

NORTHUMBERLAND COUNTY COUNCIL

COUNTY COUNCIL

At the meeting of the **County Council** held at Council Chamber, County Hall, Morpeth on Wednesday, 4 May 2022 at 3.00 pm.

PRESENT

B Flux (Chair) (in the Chair)

MEMBERS

C Ball	D Bawn
J Beynon	L Bowman
D Carr	E Cartie
G Castle	T Cessford
E Chicken	T Clark
A Dale	W Daley
L Darwin	S Dickinson
R Dodd	C Dunbar
L Dunn	P Ezhilchelvan
S Fairless-Aitken	D Ferguson
B Gallacher	L Grimshaw
C Hardy	G Hill
C Horncastle	C Humphrey
I Hunter	JI Hutchinson
V Jones	D Kennedy
J Lang	S Lee
N Morphet	M Murphy
K Nisbet	N Oliver
K Parry	W Pattison
W Ploszaj	M Purvis
J Reid	G Renner-Thompson
M Richardson	J Riddle
M Robinson	G Sanderson
A Scott	C Seymour
A Sharp	E Simpson
G Stewart	M Swinbank
M Swinburn	C Taylor
T Thorne	D Towns
H Waddell	A Wallace
A Watson	J Watson
R Wearmouth	R Wilczek

OFFICERS

Binjal, S.
Bradley, N.
Denyer, L.

Monitoring Officer
Director of Adult Social Services
Deputy Monitoring Officer

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Hadfield, K.	Democratic and Electoral Services Manager
Hunter, P.	Interim Senior Service Director
Kingham, A.	Interim Joint Director of Children's Services
Morgan, L.	Director of Public Health
O'Farrell, R.	Interim Executive Director Place and Regeneration
Reiter, G.	Interim Joint Director of Children's Services
Soderquest, P.	Service Director, Housing and Public Protection
Taylor, M.	Interim Executive Director for Communities and Business Development
Willis, J.	Interim Executive Director of Finance and S151 Officer

1 **TO ELECT A BUSINESS CHAIR AND DEPUTY BUSINESS CHAIR FOR THE ENSUING YEAR.**

Councillor Flux was nominated by Councillor Ezhilchelvan, and seconded by Councillor Reid. There were no other nominations.

RESOLVED that Councillor Flux be elected Business Chair for the forthcoming year.

2 **Councillor Flux in the Chair
APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

3 **Apologies were received from Councillors Bridgett, Foster, Jackson and Mather.
TO ELECT A CIVIC HEAD AND DEPUTY CIVIC HEAD FOR THE ENSUING YEAR**

Councillor Cessford was proposed as Civic Head by Councillor Hutchinson and seconded by Councillor Oliver. There were no other nominations.

RESOLVED that Councillor Cessford be elected Civic Head for the ensuing year.

Councillor Seymour was proposed as Deputy Civic Head by Councillor Chicken and seconded by Councillor Hardy. There were no other nominations.

RESOLVED that Councillor Seymour be elected Deputy Civic Head for the ensuing year.

Councillor Hutchinson reported to members that it had been a great privilege to serve as Civic Head and to represent the Council. Over £24,500 had been raised for Motor Neurone disease and he thanked Tracy Hollan, Susan Taylor and Jackie Roll for their support during his term of office.

Councillor Cessford advised that his chosen charity was Tynedale Hospice at Home and he would send some information to members about this.

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4 MINUTES

The Business Chair highlighted that the minutes of 23 February (19:56 pm) and 30 March 2022 should refer to them being extraordinary meetings of Council.

With regard to page 53 (Member Questions), Councillor A. Watson advised that she had been referred to as Councillor A. Scott in error.

Councillor Oliver commented that he had asked for confirmation that there was £340,000 allocated in the budget for Corbridge car park. This had been confirmed at the meeting, but this confirmation had not been recorded in the minutes and he felt it was important that it should be. Councillor Riddle confirmed this was the case.

