

NORTHUMBERLAND COUNTY COUNCIL

At a remote meeting of the **Northumberland County Council** held on Wednesday 4 November 2020 at 3.00 pm.

PRESENT

Councillor B. Flux
(Business Chair of the Council) in the Chair

MEMBERS

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

OFFICERS

| | |
|-----------------|---|
| Angus, K. | Executive Director for HR/OD and Deputy Chief Executive |
| Elwood, C. | Consultant, SOLACE |
| Foote, P. | Deputy Monitoring Officer |
| Hadfield, K. | Democratic and Electoral Services Manager |
| Hand, C. | Executive Director of Finance |
| Lally, D. | Chief Executive |
| Lancaster, H. | Deputy Monitoring Officer |
| McEvoy-Carr, C. | Executive Director of Adult Social Care and Children's Services |
| McLoughlin, J. | Executive Director Regeneration, Commercial and Economy |
| Mitchell, A. | Head of Corporate Governance |
| Morgan, L. | Director of Public Health |

97. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillors Ledger and Quinn.

98. MINUTES

With regard to Minute 79 (Member Questions), Councillor Hill advised that she had not had a response yet from Councillor Renner Thompson. This would be chased up.

With regard to Minute No. 84 (Review of Planning Functions), Councillor Dungworth asked for an update on what was being done to facilitate public participation at meetings such as County Council and LACs. The Business Chair advised that there were still some concerns around security but solutions were being looked at and he would keep members informed of progress.

With reference to Minute No. 82(1) (Corporate Services and Economic Growth), Councillor Grimshaw advised that she had not yet had a response to her query. The Business Chair advised this would be followed up.

Councillor J.G. Davey referred to the same minute and advised that he had not received a response to his query. This was noted.

RESOLVED that the minutes of the following meetings of County Council, as circulated, be confirmed as a true record, signed by the Business Chair and sealed with the Common Seal of the Council:-

- (a) Wednesday 2 September 2020

(b) Wednesday 23 September 2020

99. ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Business Chair advised that the following people particularly connected with Northumberland, had received honours in HM the Queen's birthday honours list:-

Sir Brendan Foster, Knighthood for services to International and National Sport and Culture in North East England - Stocksfield

Denise Yates MBE for services to Children and Young People - Berwick-upon-Tweed

Rhona Dunn BEM for services to the community in Morpeth, Northumberland - Morpeth

Lynne Grieves BEM for services to nursing during Covid-19 – Cramlington

He was also sad to report the death of former County Councillor Tom Saunders, who passed away on Sunday 25 October. Tom had been a County Councillor from 1989 until 2001, representing the Wansbeck Newbiggin West Ward and from 2001 until 2008, representing the Newbiggin Central and East Ward. He had been Vice-Chairman of the Council from 2005 - 2006 and Chairman from 2006-2007 and had served on many Committees and outside bodies. Many current members and officers would remember Tom as a true gentleman.

He then advised that the traditional service of remembrance would not be taking place but he was sure members would recognise the occasion in their own way.

The Leader welcomed the good take up of the free school meals scheme and thanked those involved for providing extra help with this during the school holidays. He had asked officers to prepare contingency plans should the Government not change their position on free school meals, to make provision during the Christmas and Easter holidays. These plans would be shared with Cabinet colleagues in the next week or so and then Group Leaders. On the wider issue of food poverty generally in the County, Councillor Pattison would lead on a piece of cross party work to identify some clear outcomes in order to meet the need which existed in parts of Northumberland.

Regarding Covid, the precautions which had been taken regionally had been applauded. He knew this had been difficult and he thanked all members for their support. The ongoing dialogue with members was important to explain and include them in decisions and he planned to host a public session with the Chief Executive and Director of Public Health so the public could ask questions.

Liz Morgan then updated members covering the following main points:-

- The UK was entering a period of enhanced restrictions put in place because of the rapid escalation of cases. However, the North East was the only region to have demonstrated a slowing in case transmission.
- In Northumberland there had been a reduction in the rate of increase - from 14-28 Sept weekly cases had risen by over 300 per week. From 29 Sept to 26 Oct the increase had dropped to 40 cases per week.
- A package of supportive measures rather than additional restrictions would have a bigger impact in reducing case rates and there would now be a focus in the next four weeks on moving these high impact interventions forward. These were:-
 - The development of a regional test and trace model
 - The development of a behavioural insight programme to support communities to adopt the right behaviours and actions
 - The development of models for the rapid and frequent testing of lateral flow tests
 - Additional measures to support the most vulnerable
 - A plan for the introduction and delivery of the vaccine with NHS England
- She believed that Northumberland's rates would drop as a result of the lockdown, and where Northumberland and the country was in four weeks' time would dictate whether the restrictions would be lifted and what tier Northumberland would be in afterwards.

