

## **NORTHUMBERLAND COUNTY COUNCIL**

At a meeting of the **Northumberland County Council** held at County Hall, Morpeth on Monday 2 July 2018 at 3.00 pm.

### **PRESENT**

Councillor R.R. Dodd  
(Business Chair) in the Chair

### **MEMBERS**

Armstrong, E.	Moore, R.
Bawn, D.	Murray, A.H.
Beynon, J.	Nisbet, K.
Campbell, D.	Oliver, N.
Cartie, E.	Parry, K.
Cessford, T.	Pidcock, B.
Clark, T.	Purvis, M.
Crosby, B.	Quinn, K.
Dale, P.A.M.	Reid, J.
Daley, W.	Renner-Thompson, G.
Davey, J.G.	Richards, M.E.
Davey, S.	Rickerby, L.J.
Dodd, R.R.	Riddle, J.R.
Dunbar, C.	Robinson, M.
Dungworth, S.	Roughead, G.
Dunn, L.	Sanderson, H.G.H.
Foster, J.D.	Seymour, C.
Gallacher, B.	Sharp, A.
Gibson, R.	Simpson, E.
Gobin, J.J.	Stewart, G.
Grimshaw, L.	Stow, K.
Hill, G.	Swinburn, M.
Homer, C.	Swithenbank, I.C.F.
Horncastle, C.W.	Thorne, T.N.
Hutchinson, J.I.	Towns, D.
Jackson, P.A.	Wallace, R.
Jones, V.	Watson, J.G.
Kennedy, D.	Wearmouth, R.W.
Lang, J.A.	Webb, G.
Lawrie, R.	Wilson, T.
Ledger, D.	

## OFFICERS

Angus, K.	Executive Director of HR and OD and Deputy Chief Executive
Bainbridge, V.	Executive Director of Adult Social Care and Commissioning
Hadfield, K.	Committee Services and Scrutiny Manager
Henry, L.	Legal Services Manager
Johnston, P.	Interim Executive Director, Place
Lally, D.	Chief Executive
Roll, J.	Democratic Services Manager
Scarr, B.	Executive Director of Finance and Deputy Chief Executive

Around 15 members of the press and public were in attendance.

### 17. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Bridgett, Castle, Dickinson, Flux, Hepple and Pattison.

### 18. MINUTES

**RESOLVED** that the minutes of the annual meeting of County Council held on 2 May 2018, as circulated, be confirmed as a true record, signed by the Business Chair and sealed with the Common Seal of the Council.

### 19. DISCLOSURE OF MEMBERS' INTERESTS

Councillor Sharp declared an interest as a governor at two first schools in the west of the County.

### 20. ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Business Chair reported that a number of people particularly connected with Northumberland had received honours in HM the Queen's birthday honours list. These people would receive a letter of congratulations from the County Council.

Councillor Homer reported that she had attended an event at Cramlington Learning Village recently to see 1800 children participate in the Northumberland School Games which had been a fantastic event. She thanked the event organising committee and all those who had taken part. Councillor Homer also referred to the launch of Great Northumberland on

Saturday in Hexham which complemented the Great Exhibition of the North. She detailed some of the activity and urged all members to attend.

## **21. MEMBER QUESTIONS**

### **Question 1 from Councillor Robinson to Councillor Riddle**

I have been getting a lot of contact from my constituents about their housing needs and concerns. I know it's not really something we as a council have control over because the vast majority of the properties in question in my ward belong to a separate social landlord, but the public perception is that they are still council houses. I believe these social landlords still carry a social responsibility but sometimes it's not the easiest thing getting them to accept that fact.

After many attempts to try and get to the right person to deal with my issues and in a lot of cases not really getting past the front desk, my question is can we not have someone within our housing department who can be a liaison point for all members in their initial interactions with social landlords? They should hold direct contact details with the people who are tasked to oversee these problems within their respective organisation.

Councillor Riddle responded that where housing was owned and managed by a housing association or other third party organisation, the responsibility for the management and investigation of concerns rested with that organisation. In cases where elected members received complaints, they should initially be taken up with the housing association as the Council had no statutory powers to intervene. To assist, the Head of Housing and Public Protection would seek to collate and distribute to all Councillors a list of key contacts for each of the main housing providers operating in Northumberland. In circumstances where a member was unable to obtain a satisfactory response from a Housing Association, they should escalate their enquiry to the Head of Housing and Public Protection via Mrs Jo Gavin, PA, and arrangements would be made to have the matter investigated.