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, subject to the points of clarification detailed above:-

- (1) Wednesday 23 February 2022 3.00 pm
- (2) Wednesday 23 February 2022 (extraordinary meeting) (19.56 pm)
- (3) Wednesday 30 March 2022 (extraordinary meeting)

5 **ANNOUNCEMENTS BY THE BUSINESS CHAIR, LEADER OR HEAD OF PAID SERVICE**

The Leader made the following points:-

- The Jubilee Fund had been oversubscribed so an additional £15,000 had been found to supplement this. He thanked members for their work with their communities on this.
- The recent Inequalities Summit had been very well attended and local meetings were now taking place to push forward the work. Draft recommendations and an action plan were expected by July for consideration as part of the budget preparation.
- The unemployment figure for Northumberland was down to 3.8% and he hoped this trend would continue.
- The turnover at Port of Blyth had been the highest ever this year
- North of Tyne CA had been awarded a share of the £51m Prosperity Fund and plans were being developed for Blyth and Ashington to use these funds. Berwick was also receiving significant funding.
- The Government had recently awarded £163m for bus service improvements to the Joint Transport Committee, and Northumberland would get its share of that.
- Talks around devolution continued and his position remained that the Council would not agree unless there were real benefits for Northumberland.
- Finally he paid tribute to Cath McEvoy Carr who was leaving the Authority very soon, for her sterling work and he wished her well in her new job.

6 **DISCLOSURE OF MEMBERS' INTERESTS**

Councillor Hunter declared a personal interest in agenda item 13 (Statement of Licensing Policy) and the response from Ord Parish Council as the Clerk to Ord Parish Council.

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7 APPOINTMENTS

Council was asked to note the appointment of the Deputy Leader and Cabinet members appointed by the Leader, and their portfolios.

The Leader reported that no changes had been made other than to appoint Councillor David Ferguson as the Deputy Cabinet Member for Adult Wellbeing with specific responsibility to drive forward the inequalities agenda. This position had been vacant.

8 REPORT OF THE MONITORING OFFICER

(1) Establishment of Committees

Council was asked to make arrangements for the discharge of the non-executive functions of the County Council through the appointment of committees, appointing members to those committees in accordance with the proportionality of the Council and to agree their terms of reference.

In order to hear and determine grievances raised by the Chief Executive and Chief Officers and also grievances made against the Chief Executive and Chief Officers, the Council was required to appoint a Grievance Committee.

In order to clarify roles and responsibilities and comply with the Council's legal obligations, it was necessary to make consequential amendments to the Terms of Reference to the Staff and Appointments Committee and the Employment (Appeals) Committee.

An updated document reflecting Group wishes regarding appointments had been circulated in the chamber.

Councillor Ferguson referred to the number of times the word "should" was used in the terms of reference of the Grievance Committee. He asked that this be reviewed as it left things open to interpretation, and that the word "will" should be substituted. The Monitoring Officer advised that the words used reflected the JNC process. However, if an individual did not feel that they wanted to go down that route, there was the filter process with the Director of HR available.

Councillor Dale sought reassurance that there would be no overlap of membership between the dismissal advisory committee and the employment appeals committee, and other committees where this was an issue. The Monitoring Officer replied that it was noted in the report that there should not be an overlap.

Councillor Dickinson commented that there had still been no proper response regarding the consultation with staff on this as had been raised in the Constitution Working Group, and the report now referred to it not being needed. If national guidance was being followed, he queried what had changed. The Monitoring Officer replied that page 68 of the position statement advised that this was not a change in terms and conditions therefore it didn't require formal consultation. However, the HR Director would informally consult with any officers who were affected and the report set out the process of notification.

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Councillor Hill asked for the rationale for four members of the Cabinet to be on the Grievance Committee as she felt it should be the opposite. Councillor Wearmouth responded that the members who were put on was a decision for each Group. The Monitoring Officer reminded members that the Grievance Committee of five members was new and would be established on the proportionality agreed by Council in March. The inclusion of four Cabinet members referred to the Employment Appeals Committee of five members, which was drawn from a pool of 20 members, also proportionally representative, and it was that overall pool which included the four Cabinet members as previously agreed by Council. It was up to Council if it wished to change that.