Councillor Dungworth welcomed the Leader's statement regarding free school meal provision and felt it was essential for the Authority to fill any gaps in the next two school holidays. She also asked about timescales for the cross party working group and membership.

The Leader advised that he was getting a number of options from officers. However, he could not give a firm commitment at this stage to the Council funding everything because of the number of voluntary groups who would help with this. However, any child who wanted or was entitled to a free school meal during the Christmas or easter holidays would get one. He would work with Councillor Dungworth on this when he had options available.

100. QUESTIONS

Question 1 from Councillor Hill to Councillor Oliver

Do you agree that now all Council Committee meetings are being recorded and live streamed, that the recordings should remain up on the website and be accessible after the meeting?

Councillor Oliver responded that the intention had been to replicate the meetings process as much as possible and give people access to the digital meetings. He felt there was now more opportunity for people to get involved and he was keen for the public to participate. The Leader had recently asked for meetings to be left online on the Council's YouTube channel for 2 weeks, to give those people who were not able to attend the chance to watch at their convenience.

Question 2 from Councillor Hill to the Leader

Do you ever wonder whether joining the North of Tyne Combined Authority was the right decision for this Council and the residents we serve? If not, why not? If so, why so?

The Leader responded that it had been almost two years since his predecessor had signed with Newcastle and North Tyneside to bring things together. Labour Leaders and a Labour Mayor now worked with a Conservative Administration very successfully to drive forward an ambitious agenda of inclusive economic growth for the area. Significant investment was available and he provided some examples of the schemes which were being developed on the back of that. Progress had been steady rather than at pace and he agreed it would be good to progress things more quickly. He felt it would be appropriate to provide members with some regular information about what was happening at North of Tyne and Borderlands and the areas which would benefit.

Councillor Hill asked what the Leader's response would be to residents of North Northumberland who saw no projects in the north of the NoT area and those who feared that the lessons from the LA7, in that the area did not get its fair share of investment, would not be learned. She also asked what the Leader's response would be to fears that the NoT would grow and grow without residents being properly consulted on it.

The Leader responded that working together with others was very important and his relationships with other Leaders was very good. He would get details to Councillor Hill of what was both in project or about to begin for the north of the County.

Question 3 from Councillor Beynon to Councillor Hill

Do you agree all complaints regarding officers and members must be dealt with transparently and properly subject to due legal process? Would you and your committee support the proposition that any member, officer or former officer who wishes to provide any pertinent evidence in relation to any ongoing complaint or investigation may do so with confidence, enjoying the full rights of confidentiality and the protections accorded a whistle-blower and protection against victimisation?

Councillor Hill commented that she had asked questions herself on this subject matter in the past. She agreed with Councillor Beynon's sentiment but felt that the term "public interest test" could have been included. Also, just making a complaint did not make someone a whistleblower, it had to be in good faith.

Councillor Beynon asked whether Councillor Hill would condemn the use of non-disclosure agreements to prevent officers and former officers giving evidence to any investigation instigated by the Council. Councillor Hill replied that she had asked that question herself and had been informed by Councillor Oliver that sometimes it was in the interests of all parties to agree to an NDA. She didn't like them because it meant that sometimes justice was blocked. She suspected that once an NDA was signed it was final. If someone wanted to blow the whistle, they wouldn't sign an NDA.

Councillor Oliver commented that the Administration did not have a policy on NDAs.

Councillor Flux reminded members that the Council meeting was not the place to raise matters regarding issues being handled under other processes, and it wouldn't be allowed.

Question 4 from Councillor Purvis to Councillor Oliver

Can the Council confirm how many of the businesses that applied for Covid-19 grants went into administration days or weeks later?

Councillor Oliver advised that this data was not available. The Council had paid out £94.4m to 8426 businesses through the Small Business, Retail Leisure & Hospitality, and Discretionary Covid-19 support grants. The Council was the fourth fastest authority in the country to process the grants. The further restrictions which were imminent would cause further hardship but there was some more support coming from Government and officers were working hard to keep abreast of the guidance for the next set of grants.

Councillor Purvis asked whether there were any plans to recover money from businesses which had gone into administration. Councillor Oliver couldn't answer that because he didn't know if any had, and he wasn't sure if it would be recoverable in any case. However, he could ask the question.

Question 5 from Councillor Grimshaw to the Leader

Can the Council confirm that if a member is involved in debts to the Council that they are pursued in line with the same policies that any resident or business would find themselves subjected to?

Councillor Oliver confirmed that all debts were pursued in line with the Corporate Debt Recovery Policy, which was approved by full council on 20 February 2020.

