy defined ASB in line with the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014 and examples were provided of behaviours considered ASB, as well as those excluded. The Council had committed to working collaboratively with partners including the Police, Environmental Health, Social Services, and voluntary organisations to address ASB through both informal and formal measures.

The policy also detailed the Council's responsibilities as a landlord, its victim-centred approach, and the mechanisms for reporting and investigating ASB complaints. Timescales for response were clarified, and procedures for monitoring, closing, and reviewing cases were outlined. The ASB Case Review process was highlighted as a means for residents to escalate unresolved issues.

The Council's commitment to equality, diversity, and continuous improvement through performance monitoring and staff training was highlighted in the report.

A Member asked whether Northumbria Police informed the Council of incidents, or whether this relied on victims to report them directly. The Officer confirmed that if a case involved a landlord, the police would share the information. In instances of more serious incidents requiring a wider partnership approach, all relevant parties would come together. However, the Officer clarified that, in general, the police were not obliged to share information.

A Member inquired whether money lending was a local issue. The Officer responded that this matter was handled by a team based in London and stated he would pass on further details.

A Member queried the powers held by Community Responders. The Officer explained that they were authorised to enforce all Public Space Protection Orders (PSPOs), citing the removal of alcohol as an example. He further clarified that possession of alcohol was not an offence, but refusal to surrender it when requested was.

An Independent Scrutiny Representative asked whether, in terms of data collection, the police and Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB) teams

identified hotspots based on high volumes of complaints and acted jointly. The Officer stated that all public protection teams worked closely with the police, particularly through the use of data. It was described as a multi-agency approach.

A Member asked whether the Council's powers were sufficient to tackle illegal vape shops. The Officer stated that closure orders could be issued following an investigation into the shop's stock. He added that the Government had proposed the introduction of tobacco and nicotine licensing, which would grant Local Authorities greater powers to act on such issues.

Agreed: That the report be noted.

4. Public Protection

Submitted: Report of Environmental Health

Joanne Chastney, Service Lead - Environmental Health, presented the following report to the Committee that outlined proposed updates and additions to South Tyneside Council's enforcement framework under the General Enforcement Policy for Public Protection Services. The report presented a range of policies designed to ensure consistent, transparent, and proportionate enforcement across a range of service areas. Each policy was summarised as follows:

Private Sector Housing Enforcement Policy

The Committee noted that this policy set out the Council's approach to regulating housing standards in the private rented sector. It prioritised informal engagement with landlords but detailed formal enforcement powers under the Housing Act 2004, including improvement notices and prohibition orders. The Housing Health and Safety Rating System (HHSRS) was confirmed as the assessment tool for identifying hazards.

Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMO) Enforcement Policy

This policy clarified licensing requirements for HMOs, inspection procedures, and enforcement actions for non-compliance. It aimed to ensure safe, well-managed accommodation and protect tenant

welfare. The Committee acknowledged the inclusion of both mandatory and discretionary licensing schemes.

Works in Default Policy

The Committee reviewed the procedures for undertaking works in default where property owners failed to comply with statutory notices. The policy included provisions for authorisation, cost recovery, and legal recourse, with the objective of safeguarding public health and safety.

Housing Civil Penalties Policy

This policy provided an alternative to prosecution for certain housing offences, allowing the Council to impose financial penalties under the Housing and Planning Act 2016. The Committee noted the criteria for determining penalty amounts and the inclusion of appeal mechanisms to ensure fairness.

Animal Licensing Enforcement Policy

The Committee considered the new policy governing enforcement of licensed animal activities under the 2018 Regulations. It detailed inspection protocols, risk ratings, and enforcement options for breaches, with the aim of maintaining high animal welfare standards.

Single-Use Vapes Enforcement Policy

The Committee reviewed the newly introduced policy addressing the enforcement of the ban on single-use vapes. It provided guidance on identifying illegal sales and outlined enforcement procedures. The policy supported environmental and public health objectives.

Internal consultation had been undertaken with relevant stakeholders, and the Place Scrutiny Committee had reviewed the policies in July 2025. No public responses were received during the online consultation on the single-use vapes policy.

A Member commented that they were pleased to see the HMO Policy had been strengthened. Another Member agreed with this.

One Member noted it was encouraging to see licensing requirements related to construction and asked whether there was any follow-up inspection process. The Officer explained that HMOs housing four or fewer individuals do not require a license, whereas those with five or more do. Once licensed, there is no formal obligation for inspections; however, in cases of anti-social behaviour (ASB), landlords were generally proactive in addressing issues.

A Member inquired whether Councillors could access records of HMOs within their ward. The Officer responded that there was currently no system in place to track this information.

A Member queried, in relation to illegal vape shops, what the timescale was between a test purchase being completed and a prosecution. They further noted that a £200 fine was not an effective deterrent, as many shop owners continue operating regardless. The Officer stated that the typical timescale was around six months from the last test purchase, though a closure order was usually issued in the interim. The Member then asked whether owners who relocate to new premises to continue illegal sales were further investigated.

The Officer confirmed that this had occurred and that a second closure order was currently in progress.