It was **RESOLVED** by show of hands that:-

- (a) the committees, numbers of members of committees and chairs of committees set out in Appendix A be appointed;
- (b) approval be given to the appointment of the Grievance Committee and its terms of reference, and the consequential amendments to the Terms of Reference to the Staff and Appointments Committee and the Employment (Appeals) Committee set out in Appendix B;
- (c) ungrouped members be appointed to committees of the Council as detailed in Appendix A; and
- (d) authority be delegated to the Monitoring Officer to appoint members of committees on the nomination of their respective Group Leader.

(2) Appointment of Chairs and Vice Chairs

RESOLVED that Chairs and Vice Chairs be appointed to Committees and Working Groups as follows:

Corporate Services and Economic Growth OSC - D. Bawn/L. Dunn
Family and Children's Services OSC – W. Daley/R. Dodd
Communities and Place OSC – J. Reid/M. Mather
Health and Wellbeing OSC – V. Jones/K.Nisbet
Audit Committee (Chair is a non-Councillor) – S. Watson/D. Towns
County Emergency Committee – C. Horncastle/G. Sanderson
Dismissal Advisory Committee -G. Sanderson/R. Wearmouth
Disputes Panel - Fire and Rescue Service – G. Sanderson/.B. Flux
Employment (Appeals) Committee - D. Towns
Governing Body of Netherton Park (Vice Chair is a Trustee Manager) – L. Darwin/Trustee manager
Health and Well-being Board (Vice Chair is a Board Representative) – P. Ezhilchelvan
Joint Consultative Committee (Chair is a TU Representative) – B. Flux/P. Judd
Licensing Committee – I. Hutchinson/C. Humphrey
Licensing and Regulatory Committee – I. Hutchinson/C. Humphrey
Local Area Councils:
Ashington and Blyth – L. Grimshaw, D. Carr, B. Gallacher
Castle Morpeth – J. Beynon, D. Towns, J. Foster
Cramlington, Bedlington and Seaton Valley – M. Swinburn, S. Lee, R. Wilczek
North Northumberland – G. Castle, S. Bridgett, C. Hardy
Tynedale - T. Cessford, D. Kennedy, A. Scott
Petitions Committee – R. Dodd/B. Flux

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Staff and Appointments Committee – G. Sanderson/R. Wearmouth
Standards Committee (Chair is a non-Councillor) – J. Jackson/B. Flux
Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education (Vice Chair is a faith representative) – G. Renner Thompson/Faith rep
Strategic Planning Committee – T. Thorne/M. Robinson
Climate Change Working Group – G. Sanderson/N. Morphet
Constitution Working Group – B. Flux/ TBC
Food Poverty Working Group - W. Pattison/W. Daley
Local Area Councils' Chairs Briefing – G. Castle/ TBC
Local Plan Working Group - L. Darwin/A. Wallace
Member Services Working Group - A. Sharp/E. Chicken
Northumberland Cycling and Walking Board - J. Riddle/TBC
Safeguarding and Corporate Parenting Group -R. Dodd/C. Ball
Town and Parish Council Liaison Working Group – I. Hunter/ K. Parry
VCS Liaison Group - P. Ezhilchelvan/V. Jones

9 **REPORT OF THE INTERIM SENIOR SERVICE DIRECTOR**

Appointments to Outside Bodies 2022-23

Council was asked to agree its nominations to outside bodies.

RESOLVED that:-

- (a) Council agree its nominations to the bodies detailed in the appendix at the end of the report; and
- (b) Council note the positions on the North of Tyne Combined Authority Committees, and the North East Combined Authority and North of Tyne Combined Authority Joint Transport Committees, and the Head of Democratic and Electoral Services be authorised, in consultation with the appropriate Group Leaders, to make any changes to the determination of allocation to political groupings which may be necessary following the May elections in the region, and as advised to the Council by the NECA secretariat.

10 **REPORT OF THE MONITORING OFFICER**

Report of the Independent Remuneration Panel

Council was asked to consider the report of the recently convened Independent Remuneration Panel and decide if any or all of its recommendations should be adopted.