Councillor Grimshaw asked if Councillor Oliver could confirm if a member was more than two months in arrears with council tax whether they were able to vote on the council's budget. Councillor Oliver understood that a check was done on this ahead of the council budget meeting each year and that this was in fact correct. However, as far as he knew, this had not happened.

Question 6 from Councillor Purvis to Councillor Oliver

How much extra has the council spent on Covid-19 related services since March and how much have we received from the Government?

Councillor Oliver advised that the Council had been allocated £19m in the first tranche for Covid pressures, including the most recent £3.164m tranche for the council tax hardship fund. £97.7m had been received in business support grants, £38m for business rates relief, £4.4m for adult social care infection control amongst others. Other funding was expected. Extra costs amounted to £31m.

Councillor Purvis hoped that the Administration was still lobbying Government for further funding. Councillor Oliver confirmed that this was being done strongly in a number of areas.

Question 7 from Councillor Dungworth to the Leader

Northumberland County Council residents were deeply concerned at the treatment of the now reinstated Chief Executive. Can the Leader confirm that no staff member will ever be treated like this again when they raise issues of concern?

The Leader advised that he was not going to comment on specific people but he assured members that every member of staff and every elected member could and should feel free to raise any concerns.

Councillor Dungworth asked what specific arrangements had been put in place to reassure staff that they could raise issues safely. The Leader advised that he had contacted all staff to let them know that he was proud of the work they did and that he genuinely wanted to see them working together. This had been particularly important in the last few months. His door was always open for any member or employee and was deeply grateful for their efforts.

Question 8 from Councillor Grimshaw to the Leader

Advance Northumberland Managing Director appears to be issuing statements to the press which are a cause for concern to both former and current board members from all political parties. What is the Council doing to address this issue?

The Leader replied that there was a protocol in place to ensure that messages given out by both parties were understood and agreed by both.

Councillor Grimshaw referred to conflicting statements issued to the press and asked for assurance that everyone was working together for the same outcome. The Leader agreed that it was important that Advance worked with the Council and that the relationship was understood by both sides.

Question 9 from Councillor Dunn to Councillor Wearmouth

Our three local Conservative MP recently voted against the continuation of the Government Job Retention Scheme during this second spike, resulting in a risk to on over 5000 jobs in Blyth Valley alone. Does the Council administration support this view?

Councillor Wearmouth responded that this had been overcome by events as the coronavirus job retention scheme had now been extended. The furlough scheme would roll forward and under the extended the scheme the cost to employers of retaining workers was reduced making it more generous. Business premises forced to close would receive grants up to £3,000 per month and he provided other details of government support. This was the largest package of government support in post war history. The furlough scheme had protected nine million jobs across the UK and self employed had received some £13bn.

Councillor Dunn commented that the vote to retain the scheme would be too late to stop many redundancy notices being issued, and it was not clear what

would happen when the current extension came to an end. Businesses needed some kind of certainty to avoid a job crisis and she asked what was the Council doing to address this uncertainty. Councillor Wearmouth replied that all plans needed to have an exit strategy and be able to adapt. The Council would continue to adapt its plans as the situation changed.

Question 10 from Councillor Dunn to Councillor Wearmouth

Approximately 30% of jobs in Northumberland were furloughed under the original scheme. The last release from the Office of National Statistics reported that 58.9% of businesses in the accommodation and food services industry, which accounts for 10,000 jobs in Northumberland, had reported a lower turnover. What specific action is the council taking to protect jobs here in the county?

Councillor Wearmouth advised that the Council had been monitoring the number of jobs furloughed in the County since the start of the scheme and it had been broadly in line with national figures with 32% of jobs furloughed nationally. In the North East more than half of the furloughed jobs were in retail and wholesale, accommodation and food services and manufacturing. This would continue to be monitored. The Council had been very aware of the impact of Covid restrictions, particularly on hospitality, leisure and tourism businesses and had been raising these issues with Government through regular feedback and in discussions with Government on the risk alert level of the County.

Working with colleagues in the North of Tyne Combined Authority and assisted by the region's MPs, the Council was putting in place programmes to support sectors to adapt to operating with Covid. He was proud of the Council's achievements in distributing funding as quickly as it had, supplemented by advice and support. The S151 Officer and the Head of Regeneration had done a fantastic job. Going forward, there would be some changes in the next four weeks and the Council would be working to ensure that any further support was distributed to businesses rapidly.

Councillor Dunn also wanted to thank officers for dealing so quickly with the issuing of grants. She asked how the Council could help restore public confidence in returning to restaurants and hotels, as this was not just a financial issue.