In the west of the County, he was aware that Karbon Homes had a list of contacts for that area. It would be helpful if this practice was rolled out across the County by other providers.

### **Question 2 from Councillor Robinson to Councillor Riddle**

During a recent Strategic Planning meeting we heard the application for the new school which is to be built over there. Every member was supportive and just about as passionate as the head teacher obviously was. My only concern was the traffic issue, specifically the lack of a drive in, drop off in safety and drive out again facility. One which in my view should keep traffic flowing and take out any need for parents to stop on the main road to decant their children.

I have exactly those sorts of problems in and around my ward and I bet most members do, but here we are building a new school from scratch and in that context I think a bit more thought should be applied to alleviate these

problems. I was initially informed this was the case and this had been factored in. On later investigation, I found this wasn't the case and the Council actually has a policy forbidding them so that we aren't seen to be condoning parents taking their children to school in private vehicles. The reality is that many parents **do** take their children to school in their own cars, and that's causing havoc in and around schools at start and finish times.

My position is that instead of waging some sort of subliminal war where we don't do something in case it looks like we condone it, shouldn't we be practically managing the issue in real time, certainly as far as new builds are concerned? My question is can we revisit the policy currently in place which forbids us, at a planning stage, from looking at practical and reasonable solutions to this problem?

Councillor Riddle advised that the issues relating to the use of private vehicles on the school run and the parking of vehicles in the vicinity of schools was acknowledged and recognised at both a local and national level. In local terms, the matter was referred to within the County Council's Sustainable Modes of Travel Strategy which stated "Pupil parking and drop off/ pick up areas should not be provided as this encourages car usage". The National Planning Policy Framework stated that the transport system needed to be balanced in favour of sustainable transport modes, whilst recognising that solutions would vary from urban to rural areas.

Notwithstanding this, the proposed design for Morpeth First School on the Loansdean site did include some space for drop-off and pick-up of children within the premises. The Sustainable Modes of Travel Strategy was not therefore precluding the provision of facilities, but it remained the view of officers that careful consideration of the extent of spaces for this purpose should be undertaken in consultation with Children's Services representatives, and as part of pre-design philosophy and concept, with the overriding concern being for the safety of young people.

The submitted Framework Travel Plan for the new First School in Morpeth contained reference to the drop-off spaces. These were intended to be available for those who had no choice but to drive to the site, thereby increasing the sustainable credentials of the school and seeking to minimise indiscriminate and unnecessary use of private vehicles.

Councillor Robinson responded that he had had a further look at the application, and there was no drop off point - it was a car park. Councillor Riddle advised that the policy could be looked at but the NPPF could not be contradicted.

### **Question 3 from Councillor Councillor Pidcock to Cllr Daley**

Given the shambolic nature of the West of Northumberland education consultation and the public nature of the humiliating climbdown is it not time for Councillor Daley to give way to someone more competent to deal with

these issues which have such huge effect on children and families but also on the fragile rural economy of these communities?

Councillor Daley did not agree that it was.

As a supplementary, Councillor Pidcock advised that Councillor Daley had received an invitation from the parents of a 12 year old pupil at Bellingham Middle School to undertake the journey their child would have to take should the school close, along a dangerous road and involving around 3,360 extra miles over three years, or 3.5 days on the bus, on some of the most treacherous roads in the county. He asked why Councillor Daley had not taken up that invitation, as he had done.

In response, Councillor Daley referred to the forthcoming meetings regarding education in the west of the county and reminded members that it was important not to prejudice the outcome of that. The Administration was presiding over one of the biggest investments in schools in the Council's history, and was one of the few councils in the country still investing in schools. He reminded members that Councillor Pidcock had chaired a FACS meeting in June 2013 which had supported the closure of Allendale Middle School and referred to a letter dated 13 December 2016 from the former Administration to the Minister of State for Education, which concluded with a statement that there was no alternative but to consider a solution which involved the closure of Haydon Bridge High School. He would therefore not accept any lecturing about rural schools from opposition members and was proud of the ambition he had for education in the whole of the County..

#### **Question 4 from Councillor Grimshaw to Councillor Oliver**

What assessment has the portfolio holder for corporate services made of pressures on the two year council budget since it was set?

