

# NORTHUMBERLAND COUNTY COUNCIL

## COUNTY COUNCIL

At the meeting of the **County Council** held at Council Chamber - County Hall on Wednesday, 1 November 2023 at 2.00 pm.

### PRESENT

B Flux (Chair) (in the Chair)

### MEMBERS

C Ball	J Beynon
L Bowman	S Bridgett
D Carr	E Cartie
G Castle	T Cessford
E Chicken	T Clark
A Dale	W Daley
L Darwin	S Dickinson
R Dodd	L Dunn
D Ferguson	J Foster
B Gallacher	L Grimshaw
C Hardy	G Hill
C Horncastle	C Humphrey
I Hunter	JI Hutchinson
V Jones	D Kennedy
J Lang	S Lee
M Mather	N Morphet
M Murphy	K Nisbet
K Parry	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	M Swinbank
M Swinburn	C Taylor
T Thorne	D Towns
A Wallace	A Watson
J Watson	R Wearmouth
R Wilczek	

### OFFICERS

Bradley, N.	Executive Director – Adults, Ageing and Wellbeing
Gerrard, S.	Director of Law and Corporate Governance (MO)
Hunter, P.	Director of Strategy and

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Jones, P.	Communications Director of Environment and Transport
Kingham, A.	Executive Director – Children and Young People
Little, L.	Senior Democratic Services Office
Masson, N.	Deputy Monitoring Officer
McNeil, J.	Deputy Chief Fire Officer
Murfin, R. (Virtual)	Director of Housing & Planning
Paterson, Dr H.	Chief Executive
Reiter, G.	Director of Children, Young People and Families
Willis, J.	Executive Director for Resources & Transformation (S151)

## 12 CHAIRMAN'S OPENING REMARKS

The Chair advised that item 13 on the agenda would be moved to immediately following item 11 with item 12 to be taken after item 13.

Those Members who had provided helpful feedback following the 10 minute time limit which had been suggested at the last Council meeting were thanked. The Chair advised that the Chair must balance the demands of Members wanting to speak against the need to manage the good and timely conduct of business of the Council. On reflection and following feedback from colleagues a more flexible approach would be adopted and the support of all Members was requested in ensuring arrangements worked in a way which facilitated appropriate debate and challenge whilst ensuring that business was conducted in a business-like and constructive fashion. How this would be managed during this meeting was set out as follows:

- Members would be called in order while trying to reflect political balance, with preference to those who had not previously spoken.
- Participants were asked to avoid repetitive questions and were encouraged to make fresh points so as to ensure that everyone who wanted to speak was able to do so.
- Members were asked to keep to the point in both questions and answers and as a guideline for all contributors to keep to two minutes so far as possible.
- Contributors would be brought back to the point should they stray from the issue and he would ensure that questions did not go on so long that they ceased to shed further light on the matter.

The Director of Law and Corporate Governance had been requested to oversee a review with Members of the effectiveness of arrangements before the end of the municipal year.

## 13 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillors D. Bawn, C. Dunbar, P.D. Ezhilchelvan, S. Fairless-Aitken, N Oliver, W Pattison and G Stewart.

## 14 MINUTES

**RESOLVED** that the minutes of the meeting of County Council held on

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Wednesday, 6 September, 2023, be confirmed as a true record.

15 **DISCLOSURES OF MEMBERS' INTERESTS**

16 **ANNOUNCEMENTS BY THE CHAIR, LEADER, MEMBERS OF THE CABINET, CHAIR OF AN OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE OR HEAD OF PAID SERVICE**

This years' Service of Remembrance was to be held at County Hall on Friday, 10th November. If any Member wished to bring a wreath to lay there would be a briefing in the restaurant at 10.30 am, and the service would commence 10.50 a.m. Refreshments would be available after the service outside of the restaurant and Members were asked to confirm attendance to Susan Taylor.

The MOD Employer Recognition Scheme Gold Award revalidation had been approved and Northumberland County Council would now hold this for a further 5 years. This represented exemplary support provided to our Armed Forces community.

An initial request for the Council to support a march which was planned for 204 Battery, Kingston Park, 101 Regiment on 27-28th January 2024. The intention was that marching troops would leave Kingston Park on Saturday 27th and arrive in Alnwick on Sunday 28th. The march would come to a halt at Alnwick Castle. The reason for this march and this route was, the 1st Battalion Tyneside Scottish marched from Newcastle to Alnwick on 29-30 Jan 1915 to begin their military training during WW1.

A Request would be made by the Royal Regiment of Fusiliers for a St Georges Day march through Ashington on 20 April 2024 which would also mark the 350th anniversary of when the Royal Regiment of Fusiliers was first formed in Northumberland.

Former County Councillor Mike Stott had sadly recently passed away. Mike represented the Blyth Valley Kitty Brewster ward from 1981 to 1985 and was Chair of the Amenities Committee during that time. Members observed a minute's silence in memory of former Councillor Stott.

The Leader advised that Cabinet the following week would be discussing Devolution and the final stage of moving to the North East Mayoral Combined Authority (NEMCA). All of the seven local authorities involved would be taking the decision making paper around the same time so that they could all proceed with this potentially important development for our region. Relationships between the Leaders of all the authorities remained cordial and respectful and this was expected to continue going forward. He looked forward to seeing whoever was chosen to be the Mayor to lead with passion with care.