Councillor Wearmouth replied that this was about what the Council could do to ensure safe public spaces and there had already been some innovative work done on this, but he asked all councillors, business and the public to get in touch with the Council and think about how towns could be made safe places to shop and visit. He encouraged any business that had ideas about how to improve public confidence to get in touch.

Question 11 from Councillor Dungworth to Councillor Renner Thompson

Northumberland's three Conservative MPs voted last week not to extend the provision of free school meal vouchers up to and including the Easter holidays and this council has refused to step up and provide a county wide scheme, unlike most councils in the country. Rather than using capital budgets to provide a virtue signalling opportunity for individual councillors and placing additional responsibility on smaller councils and charities, will he guarantee

that this council will ensure that there is a county council scheme in place for Christmas and Easter?

Councillor Renner Thompson recognised that all children and young people should not go hungry in the 21st Century, and he was aware of the impact hunger could have on a child. Over the school half term, a range of measures had been put in place in order to support families whether they were in receipt of free school meals or not, and this had been planned for long before the political debate had been raised.

Northumberland Communities Together provided hardship funding to community groups to support 'holiday food' offers throughout the county and the Community Hub responded to individual requests for support as well as pop up events with food and activities. This complemented the other offers from businesses, food outlets and foodbanks around the County as well as the ability of members to use their small schemes funding to offer support where needed. Many members had taken up the opportunity of providing this support from all Groups.

Across the region there was a mixed response in relation to FSM offers with a number offering similar options to Northumberland and he provided some examples. The Council's review mentioned earlier would inform the offer to be provided for Christmas and Easter holidays.

Councillor Dungworth felt this confirmed there had been no plan until very recently, adding that members small schemes funding had been used by some members because there had been no other way of getting help to the families who needed it. She asked what was being put in place to provide help direct to those families in need rather than people having to apply, as the Council already had the data on families who qualified for free school meals. A proper system was needed or the most vulnerable children would be missed.

Councillor Renner Thompson replied that there had been a plan in place long before this debate had started through Northumberland Communities Together. If anyone had any issues with food, fuel, school uniform etc they could get the help they needed from NCT. Regarding the specific question Councillor Dungworth had raised, this would be looked at by the Working Group. None of the voucher offers set up across the region were automatic.

Question 12 from Councillor Dickinson to the Leader

Concerns have recently been raised that breaches of the Members Code of Conduct have occurred when members have taken part in matters in which they could be perceived to have a conflict of interest. Does the Leader agree with me that it is good governance for all members to declare their membership of organisations they belong to, whether their membership is in the public domain or not, in order to ensure transparency within the council and for the public?

The Leader felt that generally these rules were carried out by members and generally a very sensible attitude was taken.

Councillor Dickinson asked whether the Leader would commit to setting up a working group to look at the members' code of conduct and the inclusion of

organisations which should be listed which weren't currently. The Leader agreed that it would be good to have some guidance on what should be included and he would ask the Constitution Working Group to have a look at this.

Question 13 from Councillor Dickinson to the Leader

Will the Leader please confirm that officers of arms-length companies do declare such membership, for the same reasons, in accordance with the Officer Code of Conduct?

The Leader advised that there were separate guidelines on this but anyone who belonged to an organisation in public life, whether big or small, should look carefully at what they declared.

Councillor Dickinson asked if the Leader would be concerned to learn that Advance Northumberland had recently changed its policies so that officers did not need to declare that, and had moved away from the standard policy of the Council.

The Leader understood that the arms' length companies could have their own set of standards regarding declarations and did not need to follow the owning company in that regard. This was a decision for Advance Northumberland though it was important for the Council to have some oversight to ensure it was in keeping with the Council's priorities.

101. CABINET MINUTES

With regard to Minute No. 130 (Summary of New Capital Proposals), Councillor Dungworth asked why additional projects were being included when some of the existing projects were not going to be achieved e.g. Seaton Valley Federation Rebuild. Councillor Oliver advised that the capital programme was always a moving feast and this year it was greater than ever because of Covid. The Administration remained committed to an ambitious capital programme for all parts of the County. The change Councillor Dungworth had highlighted was to secure significant Government investment into a very ambitious regeneration initiative.

Councillor Dungworth asked what was happening with the Cowpen Road programme and was disappointed to learn of the change from a newspaper. Councillor Oliver advised that this had been picked up by the media from a public Cabinet report but he was happy to meet with Councillor Dungworth to talk about the issue.

With regard to Minute No.46 (Financial Performance 2020-21), Councillor Dale asked if the independent members could be involved in discussions regarding school meals. Also, she asked if the independent members could be invited to the Scrutiny meeting to discuss the budget in the interests of transparency. Councillor Oliver agreed any member could attend.