Councillor Oliver advised that when the Administration was elected in May 2017 there had been numerous significant pressures within the Council's revenue budget not addressed by the previous administration, which had been referred to as a "black hole". A number of meetings had then taken place where the portfolio holders and the Directors met with the Leader and himself to discuss the pressures inherent in the budget at the time. As a result of those meetings, a budget was put together which was passed by Council in February. £24.1 million had been committed to the 4 year Medium Term Financial Plan to cover the recurrent pressures not dealt with by the previous administration, and nearly £1.8 million had been incorporated to cover the non-recurrent pressures they had been made aware of at the time.

There continued to be significant pressures on services - demand for both adults' and children's social care services was increasing; and all members were aware of the pressure on the highways service following the severe weather earlier in the year (which occurred after the Council had set its budget), and the state of the roads in Northumberland. The Administration was doing what it could to alleviate the pressure on the budget but there was a

limited amount of money and a lot of debt, which was expensive to service, and there were tough choices to be made.

The portfolio holders and the Cabinet received regular updates from the Executive Team, and the Leader and himself had regular meetings with the S151 Officer. The position was being constantly monitored.

Councillor Grimshaw asked for details of the “black hole” which Councillor Oliver had referred to as she assured members there had been no black hole, and disagreed with these comments. Councillor Oliver agreed to send Councillor Grimshaw a copy of the presentation slide which had set this out in detail at the Local Area Council meetings early in the year.

### **Question 5 from Councillor Grimshaw to Councillor Oliver**

What assessment has the portfolio holder for corporate services made of pressures on capital funding since the budget was set?

Councillor Oliver advised that the Administration had inherited a capital programme which would have taken the Authority from  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a billion pounds in debt to 1  $\frac{1}{2}$  billion pounds in debt, and would have cost the Council another £20m pa in debt servicing charges, so the Administration had had to look in detail at that programme. Council had set a new budget in February and the capital programme formed part of that. Things would arise that couldn't be anticipated and the Administration would have to react accordingly, but the position was being constantly monitored and a really high bar had been set for capital expenditure to ensure that any new proposals could be funded ensuring that there was a robust process in place to assess business cases. The Administration was also ensuring that capital expenditure was spread right across the County.

Councillor Grimshaw referred to the Ponteland school and leisure proposals, which was an example of the last administration's commitment to invest right across the County. However, a significant proportion of the funding package had been derived from S106 agreements from housing schemes surrounding Ponteland. If the housing development in Ponteland was not to take place, she queried whether the shortfall would be made up from the general fund, and whether the taxpayers across the County would be forced to pick up the bill, many of whom had children in schools also in a poor state of repair.

Councillor Oliver replied that the Administration remained committed to the Ponteland development, and indeed to investment across the County, and he expressed gratitude to the previous Administration for the work they had done on this, and on other investment across the County. Regarding S106 receipts, these could not be relied upon until planning permissions had been granted, and it would therefore be imprudent to budget for them. No revenue for the Ponteland developments had been budgeted for from S106 monies, so nothing had changed. Funding for the development had been put into the Administration's budget, and this had been approved by full Council.

### **Question 6 from Councillor Dungworth to Councillor Jones**

The Public Accounts Committee review of the adult Social Care Workforce in England found underfunded services with staff experiencing low pay and esteem. Four-fifths of local authorities are paying below the sector's benchmark cost for commissioning home care and Brexit may have a major impact on the workforce. With workers not valued in the same way as those employed by the NHS, providers are struggling to fill posts. Are you aware of any staff surveys that have been undertaken with home and residential care workers in Northumberland and if so what were the results?

Councillor Jones responded that staff who were employed in home care or in residential settings, who were employed by the Council and Northumbria Health Care Trust, were subject to an annual employee survey. In each year, there had been positive results across a number of questions in relation to job satisfaction.

The independent sector, who employed home care and care home workers, would utilise various tools for staff feedback. The Council as a commissioner of those services would receive information as part of its quality monitoring of services. In addition, the regulator of these services, CQC, as part of their annual inspection, would survey/interview staff. From those inspections, it was known that Northumberland had improving CQC ratings.

Councillor Jones reported that the commissioned home care providers did report some difficulties in staff recruitment, particularly in the more rural areas. The reasons given varied, and included competition from other sectors such as retail and tourism, and also the sparse population in the rural areas. The Council paid higher rates in the rural areas and worked with providers on their recruitment strategies. NCC had increased rates last year to match industry levels. The provider's response to improve staffing levels had been to address some of the broader issues that covered more than salary and include value based recruitment to ensure they appointed the right people in the first place who were committed to stay in the sector, and improved support through team working. The Council was reviewing the home care contract this year and would continue to look at contracted rates.