Councillor Wearmouth highlighted the key issues and recommendations of the independent Panel.

Councillor Dickinson queried whether the three Deputy Cabinet positions would involve additional expenditure. Councillor Wearmouth explained that the Deputy Business Chair position would not be filled which would provide the majority of the funding cost.

Regarding the funding of broadband for members, Councillor Dale commented it was important for the Council to ensure all members had equal access to this. Councillor Wearmouth replied that this would be addressed in the next review and members could feed into that.

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RESOLVED that the recommendations of the Independent Review Panel be agreed and adopted, namely:-

1. the level of basic allowance for elected Members be maintained at its current level of £15,033 from the start of the 2022/23 municipal year, with the index-linking previously agreed for this allowance to be continued;
2. the Panel be authorised to give further consideration to the level of special responsibility allowances as part of the next review of the Members' Allowances Scheme;
3. a special responsibility allowance of one third of the value of the Cabinet Members' special responsibility allowances be attached to the three Deputy Cabinet Member positions (this being, at present, £4,950) from the date of the Annual Council meeting of 4th May 2022;
4. the issue of broadband allowances be considered further at the next review;
5. that a review of the Parental leave policy takes place at the next review; and
6. the panel be authorised to carry out a more considered and detailed review of members allowances be carried out in time for Full Council in January 2023 which the Panel understands could then feed into the Budget-setting process and could take effect for the municipal year 2023/24.

11 **REPORT OF THE MONITORING OFFICER**

Model Code of Conduct

The report updated Members with regard to the new Model Code of Conduct prepared by the Local Government Association and presented to Council a new draft Code for its consideration.

The report was introduced by Councillor Wearmouth.

Councillor Dickinson sought clarity from the Monitoring Officer that any member with an open code of conduct issue could vote on the report. The Monitoring Officer confirmed this was correct with existing issues being dealt with under the current code. If Council chose to adopt the new code, new matters would be dealt with under that.

Councillor Morphet referred to declarations of membership of masonic lodges which had charitable purposes, and asked how many there were in Northumberland and which ones had charitable purposes. The Monitoring Officer was not able to answer that specific question but she added that the trainer who had provided training to the Council on code of conduct matters previously, had clarified that only lodges which had charitable status should be declared. However, only members themselves would know if their lodge had charitable status. A query had been raised with the LGA but no response had been received. If members wished further research to be done, then this could be.

Councillor Hill commented that she did not understand why members should have a problem with declaring anything, particularly those groups

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where members swore oaths of allegiance to each other. She welcomed the proposal to seek further legal advice.

The Monitoring Officer confirmed that officers had done the further research requested by the Constitution Working Group. An approach had been made to the LGA and the training provided to members had been reviewed. She sought clarification that Councillor Hill was proposing an amendment to the code of conduct that members should include membership of these in their register of interests regardless of their status. Councillor Hill confirmed that she was, and this was seconded by Councillor Morphet.

Councillor Dodd suggested that Council refrain from making any further decisions on this issue until the further advice was received which had been sought. Councillor Hill replied that there was no advice which said councils should not do it.

Councillor Wearmouth felt it would be preferable to adopt the model code and amend it if necessary in light of any further advice.

In response to some comments regarding what the amendment was, Councillor Hill replied that membership of masonic lodges should be declared regardless of their charitable status. She asked for a named vote on this, which was supported by the required number of members.

The Business Chair informed members that a reply had now been received from the LGA. They advised that if a lodge carried out charitable work then it could fall within other registrable interests. Councillor Hill wished her amendment to be voted upon, adding that members may have interests they wished to record in respect of that.

Councillor Bawn declared an interest as a member of a masonic lodge and felt that masonic lodges were subject to unfair conspiracy theories in the same way that other organisations were not. He felt it was prejudicial to declare membership of lodges because it resulted in unfavourable treatment in social media and attacks on members for being part of organisations which had many purposes. If the point of the vote was to unmask members, and a member could not take part in the vote by declaring an interest, then the object of the vote had been defeated. He asked whether members had to declare an interest, and if they did, could they take part? The Monitoring Officer advised that they could and that members were voting on the code of conduct as a whole which included declaration of all organisations of which they were members.