With regard to Minute 130.4 (County Hall Solar Carport Additional Funding) Councillor Dale asked if members could have a report on the full costs for the County Hall refurbishment programme since 2017. The Leader replied that the

solar carport was an important initiative for the climate change agenda. Regarding the refurbishment budget, Councillor Oliver advised that he would seek a breakdown of the expenditure to date against the original budget.

The Leader agreed with the point about transparency. He had asked whether some form of public question time session on the budget would be possible, and the budget would be discussed at the Local Area Councils in January.

Councillor Dungworth asked, in view of Councillor Oliver's comments on non-members attending Scrutiny, whether this meant the ban on non - members attending a meeting was no longer in place? Councillor Oliver replied this was a specific measure to deal with the joint Scrutiny meeting.

RESOLVED that:-

- (a) the minutes of the meetings of Cabinet held on 8 September and 13 October 2020 be received; and
- (b) the following resolutions be approved as they involve budget and policy framework matters requiring Council approval:-
 - (i) **Minute No. 128 of the 13 October 2020 meeting relating to the Borderlands Inclusive Growth Deal.**
 - (ii) **Minute No. 130 (3) of the 13 October 2020 meeting relating to the recommendation from the Capital Strategy Group on the Winter Services Fleet Systems Enhancement**

102. 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 Swinburn.

With regard to Minute No. 92 (Covid 19 Update), Councillor Dale reminded members about previous work done on the Marmot Review. She also referred to the more recent review carried out this year and suggested that Councillor Pattison look at these previous reports and also talk to the Citizens Advice Bureau who could provide information on how serious the situation was becoming in Northumberland. These reviews would provide useful background information.

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.

Councillor Gallacher referred to Minute No. 63.1 (Northumberland Waste Management Strategy) and welcomed the initiatives. However, he pointed out that in some parts of SE Northumberland rubbish could only be collected in black bin liners. This was an unsatisfactory situation from many points of view and he wanted to see the same progress being made to get away from this situation.

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

(4) Health and Wellbeing OSC

These were presented by Councillors Rickerby and Beynon, who thanked Liz Morgan and Jeff Brown for their regular updates to members on Covid.

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

(5) Health and Wellbeing Board

These were presented by Councillor Dodd who urged members to get their annual flu vaccination.

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

(6) Audit Committee

These were presented by Councillor Hill, who drew members' attention to Minute No. 50 (Chair's Announcement) and her comments regarding the role of the Audit Committee.

RESOLVED that the minutes of the Audit Committee be received.

(7) Pension Fund Panel (final meeting)

These were presented by Councillor Watson, who drew members' attention to the final paragraph expressing appreciation to officers and members of the Panel and Board. The Fund was in an excellent position at the moment and members of all parties had worked very well together. He would continue to work on the Tyne and Wear Panel to maintain the current high standards.

Councillor Kennedy echoed these comments. The Panel had worked exceptionally well with lots of effort from members and officers on some very complicated work, leaving the Fund fully funded at the end. He also thanked Councillor Watson for being an excellent Chair.

Councillor Dale felt members should credit Clare Gorman, Alan Culling and other officers for their excellent support.

RESOLVED that the minutes of the Pension Fund Panel be received.

103. REPORT OF THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF FINANCE

Approval of the Council Tax Support Scheme for 2021-22

The report sought approval for the Council Tax Support Scheme for 2021-22 to continue to provide support at a maximum level of 92% of Council Tax Liability. The full Council Tax Support Scheme document was available on the Council's website via the link below. Members had been advised to ask for a paper copy if they wished to receive one.

Councillor Oliver advised that the proposed Scheme remained exactly the same as the previous year. There had been exceptional circumstances this year with funding of £2.3m used to reduce council tax bills by up to £150 or the total amount payable by those on council tax support. Any money left remaining at the end of the year would be used to run something similar in April.

Councillor Grimshaw reiterated her previously expressed concerns about this Scheme. Poverty was on the increase more than ever before. She had asked at Scrutiny for this report to be deferred until a report had been received from the Revenue and Benefits Team about the difference between expected and actual income achieved and she did not believe that people were receiving as much as was being made out.

Councillor Oliver replied that he had explained at Scrutiny that this report could not be delayed because of the process and the requirement for consultation. He understood that with the funding that was left over for the start of the next financial year a typical single person living in a Band A property would have to pay about £2.50 a month. He understood that some people had difficulties but there was a lot of work going on across Council services to help people most affected.

Councillor Dungworth would not support the report. Much time had been spent in Council talking about the hardship facing residents but this policy of taking 2% in council tax benefit from people was still being pursued, when it often had to be paid back.