Councillor Dungworth queried whether the contract was still a temporary one. Councillor Jones advised that the contracts had now all been agreed.

### **Question 7 from Councillor Dungworth to Councillor Jones**

Has Northumberland a workforce strategy for adult social care?

Councillor Jones replied that the Council had recently refreshed its Social Care Workforce strategy, which linked to the regional and national workforce strategy – the Principal Social Worker for the Council and Lead for Social Work development actively updated the strategy and implemented plans to support it. In addition, the Council was currently out to consultation on its

Adult Social Care Market position statement, which covered services delivered by the independent sector – which also addressed workforce issues.

Councillor Dungworth queried whether there had been any impact from Brexit on the workforce in Northumberland. Councillor Jones replied that there was an awareness of the potential for impact, and this was being monitored, but it was less likely than in other parts of the country.

### **Question 8 from Councillor Dale to Councillor Dodd**

At the Full Council meeting on 3rd January 2018, it was agreed to set up a working group to discuss the use of Social media. Please could you let Full Council know if a meeting of the working group has taken place?

Councillor Oliver responded that he did not remember if this had been a decision to set up a working group, or to consider doing so. He acknowledged that social media was becoming an increasingly important part of Council communication and this was important because it enabled more direct, specific and better communications with residents. It also enabled direct participation in the democratic process for residents and it improved the accountability of members.

There was a policy which could be shared with members called Guidance on the Use of Social Media by Members. The Council also had a Social Networking Policy for employees which was updated in May 2018 following the introduction of GDPR. Members had been offered social media training previously, and the Communications Team was willing to facilitate refresher courses. This could be done through dedicated member training, or perhaps through the Local Area Councils, which would benefit local town and parish council colleagues too.

Councillor Dale reminded members that her question stemmed from a motion put to Council in January which had been seconded by Councillor Jackson. Six months later, nothing had happened. Measures were needed to tackle the nasty, provocative and illegal productions on Facebook which had caused a lot of harm to both members and public. She asked the Administration to invite a lot of people to be involved in this working group, especially those who had been harmed by the activities which had taken place.

Councillor Oliver apologised that he had not recalled it had been formally agreed as a motion. However, a number of improvements had been made in recent months to improve the Council's website, the ability for residents to communicate with the Council and the ability to pass on information to residents. Regarding harmful activity, he urged members to report anything suspect on the County Council's social media channels, but stressed that it would be unrealistic to expect the Council to police all social media.



## **Question 9 from Councillor Dale to Councillor Riddle**

As County Councillors we are instructed to use the County Council emergency telephone number 0345 600 6400. How many County Councillors have used this number over the last year?

Councillor Oliver advised that the 0345 600 6400 number was the general NCC out of hours contact number, and not an emergency telephone number. If there was any requirement for Elected Members to report an emergency they would always be advised to call 999. Members had previously been provided with a direct admin number for NFRS Fire Control to allow them to report ward or constituency matter concerns without navigating the recorded preference system which they would also be encouraged to use.

Regarding the number of times Elected Members had called the 0345 number, the only way this could be accurately confirmed would be by checking all potential numbers which councillors would ring in on against those recorded on Lagan. Officers would look to see if there were system changes and new procedures for councillors which could be introduced to make this level of detail recoverable in future.

Councillor Dale commented that she had a letter which stated that the emergency number was 0345 600 6400 and asked that all letterheads be checked. Councillor Oliver agreed that this would be done and asked for sight of the letter in question which would help in sorting out the issue.

## **22. CABINET MINUTES**

The Leader moved the following minutes of Cabinet:-

- (1) Tuesday, 8 May 2018
- (2) Thursday 14 June 2018

**RESOLVED** that:-

- (a) the following minutes be received:

- (1) Tuesday, 8 May 2018**
- (2) Thursday 14 June 2018**

- (b) the following resolutions be approved as they involve budget and policy framework matters requiring Council approval:-

- (i) Minute No. 4(1)(a) of the 8 May 2018** meeting relating to the capital funding for Haydon Bridge High School.
- (ii) Minute No. 13 of the 14 June 2018** meeting relating to the new capital proposals considered by Officer Capital Strategy Group.

Councillor Pidcock sought reassurance that the closure of Bellingham Middle School was not being agreed by supporting these resolutions. Councillor Daley confirmed that the resolution related only to the capital funding allocation for Haydon Bridge High School.

## **23. COMMITTEE MINUTES**

### **(1) Corporate Services and Economic Growth OSC**

These were presented by Councillor Bawn.