The Leader proposed that members agree the report as it stood, and a report would come back in July to address the masonic lodge issue. This was seconded by Councillor Dale.

Councillor Dickinson asked for advice regarding a declaration as someone who had worked with a masonic lodge and received various things for their community. Councillor Cartie raised a similar question regarding funding.

Councillor Daley supported the Leader's suggestion for a report in July

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given some of the queries which members were raising regarding links with the freemasons. This would allow advice to be included in the report regarding the need for any potential disclosures about that.

On Councillor Hill's amendment being put to the vote, the votes were cast as follows:-

FOR: 8

Fairless Aitken, S.	Morphet, N
Hill, G.	Swinbank, M.
Kennedy, D.	Taylor, C.
Lee, S.	Waddell, H.

AGAINST: 34

Bawn, D.	Hutchinson, J.I.
Beynon, J.	Jones, V.
Carr, D.	Oliver, N.
Castle, G.	Pattison, W.
Cessford, T.	Ploszaj, W.
Chicken, E.	Reid, J.
Dale, A.	Renner Thompson, G.
Daley, W.	Riddle, J.
Darwin, L.	Sanderson, H.G.H.
Dodd, R.R.	Seymour, C.
Dunbar, C.	Sharp, A.
Ezhilchelvan, P.	Stewart, G.
Ferguson, D.	Swinburn, M.
Flux, B.	Thorne, T.N.
Hardy, C.	Towns, D.
Horncastle, C.W.	Watson, J.
Humphrey, C.	Wearmouth, R.

ABSTENTIONS: 21

Ball, C.	Nisbet, K.
Bowman, L.	Parry, K.
Cartie, E.	Purvis, M.
Clark, T.	Richardson, M.
Dickinson, S.	Robinson, M.
Dunn, L.	Scott, A.
Gallacher, B.	Simpson, L.
Grimshaw, L.	Wallace, A.
Hunter, E.I.	Watson, A.
Lang, J.	Wilczek, R.
Murphy, M.	

The amendment was therefore defeated.

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The Leader urged members to support the report's recommendations as they stood and confirmed that a report would come back to July Council on the position regarding charitable bodies, not just masonic lodges as the issue was a wider one.

Councillor Reid asked for a named vote on the report's recommendations but this was not supported by the required number of members.

It was therefore **RESOLVED** by show of hands that the model code of conduct be adopted in its entirety and a further report be brought to July Council as detailed by the Leader above.

12 **REPORT OF THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES AND ADULT SOCIAL CARE**

Adopting a New Agreed Syllabus for Religious Education

The report outlined the process of designing a new agreed syllabus for Religious Education.

The report was presented by Councillor Renner Thompson as Chair of the Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education.

Councillor Reid queried whether school governors needed to declare an interest in respect of this report and queried who would be adapting the modules in the syllabus for Northumberland schools. Councillor Renner Thompson replied that the specialist adviser would advise SACRE on this and the Committee would then approve them.

Regarding the interests, the Monitoring Officer advised that this would depend on where the school was. Her recommendation was that as this was a policy and not an individual school, then a declaration was not needed, however, it was a matter for the individual member.

Councillor Bowman thanked the members of the Committee on pulling this together.

Councillor Dunn declared an interest in respect of this matter and advised she would not be voting.

RESOLVED that:-

- (a) Council note that a revised Locally Agreed Syllabus has been created and formally approved by Northumberland Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education;
- (b) Council adopt the approved Locally Agreed Syllabus; and
- (c) officers be authorised to recommend the revised Locally Agreed Syllabus to Northumberland maintained schools for implementation from September 2022.

13 **REPORT OF THE HEAD OF HOUSING AND PUBLIC PROTECTION**

Statement of Licensing Policy

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The report advised Members of the outcome of the consultation regarding the Statement of Licensing Policy.

The report was presented by Councillor Horncastle who drew members' attention to the key points. The last review had been delayed due to covid.