Councillor Reid asked if it was correct to refer members to the website if they wanted to see the policy as he thought it had been issued in the past and this was an important decision. He queried whether it could be deferred to a later meeting. Councillor Oliver advised that it couldn't be delayed because it wouldn't be possible to do the necessary consultation in time to meet the budget deadline in February.

The Business Chair advised that members had been encouraged to look at the report via the link clearly displayed, and had been asked to get in touch for a paper copy if they wanted one.

The Deputy Monitoring Officer advised members that the report did form part of the agenda, there were clear links from the agenda and from the report itself and she did not see a problem with that. The S151 Officer concurred. Councillor Oliver advised that in future it would be sent out by email as an attachment.

Councillor Dickinson felt there needed to be information more readily available to members and the report did include new information this year. This report affected 28,000 residents in Northumberland and members had to be really careful in making such decisions in accordance with the usual procedures. Many more people were in hardship and members were making comment about the way the information was being made available and he advised he would be asking for a named vote.

Councillor Oliver advised that the information was not substantially different, it was provided in a different format via a link as opposed to printing it all out and posting it, which supported the climate change agenda.

Councillor Hill commented that it was clear in the agenda that if members wanted a paper copy they should ask and the link was there so she did not feel there was a legal issue. Things were very tight and other council tax support schemes were less generous, but she had constantly voted against this as it did make a difference to some people and the Council had to protect its most vulnerable residents.

Councillor Campbell asked how many people had been pursued for the £2.50. People were losing their jobs every day and these were exceptional times. People didn't have enough money to feed their children and exceptions needed to be made. She urged Councillor Oliver to think again. Councillor Oliver advised that support was there for people who needed it.

The S151 Officer advised members that the link was in the paper and accessible to members and members also had the opportunity to receive a paper copy if they wished. The document was very large and would have incurred significant postage costs to all members as well as printing. The document was largely unchanged from last year, just updated to reflect key dates and some elements still needed to be updated to take account of other matters published by other authorities, so the document would not be the final version in any case. The vote for members was on the principles of the scheme, which were unchanged from last year.

On the required number of members asking for a named vote, the votes were cast as follows:- FOR: 33 as follows:-

| | |
|---------------|---------------------|
| Armstrong, E. | Oliver, N. |
| Bawn, D.L. | Pattison, W. |
| Beynon, J.A. | Reid, J. |
| Castle, G. | Renner Thompson, G. |

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|------------------|-------------------|
| Cessford, T. | Rickerby, L.J. |
| Daley, W. | Riddle, J.R. |
| Dodd, R.R. | Roughead, G. |
| Dunbar, C. | Sanderson, H.G.H. |
| Flux, B. | Seymour, C. |
| Gibson, R. | Sharp, A. |
| Homer, C.R. | Stewart, G. |
| Horncastle, C.W. | Swinburn, M.D. |
| Hutchinson, J.I. | Thorne, T. |
| Jackson, P.A. | Towns, D. |
| Jones, V. | Watson, J.G. |
| Lawrie, R. | Wearmouth, R. |
| Murray, A.H. | |

AGAINST: 28 as follows;

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|---------------|---------------------|
| Bowman, L. | Grimshaw, L. |
| Campbell, D. | Hepple, A. |
| Cartie, E. | Hill, G. |
| Clark, T.S. | Lang, J. |
| Crosby, B. | Nisbet, K. |
| Dale, P.A.M. | Parry, K. |
| Davey, J.G. | Purvis, M. |
| Davey, S. | Richards, M.E. |
| Dickinson, S. | Robinson, M. |
| Dungworth, S. | Simpson, E. |
| Dunn, L. | Swithenbank, I.C.F. |
| Foster, J. | Wallace, R. |

| | |
|---------------|------------|
| Gallacher, B. | Webb, G. |
| Gobin, J.J. | Wilson, T. |

ABSTENTIONS:0

It was therefore **RESOLVED** that the Council Tax Support Scheme be adopted as the Council's local scheme for 2021-22.

104. REPORTS OF THE SERVICE DIRECTOR: CORPORATE ASSURANCE

(1) Designation of Northumberland County Council's Audit Committee as Group Audit Committee

The purpose of this report was to:

- (a) outline advice received from the external auditor, Mazars, that the County Council's Audit Committee should be designated as Group Audit Committee in order to maintain required governance oversight across all entities operating within Northumberland County Council's accounting group boundary; and
- (b) propose that County Council agree to the designation of the County Council's Audit Committee as Group Audit Committee, with additional specific Terms of Reference added to the Constitution for this purpose.

Councillor Oliver introduced this report. The report proposed to bring Advance and any other subsidiaries within the scope of the Council's Audit Committee and the terms of reference were included. The aim was to ensure that the Audit Committee had the ability to work with subsidiaries and was another step in improving the governance arrangements.