A Member queried whether intelligence on illegal vape shops was shared across Local Authorities. The Officer confirmed that this information was shared between Trading Standards teams. The Member added that some residents suspected these shops may be fronts for organised crime.

Agreed: That the presentation be noted.

5. Tree and Woodland Policy

Submitted: Report of Place Strategy

Tristram Gray, Senior Tree Officer, delivered a presentation to Members providing an update on the Tree and Woodland Policy. He also circulated the accompanying policy document for reference.

The Policy outlined how the Council managed trees under its responsibility, noting that South Tyneside Council oversaw approximately 300 hectares of tree canopy. Mr Gray highlighted the ecological, cultural, and psychological benefits of trees, including enhanced biodiversity, reduced pollution, and improved climate resilience. He emphasised the Council's legal duty of care—under both civil and criminal law—to ensure the safety of trees.

The scope of the Policy and its legal framework applied specifically to Council-owned or managed trees, excluding those on private land or school premises. Shrubs and other non-tree vegetation were also outside the scope. Key legislation referenced included the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974, Occupiers' Liability Acts 1957 and 1984, Highways Act 1980, Forestry Act 1967, and the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981.

Regular inspections with risk-based reinspection schedules reduced the overall risk of an incident. Tree work prioritised by risk level:

- Extreme: ASAP;
- Serious: within 7 days;
- Significant: within 4 weeks;
- Moderate: within 3 months;
- Slight: within 1 year;
- Minimal: re-inspect in 3 years;
- Non-risk-related work subject to budget and resources.

The team would only prune/remove trees, when necessary, with 3 of the most common reasons being it was legally required, safety or health of tree is at risk or routine maintenance. There was emphasis on preserving tree benefits and avoiding unnecessary work however exceptional

circumstance cases would be considered on an individual basis.

The Officer highlighted the benefits of tree planting including the support for the “Our South Tyneside Vision and Strategy,” responds to Climate and Ecological Emergencies, Member of North East Community Forest, commitment to tree replacement and canopy enhancement where appropriate, and following the right tree right place principle.

Common complaints received were regarding overhanging branches, shading, sap and leaves falling. The Council’s actions in response to dangerous trees was remedial or removal. To structural damage, they would need evidence. Light, TV, or seasonal issues generally did not cause grounds for action. Residents may exercise Common Law rights for minor encroachments.

The operating procedures document which was also given to the committee described the operation of South Tyneside Council’s Tree Team. It was a live ‘technical handbook’ for the day-to-day activities and functions of the team. Key parts of the document explained how risks would be managed. Having a written procedure was intended to achieve consistency, quality, and defensibility in practice.

A Member had questioned what had happened regarding trees grown on private property that were overhanging onto Local Authority land. The Officer explained that if a tree had fallen onto the highway, a letter would have been sent to the property owner. However, minimal action was required if the tree had extended into a park. In cases where an incident occurred due to overhanging branches, the responsibility lay with the private property owner.

A Member had thanked the tree team for their prompt action after they had reported that members of the public were being struck by branches while walking on the pavement. This had forced pedestrians, including those with disabilities, to divert onto a busy road, which had posed significant accessibility issues.

The Lead Member had described the Borough’s trees as fantastic and noted that work had been underway with South Tyneside Housing Services to develop the updated tree policy. He also congratulated the ‘Friends Of’ groups for their time and dedication.

6. Tennis Court Facilities

Submitted: Report of Place Strategy

Phil Dixon, Head of Strategic Housing and Assets, and Neil Govett, Senior Building and Compliance Manager, provided the Committee with a presentation outlining the refurbishment and future management of tennis court facilities across South Tyneside.

The improvements were supported by £30 million nationwide funding from the Lawn Tennis Association (LTA) and Central Government, which resulted in over 2500 courts across Britain transport.

It was noted that many existing tennis courts were in poor condition, subject to vandalism and anti-social behaviour, and had limited public use. The LTA identified five parks in South Tyneside were selected for refurbishment following site visits and assessment:

- Readhead Park;
- West Park, South Shields;
- Cornthwaite Park;
- Coulthard Park;
- Carr Ellison Park.

Other parks were considered but discounted due to the high cost of refurbishment.

To ensure long-term sustainability, the LTA required a management plan including sinking funds. As the Council did not have the internal capacity to manage the courts, a partnership was established with We Do Tennis, a not-for-profit Community Interest Company. Their responsibilities included ongoing court maintenance, delivery of coaching and recreational sessions, and organisation of inter-park leagues. A legal agreement with the organisation had recently been concluded, therefore communications were limited.

Gate access technology and an online booking system were introduced to improve accessibility and ensure court availability. Bookings were managed via an app or telephone, allowing users to select location, date, and time. This system was intended to increase participation.

A small booking fee would be introduced:

- £2 per hour for concession users;
- £4 per hour for non-concession users.

Concession rates aligned with existing STC Leisure Services. Additional options included free weekly sessions on Saturday and Sunday mornings, and annual passes priced at £40 per person or £60 per household (2 adults, 4 children). Courts were available seven days a week, from 6am to dusk, year-round.