Regarding some member concerns about lack of consultation with town and parish councils on licensing applications, he stressed that licensing legislation was different to that of planning and local authorities could not legally notify town and parish councils. To do so would be going beyond the Council's statutory powers.

Councillor Thorne declared an interest in this matter.

RESOLVED that:-

(a) Council note the outcome of the consultation exercise, the content of the report and agree proposed amendments or revisions to the Statement of Licensing Policy; and

(b) the revised Statement of Licensing policy be adopted for the period 2022 – 2025, as recommended by the Licensing Committee.

14 **CORRESPONDENCE (IF ANY) TO DATE OF MEETING**

15 **QUESTIONS TO BE PUT TO THE BUSINESS CHAIR, A MEMBER OF THE CABINET OR THE CHAIR OF ANY COMMITTEE OR SUB COMMITTEE, IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE CONSTITUTION'S RULES OF PROCEDURE NO.10.**

Question 1 from Councillor Hill to the Business Chair

As Business Chair, do you accept that it is very poor practice for papers to be distributed during the actual meetings and not circulated to members in advance?

The Business Chair replied that the provisions of Schedule 12 of the Local Government Act 1972 set out the arrangements for convening meetings of the council and its committees, and for publication of the agenda and reports. These were contained in the council procedure rules in part 5 of the NCC constitution.

As members were aware, the Access to Information Rules required that notice is usually given 5 clear days in advance and that the business to be transacted at a meeting is set out in the agenda convening the meeting. It was best practice for written reports to accompany each agenda item. Both the Local Government Act 1972 and the Council Procedure Rules provided that in cases of urgency, the Chair could permit additional items of business to be added to the agenda, and in such cases a written report accompanying the urgent business would be provided to the meeting. Similarly, if there were new facts or matters which had come to light since the original report was published, it would be best practice for an updated report to be provided to a meeting.

Councillor Hill commented this was not the procedure at this Council and asked if Councillor Flux was aware of the increasing concern from members about this practice, particularly in relation to long and complex matters. She asked for a reassurance that no councillor would be presented with long and complex reports at a meeting and be expected to make a decision on them.

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The Business Chair asked Councillor Hill to provide him with specific examples but added that sometimes this practice was necessary rather than to have to call additional meetings.

Question 2 from Councillor Hill to the Leader

The Leader recently said that he is looking to cut £1m from the NCC wage bill; “by employing full-time staff, mainly senior staff, instead of consultants and interims.” What recent progress have you made on this?

The Leader responded that significant progress had been made. The independent governance review would be reported upon soon and he was keen to have a review of the senior management structure carried out at the appropriate point as he was concerned about the turnover of staff. He expressed gratitude to those interim officers who were currently in place. The saving would be achieved without any compulsory redundancies if he could help it. He urged members to be less negative and get behind Council staff.

Councillor Hill commented that all members were entitled to express criticism when it was justified. She asked if the Leader accepted that when the public looked at the costs detailed on the Council’s transparency webpage, that they would see these salaries as excessive, and she asked if the Leader would commit to make sure that public money was used sensibly and not wasted. The Leader responded that everyone wanted to make sure the right staff were in the right place and doing the right job at the right rate of pay.

Question 3 from Councillor Taylor to Councillor Riddle

There have been a number of concerns raised by residents and visitors following the Easter holidays by people using the footpath from Attlee Park to Humford Woods, this path is in a terrible state and needs looked at urgently. I have raised this before so could I please have an assurance that this will be a priority for repair before the summer holidays this year.

Councillor Riddle replied that the footpath would not be repaired for the summer and had not been included in Councillor Taylor’s LTP priorities. Money had been identified in this year’s LTP to do a feasibility study but this would be a major project and wouldn’t be done this year. It would be included with other bids for next year’s LTP. In the meantime, the Council would continue to inspect the footpath and undertake any minor repairs or path realignment required to ensure the route remained accessible and in a safe condition for users.

Councillor Taylor asked whether it would be possible to erect some temporary fencing at the places where it was quite narrow. Councillor Riddle replied that if officers felt there was a need for safety measures they would be put in place.