Councillor Hill agreed with this and reminded members about concerns being raised about control and governance issues, and that the Council's VFM opinion had been qualified for the last three years because of issues. This was the right way forward, it had been recommended by Mazars and she hoped members would support it.

Councillor Reid moved that this report be sent to CSEG OSC before it was implemented. He asked where the opportunity was to discuss this report in detail, he felt the Audit Committee was acting as its own judge and jury on this and queried why the Council's other arms' length companies were not mentioned. After a long meeting this was not the place for an in depth debate about what the Audit Committee should do. He suggested that something of this significance should be looked at with an independent chair who had relevant experience. Councillor Beynon seconded Councillor Reid's his motion.

Councillor Dickinson advised that his Group welcomed the report which would enable better scrutiny of Advance.

Councillor Roughead did not object to the report but felt there was a wider discussion to be had at a Scrutiny meeting. He suggested that the proposed terms of reference be double checked with the Monitoring Officer of another Authority who hadn't been involved in authoring the report before it was enacted into the Constitution.

Councillor Swinburn advised that this had been done as a result of a recommendation from the external auditor Mazars as good practice, it had not been a suggestion from the Audit Committee itself.

Councillor Swithenbank supported the report's proposals. He knew from his experience with the LGA that a single point of audit ensured consistency and was far better than a fragmented system.

Councillor Sanderson commented that it was good practice to have an independent chair of Audit Committee and he had asked officers recently to investigate this as a possible way forward. If the Chair of CSEG and sufficient members felt it would be of benefit for them to look at it, he wasn't aware that this delay would cause any problems. Members could have a free vote on this. Councillor Bawn supported Councillor Reid's motion.

Councillor Oliver commented that the accounts had been qualified in the past, but last year this hadn't been anything to do with Advance/Arch. He did support the proposals but didn't want to object to any scrutiny of them.

Councillor Dungworth expressed concern at the discussion on this report, which only proposed due diligence for the Council. The whole point of Audit Committee was that it was separate and she did not understand where the sudden push for an independent chair was coming from as it had been resisted in the past. Both chairs of Audit had been completely independent and she feared that there was political interference at work. The independent chair point had been discussed now by a number of members and she feared that this decision had been pre-planned. She urged members to follow the advice of the external auditors and do things properly.

Councillor Jackson commented that there were wider issues that that needed deeper discussion, such as the multiplicity of the arms of the Council and Advance was only one of these. There needed to be consistency. Also, best practice was a consideration, and someone with outside experience might be of benefit. A pause to deal with these two issues and come back with a comprehensive view from the Scrutiny Committee should be welcomed.

Councillor Hill expressed surprise at Councillor Reid's views given his previous positions within Arch and the experiences there. Councillor Oliver was wrong in that the qualified opinion in the last three years had been because of Arch/Advance. The comments being made today were about the vote of Council on 3 September and all that had involved. The recommendation was from Mazars that this would be normal for a local authority, and she urged that members move to the vote.

Following an exchange between Councillors Reid and Hill the Business Chair asked that they both be muted. Councillor Dickinson then asked if it was

appropriate for a Director of Advance to make a proposal about the audit of that company. The Deputy Monitoring Officer confirmed that this was in order.

Councillor Dale commented that Active Northumberland was a charity and therefore a separate entity and she suggested that Scrutiny look at the relationship between Cabinet and the Audit Committee. She supported Councillor Reid's motion.

Councillor Oliver supported the concept of widening the scope of the Audit Committee to include the subsidiaries but he did not want to block any scrutiny. He asked whether it was in order for Scrutiny to look at the Audit Committee's issue and whether any delay to the decision would cause any problem to the group audit of accounts. The S151 Officer advised that this would not be affected.

Other members spoke in support of the report's recommendations as stated.

Councillor Dungworth pointed out that taking this to Scrutiny would mean a decision couldn't be taken by Council on it until January 2021.

Councillor Reid reiterated his earlier points about the benefits which could be had by taking the report to Scrutiny to make sure that all of the relevant issues had been considered in the interests of transparency and openness.

The Business Chair asked members to agree to suspend standing orders as the time had now reached 6.00 pm, which was confirmed.

Ms Allison Mitchell confirmed to members that this was a recommendation from Mazars; the terms of reference had been provided as an example by them and reflected best practice. Active Northumberland was not within the Council's accounting group boundary, all of those bodies were listed in the report before members. Any new companies which fell within the accounting group boundary were set out in paragraph 7 which stated that the Audit Committee would also discharge the function for those entities. Regarding an independent chair, there was no requirement for any audit committee in a local authority, other than a combined authority, regarding the designation of chair. It was a matter for individual authorities to determine.