**RESOLVED** that the minutes of the Corporate Services and Economic Growth OSC be received.

### **(2) Family and Children's Services OSC**

These were presented by Councillor Renner Thompson.

With regard to Minute No. 6.2 (Safeguarding Activity Trends Report), Councillor Dale referred to the request from the Committee for benchmarking work to be done with comparable unitary authorities. She urged members to look at past work done by the Committee on safeguarding and children in need, where it had been identified that investment was needed to prevent children in need.

Councillor Renner Thompson responded that benchmarking had been discussed but as it had been done differently this year it made things difficult to compare this year. Officers had been asked to do their best with the data as the Committee had been keen for that information. Councillor Daley agreed on the need to look at best practice, and cited the example of the social worker academy which was now in its second year, and he felt sure the Committee would take on the points being made. He assured members that the Administration was focussed on the issues which needed addressing.

Councillor Dale commented that it was important to look at the cause of the problem, which was poverty, and to invest in these poorer areas.

Councillor J.G. Davey commented that the measures outlined, whilst to be applauded, did not target the real issues which stemmed from the Government's policy of Universal Credit, and from the Administration's manifesto, which excluded any investment in Ashington and Blyth. Councillor Daley reminded members that the Authority now had a poverty lead to work in these communities to address the issues. Councillor Pidcock advised members that the JCC had asked for an impact assessment of the reduction in teaching assistants in schools and the effect this was having on shoplifting and truancy etc.

**RESOLVED** that the minutes of the Family and Children's Services OSC be received.

**(3) Communities and Place OSC**

These were presented by Councillor Reid.

**RESOLVED** that the minutes of the Communities and Place OSC be received.

**(4) Health and Wellbeing OSC**

These were presented by Councillor Watson.

With regard to Minute No. 8 (Engagement about a possible integrated hospital and leisure development for Berwick), and the comment that “some communities were not in favour of a joint facility” Councillor Hill felt it would be more accurate to say that feedback from the public meeting and elsewhere would indicate that the community as a whole was not sold on the idea of a joint leisure/hospital facility. She asked that this be amended, with the Chair’s permission.

**RESOLVED** that the minutes of the Health and Wellbeing OSC be received.

**(5) Health and Wellbeing Board**

These were presented by Councillor Dodd.

**RESOLVED** that the minutes of the Health and Wellbeing Board be received.

**(6) Audit Committee**

These were presented by Councillor Hill.

**RESOLVED** that the minutes of the Audit Committee be received.

**(7) Devolution Working Group**

These were presented by the Leader who advised that it was hoped to get another meeting scheduled very quickly.

With regard to the points on page 93 regarding economic growth, Councillor Robinson queried whether the figures should be £30m for five years, not £20m as stated as he understood that it was a £600m deal. The Leader confirmed it was £20m for 30 years.

Councillor Reid enquired how close the original schedule was being adhered to. The Leader confirmed that there had been a slight delay in the arrangements for separating from NECA. The current target date for the Order to go before Parliament was 24 July and the new Authority would start very soon after that. There had been a lot of detailed work going on behind the scenes so it was important to apprise all political groups about the latest position and get some feedback.

**RESOLVED** that the minutes of the Devolution Working Group be received.

**24. DELEGATED DECISIONS**

**RESOLVED** that the delegated decisions be noted.

At this point Councillor Moore left the meeting.

**25. EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC**

**RESOLVED** that the press and public be excluded from consideration of the following item on the agenda as it involves the disclosure of exempt information of the description in paragraph 5 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A to the Local Government Act 1972 in that it contains information in respect of which a claim to legal professional privilege could be maintained in legal proceedings. The public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighs the interest in disclosure because the withholding of this information, which supports the timely development of a robust Northumberland Local Plan Core Strategy, is considered to be in the interests of the wider community within Northumberland, as opposed to the much narrower interests of those parties who would may benefit directly from disclosure.

**26. REPORT OF THE LEGAL SERVICES MANAGER**

**Report on Motion to Reinstate Northumberland Local Plan Core Strategy 2017 - Legal Advice**

The report provided members with confidential legal advice in support of members' consideration of the Motion to Reinstate the Northumberland Local Plan Core Strategy (agenda item 10).

The report was circulated and members were given time to read it.

Legal advice was given, and the motion was withdrawn.

The Common Seal of the County Council  
of Northumberland was hereunto affixed  
in the presence of:-

.....  
Chair of the County Council

.....  
Duly Authorised Officer