Question 4 from Councillor Taylor to Councillor Ploszaj

With the agreement for the additional £2.0m to ensure the completion of phase 1 of Bedlington town centre redevelopment, when will work recommence as it seems to have stopped again.

Councillor Ploszaj replied that the original £2m additional funds would allow Advance Northumberland to sign the contract for the remaining works, and the

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contractor was expected to start work by the end of May.

Councillor Taylor asked if the works were expected to finish on time. Councillor Ploszaj would get a response to her on this, and the Leader added that a further meeting was scheduled with Bedlington members for 11 May.

Question 5 from Councillor Ball to Councillor Horncastle

We have seen the cost of living is turning in to a cost of surviving crisis for many. Rents up including council rents..... council tax up again this year national insurance rising for many middle income earners. People struggling and people in work having to access support from food banks and some food banks reporting a new crisis that people who are receiving food from them are in the tragic situation that they cannot afford to cook the food as they have key meters and the cost of electric has near doubled so no electric to turn on the cooker.

We as a local authority are having to find more and more year on year to support hard working families to get by while the rich get richer and support cut to the worst off.

How does Northumberland County Council ensure that tenants are not stuck in the situation they have a place to live but no standard of living due to rising rents and pre-payment meters, and can I meet with the portfolio holder to gain a understanding of how both Northumberland County Council and the arm's length company Advanced Northumberland Homes are supporting tenants and hear what the long term plans are as we are seeing the situation get worse year on year?

Councillor Horncastle replied that the Council recognised the impact of the cost-of-living squeeze on residents and was providing support for both prospective and current tenants in a number of ways. With new tenants a financial assessment was undertaken prior to allocation so that the properties that were allocated were affordable. At tenancy sign up welfare support was also provided to ensure access to appropriate benefits and grants.

The Council also supported existing tenants who were struggling and eviction was only considered as a last resort. The Council proactively supported those on Universal Credit, providing advice and setting up payment plans. The welfare support team last financial year helped tenants generate an extra £476,032.20 and the Council would continue to offer this service to any tenant facing financial hardship or needing advice and support.

The Council also provided other assistance, including, as agreed as part of the 2022/23 HRA Budget, a rent-free week for Council tenants and a Council Tax hardship payment of up to £200 was available. In addition, the size of the Discretionary Housing Payments Fund had been doubled to provide extra targeted help to households across all tenure types that were struggling to pay their rent and other essentials.

Alongside this, the Council was working hard to ensure that financial support from central Government such as the £150 energy bill rebate and the £2.5m Household Support Fund got to those households in greatest need. 45,000 payments were expected to be made from the Household Support Fund during the first 6 months of this financial year, including 21,000 to families with children

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and 13,000 to vulnerable pensioners. Payments would cover a range of essential needs including shopping vouchers and assistance with energy and water bills.

Councillor Ball commented that the long term plan for those in work poverty needed to be addressed. Would Northumberland support the right to food campaign?

Councillor Horncastle responded that there had been a lot of change in Northumberland in recent years and the recent budget had contained many measures to help those who were struggling. The Local Plan would ensure that further investment was attracted to the area and there had been major investment in education in the County in the last couple of years. He agreed that he would meet with Councillor Ball to discuss matters further.

Question 6 from Councillor Ball to Councillor Ploszaj

It a welcome sight to see Home Bargains open on the Portland Park Development, Any news on when we will have a cinema and the other plots filled?

Councillor Ploszaj replied that the Council remained committed to the development of Portland Park and to securing a cinema as part of that development. Tenders had been received for the construction of the cinema and were being examined. The Council was also with partners developing a wider Levelling Up Fund bid for the town, which would pull together in a cohesive way the investments the Council was making in Portland Park and in the new Northumberland Line rail station. He expected to have news to share with partners and residents soon.

Councillor Ball commented that the funding had been secured a couple of years ago for the cinema and there had been no progress. What was happening? Councillor Ploszaj replied that the cost had risen due to covid and that was why the tenders had had to be revisited.