Councillor Hill asked that, if Council agreed to send the report to CSEG OSC, that Mazars also be asked to attend the meeting. Also, potential bias from the Chair of that Committee would have to be taken into account.

The Business Chair asked members to agree a brief adjournment at that point. Council adjourned at 18.04. The meeting reconvened at 18.16.

The Leader reassured members that there was no plot in regard to this matter. Regarding an independent chair, he felt it was right that Council should look at this in due course. He reiterated that members had a free vote on this.

Mrs Helen Lancaster then advised members that the recommendations were clearly to Council, this was a function for Council only, and the terms of

reference for CSEG OSC provided no scope for the Committee to deal with this matter. Also, Council was the scrutiny for Audit Committee.

Councillor Reid commented that if the legal advice was that Audit Committee could only be scrutinised by Council and not a Scrutiny Committee, then he had to accept that. He had just felt the matter needed to be looked at properly. Under duress, he therefore withdrew his motion.

On the report's recommendations being put to the vote, members voted by a show of hands, and by a clear majority in favour of the recommendations.

It was therefore **RESOLVED** that:-

- (a) Council note the advice received from the external auditor, Mazars, that a Group Audit Committee should be designated to maintain oversight of governance matters across all entities within the County Council's accounting group boundary;
 - (b) Council note that this role would be expected to be discharged by the County Council's Audit Committee;
 - (c) Council agree that the County Council's Audit Committee be therefore designated as Group Audit Committee for all group entities; and
 - (d) Council agree the Terms of Reference at Appendix A to the report, to govern the discharge of duties when acting as Group Audit Committee, be added to the existing Terms of Reference and Powers of the Audit Committee already in the Constitution.
- (2) Update to Constitution – Officer Employment Procedure Rules and Staff Appeals Committee**

The Council had recently sought additional support through Solace in appointing a Governance Team of external consultants to provide additional resources to the Authority on a number of governance issues it currently faced and as part of its new governance accountability framework. The team had been asked to assist in making a number of changes to the Council's Constitution which it had become apparent were necessary in order to ensure compliance with the requirements of the Local Authorities (Standing Orders) (England) Regulations 2015, which had amended the 2001 Regulations, and also with best practice as set out in the JNC Guidance on the Model Disciplinary Procedure.

The Business Chair introduced the report.

Councillor Dickinson queried why the minutes of the meeting had not been attached to the report so members could see the thorough debate which had taken place. The Business Chair advised that they had not been completed due to work pressures.

Councillor Reid moved the recommendations commenting this was a good example of members discussing a topic in detail and developing clear recommendations. Councillor Dungworth seconded this.

Councillor Roughead agreed it was a good example of how a cross party group could work. He supported the recommendations but added that this time last year some changes had been agreed by Council for inclusion in the Constitution and he asked when these would be included. He could also see quite a big error in the constitution which he felt should be considered by the next meeting of the Working Group. The Business Chair advised that all members of the Working Group had been emailed inviting them to put agenda items forward.

Councillor Watson agreed with the recommendations but he was concerned about the change in the make up of the Committee half way through a process. He had been assured this was in order but his reservations remained.

Councillor Oliver asked whether there were any plans to review or change any of the decisions which had already been made as a result of these changes in the Constitution. The Deputy Monitoring Officer, Mr Foote, advised members that it was inappropriate to discuss an ongoing matter in a public forum.

Councillor Hill welcomed the work that was going on to address the inadequacies of the constitution. She agreed with Councillor Watson's points but the issue had been about political balance on the Committee. Matters relating to complaints or standards brought in the strongest argument for independent people who weren't politically aligned.

RESOLVED that:-

- (a) Council approves the amendments to the Council's Constitution as set out in Appendix A to the report;
- (b) Council agrees to formally adopt the procedures as set out in the JNC Model Disciplinary Procedure & Guidance as a framework in respect of the Head of Paid Service, Monitoring Officer and the Chief Finance Officer;
- (c) Council agrees to appoint a Standing Chair of the Staff (Appeals Committee) and agrees that Councillor Jeff Watson should be appointed as the Standing Chair of the Staff (Appeals) Committee for the remainder of the civic year.
- (d) Council agrees to increase the size of the current Panel from 16 to 20 (to include 4 Cabinet Members) and to make nominations to the additional vacancies;
- (e) Council agrees that the Staff (Appeals) Committee should be re-designated as the Employment (Appeals) Committee; and
- (f) Council notes the appointment of Mr Paul Foote as the Council's Deputy Monitoring Officer on an interim basis.

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

.....
Chair of the County Council

.....
Duly Authorised Officer