Completed works included court resurfacing and installation of new gates and locks. Outstanding works included spray painting of surfaces (weather-dependent) and installation of new posts and nets.

The Committee were shown similar initiatives across the North East, including refurbished courts in Newcastle, Sunderland, and North Tyneside, supported by the same LTA funding programme.

The Playing Pitch Strategy, developed as part of the Local Plan, identified significant potential to improve park courts. Courts at West Park and Cornthwaite were rated poor, with others considered low standard. Issues included weeds, debris, broken fencing, and faded lines. The investment was seen as a key opportunity to meet public need and increase engagement through targeted promotion and participation initiatives.

Positive feedback had been received from residents regarding coaching sessions delivered by We Do Tennis. Testimonials highlighted improved engagement, enjoyment, and quality of instruction for children and families.

A Member queried why the tennis courts had been allowed to fall into disrepair, particularly given that residents paid Council Tax. The Officer explained that this was partly why the courts had previously been subject to charges—to fund their maintenance. However, once the decision was made to remove those charges, the Council no longer had the necessary funds to maintain them.

A Member asked who had initiated the process, and the Officer confirmed that the Lawn Tennis Association (LTA) had approached South Tyneside Council.

Another Member raised concerns about how We Do Tennis could be trusted to manage residents' personal data when booking courts. The Officer responded that the company was already operating in other Local Authorities and had secure systems in place. Additionally, the individual booking the court would be held responsible for its use, which was expected to deter intentional damage.

A Member queried who had responded to the LTA following their initial approach. The Officer explained that he had attended a seminar in late 2023 or early 2024, where the Playing Pitch Strategy was introduced, outlining future plans for tennis. Quarterly meetings had been held since to discuss tennis related matters, and by August/ September 2024, the funding offer had concluded. At that point, discussions were held with leadership. When asked who had ultimately made the decision to accept the offer, the Officer stated that it had followed extensive discussions among officers and the Lead Member.

A Member questioned whether the Contracts and Commissioning Scrutiny Committee had been effectively utilised, given that the contract had been signed prior to this meeting. The Officer clarified that this concern had been discussed at the Committee earlier that

week and it as noted the matter had been included in the Forward Plan. They acknowledged the need for improved communication going forward.

A Member queried when ward members had first been informed about the matter. The Officer responded that communication had taken place on the 1st of May. The Member remarked that earlier notice would have allowed for more meaningful input. In response, the Officer explained that the situation had involved unique legal circumstances but assured the Committee that efforts would be made to improve communication in future. They also expressed appreciation for the Committee's feedback.

A Member questioned whether anyone was monitoring We Do Tennis, given that the company was handling residents' money. The Officer responded that they had access to the financial figures and that weekly inspections were being carried out.

A Member raised concerns about We Do Tennis using the funds to appoint their own contractors for works. The Officer assured the Committee that this would be closely monitored and that best practice would be upheld. Another Officer added that We Do Tennis was a highly reputable company.

An Independent Scrutiny Representative expressed concern that the new rules excluded under-17s from playing tennis, as well as individuals who wished to play spontaneously. The Officer clarified that under-17s were still permitted to play, provided a responsible adult booked the court on their behalf.

A Member suggested that the Friends Of groups be invited to participate in discussions regarding the proposed changes to the facilities. The Officer acknowledged the importance of engaging members from all communities to ensure open and inclusive feedback, and confirmed that communications would be issued accordingly.

Another Member expressed that they shared their residents' frustrations over the lack of communication on the matter. The Officer admitted that the approach could have been handled differently and noted that lessons had been learned for future improvements.

A Member voiced disappointment that the Tennis Courts, historically free of charge, were now subject to fees. In response, the Officer clarified that charges had been applied during a previous period and were necessary to fund maintenance, ensuring the courts remained safe, clean, and visually appealing for users.

An Independent Scrutiny Representative questioned whether the process had complied with the Council's Constitution. The Officer

explained that approval from Cabinet would have been required only if the expenditure exceeded £350,000. As the cost fell below this threshold, the Lead Member and Officers had the authority to proceed.

A Member queried how communications had been issued via social media and to Members on 1st May, given that the agreement was only finalised on 30th April. The Officer responded that the Public Relations Team had prepared the messaging in advance, in collaboration with relevant parties, but had held off on publishing until the appropriate time.

A Member welcomed the programme, describing it as a positive development. Another echoed this sentiment, adding that they hoped to see a second phase of the scheme extended to areas such as Cleadon Park. The Officer stated that, subject to a few considerations, they would like to expand the initiative in due course.

A Member proposed that the programme be reconsidered by Cabinet and the Constitution Committee. The motion was moved and seconded, but following a dissenting voice, a vote was held by show of hands. The proposal was not carried.

Agreed: a) That the report be noted, and b) the Friends Of groups be invited in to the Town Hall to see the presentation and discuss.

7. Our Place Scrutiny Committee Work Programme 2025/2026

Submitted: Report of the Director of Governance and Corporate Affairs

Members were updated on the expected items for future meetings of the Committee.

Agreed: That the Work Programme for 2025/2026 be approved.

8. Chair's Urgent Items

There were no urgent items to be discussed.