16 **TO RECEIVE THE MINUTES OF THE CABINET MEETINGS HELD ON:-**

Regarding Minute No. 103 (RDA Relocation from Tranwell). Councillor Dunn asked when the report would be returned to FACS OSC as per their request. Councillor Renner Thompson advised that there had not been time to do that as it would have held up the move.

RESOLVED that:-

(a) the following minutes be received

- (1) Tuesday 8 March 2022
- (2) Tuesday 29 March 2022; and

(b) the following resolutions be approved as they involve Budget and Policy framework matters:-

- (i) Minute No.95 (xiv) and (xv) of the 8 March 2022 meeting (Financial Performance 2021-22 - Position at end of December 2021).

17 **TO RECEIVE AND CONSIDER MINUTES FROM THE FOLLOWING**

Ch.'s Initials.....

COMMITTEES:-

(1) Corporate Services and Economic Growth OSC

These were presented by Councillor Bawn.

RESOLVED that the minutes be received.

(2) Family and Children's Services OSC

These were presented by Councillor Daley and Dodd.

RESOLVED that the minutes be received.

(3) Communities and Place OSC

These were presented by Councillor Reid.

Regarding Minute No.48.2 (Empty Homes in Northumberland), Councillor Gallacher asked members to note that there were very few people in the team delivering this service and further government cutbacks could jeopardise the effectiveness of the team. The service also needed to be better connected with other services within the Council and this should be taken into account when reviews were carried out because long term empty homes attracted problems.

Also regarding Minute No.60.2 (Local Services – Highways Maintenance), he urged members to support the interactive reporting system as this could be rolled out to other services. The Leader supported these comments.

RESOLVED that the minutes be received.

(4) Health and Wellbeing OSC

These were presented by Councillor Jones.

RESOLVED that the minutes be received.

(5) Health and Wellbeing Board

These were presented by Councillor Flux.

RESOLVED that the minutes be received

(6) Standards Committee

These were presented by Councillor Flux.

Councillor Dale hoped that the Standards Committee would be allowed to get on with its work now that a new code of conduct had been adopted, and queried whether it should be sent to town and parish councils for adoption. Councillor Flux replied that members of the Standards Committee always acted with integrity and impartiality, led by a very good chair.

Ch.'s Initials.....

RESOLVED that the minutes be received.

ANNUAL REPORTS

(1) Overview and Scrutiny Committees

Corporate Services and Economic Growth OSC

Councillor Bawn reported that this had been a very productive year with many issues covered. He thanked the Vice Chair Councillor Dunn and members of the Committee and Sean Nicholson for his work.

Communities and Place OSC

Councillor Oliver thanked Scrutiny members and officers for their work during his time as Chair. Councillor Reid echoed these comments and looked forward to the coming year.

Health and Wellbeing OSC

Councillor Reid commented he had chaired the Committee during a difficult time over the first call-in for many years and he thanked members and officers for their support. Councillor Jones referred to the difficulty in getting dentist and GP appointments issue which the Committee had looked at. She thanked officers for their support and members for their sensible questions.

Family and Children's Services OSC

Councillor Daley thanked Chris Angus and Lesley Little for their support and Councillors Stewart and Dodd who had served as Vice Chair, and to Cath McEvoy Carr. He highlighted some of the issues the Committee had successfully addressed over the year, particularly the high number of exclusions in Northumberland Schools and Government funding policy.

(2) Standards Committee

Councillor Flux referred to an earlier point raised by Councillor Dickinson regarding the cancellation of meetings/hearings and asked him to email him about the matter.

Councillor Dickinson commented that there was a need to look at the ongoing caseload. Transparency and the advice which the Chair received were really important.

(3) Armed Forces Forum

Councillor Watson urged members to read the report. There had been over 200 referrals in the last year from those in need. There was now much closer liaison with the Communities Together Team which was proving very effective. He was very proud of what was being done. Councillor Castle added this was a source of active support for veterans, assisted by first rate officers.

RESOLVED that the annual reports be received.

Ch.'s Initials.....