17 **PUBLIC QUESTIONS**

No public questions had been received.

18 **MEMBER QUESTIONS**

**Question 1 from Councillor Hill to the Leader**

Scottish Power's net profit last year was £487 million, which must bring great joy to their shareholders. Having less fun were the residents in my ward and within

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Councillor Hunter's ward who had recently been walking home nervously in the dark as, once again, Scottish Power were taking weeks (sometimes many months) to fix faults impacting street lighting. Do you think this was acceptable and what was this authority doing about it?

The Leader advised that investigations identified a fault with the underground electricity cable. Once the fault was identified as being with the mains supply it must be dealt with by the power company who had 20 working days to complete the repair. The repair was carried out within this timescale. The Council did everything they could to encourage private companies to think about residents when the lighting fails.

Councillor Hill asked in light of the fact that last year in Highcliffe that Scottish Power took over a year to fix a fault and that Renfrewshire Council had written to the Chief Executive of Scottish Power, quite rightly, to say that given the profits that they make, that the delays and lack of urgency were unacceptable, would the Leader write to the Chief Executive of Scottish power advising these delays and lack of urgency were unacceptable? She was aware of three or four examples of these unacceptable delays.

The Leader advised he would need to consider how many similar issues there had been and the timescales involved along with which utility companies these involved. If there was a common thread then this would be taken up with whichever utility company it was. The Council did try to work with people on good terms as much as they could, but he would look at this and if appropriate write to them.

**Question 2 from Councillor Murphy to the Chair**

Would the Leader agree with me, that openness and accountability were critical components of a well-run Local Authority, and that, in order to achieve these a full Council meeting should not be restricted by arbitrary and artificial time constraints, which bore no relation to the importance of the issue being discussed, nor of the interests of members who wished to contribute to the debate, and effectively disenfranchise back bench councillors?

The Chair advised that he had addressed this in his introductory remarks at the beginning of the meeting and work would continue to make this a good Council and make meetings productive and he hoped that the issue was now resolved.

**Question 3 from Councillor Darwin to Councillor Jones**

It was reported to members earlier this year that there had been a steep rise in Domestic Violence. Did Northumberland Adult social care work closely with Northumbria Police when it came to tackling Domestic Violence and issues of safeguarding? Also, what steps were put in place, if any, to ensure cases of Domestic Violence which were reported to Northumbria Police were also reported to Northumberland Adult social care to ensure Northumberland County Council could best support victims of Domestic Violence in such uncertain, worrying, and devastating times?

Councillor Jones thanked Councillor Darwin for raising such an important matter. All incidents of Domestic Violence were submitted by the police as an "Adult Concern Notification" into a team based in Foundry House, Bedlington. The team

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was referred to as the “MASH” and MASH stands for multi-agency safeguarding hub. The team was sub divided into two parts and if children were involved the concern would go to the children’s MASH and if no children were involved it would go to the adult MASH. Northumbria Police were a key partner of the MASH and were physically located in the building in Bedlington along with the Council’s staff. An Independent Domestic Violence Advisor also works within the MASH team and could pick up incidents of real concern and discuss referrals to seek refuge quickly. Northumbria Police were also core members of the Northumberland Children and Adults Safeguarding Partnership Board which reviews occurrences and patterns in domestic violence from a more strategic level.

Councillor Darwin stated that he had been a victim of domestic violence earlier the previous year so would like Members to know more about this issue and know that it could affect anyone at any time. He asked if he could meet with the head of Social Care or those who were best placed to help with this matter going forward to make positive changes for residents of Northumberland and improve, where possible, information shared with the police and police services. He had an ongoing investigation with Northumbria Police where a complaint had been raised on his behalf on the handling of his case and he would like to meet with Members to discuss this more.

Councillor Jones advised that this was Councillor Pattison’s portfolio so that request would be passed to her. She would advise that he visit the one call centre at Bedlington and would ask that Councillor Pattison to arrange this.

#### **Question 4 from Councillor Hunter to the Leader**

I have been contacted by a few residents asking about the 50+ question survey they have recently received in the post from Lake Market Research from Kent on behalf of Northumberland County Council. The residents who have contacted me have all stated they looked at the number of questions and due to the length of the survey placed the paperwork in the bin. Please can the Leader advise me:

- Who authorised the survey?
- What was the purpose of the survey?
- Would the results of the survey influence future budget expenditure?
- What was the total cost so far to Northumberland County Council for undertaking the survey?
- When will elected members receive feedback from the survey?

The Leader responded by stating that the survey had been authorised by himself, the Chief Executive and the Director of Strategy and Communications. The purpose of the survey was to gauge public opinion and find out what were the really important things the Council did and how much these were either appreciated or not, or whether the Council did things well or not etc. It would influence spending and the budget process this year and the next year, as it was important that the Administration reflected what people told us. The cost of the survey was around £25,000, which was on the modest scale for a survey of this size, and unfortunately we did not have the resources to undertake this ourselves. The normal process was used to find a supplier to do this on our behalf and feedback would be provided to Members.

In February Members stated that the Administration did not listen and public

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consultation was rubbish, so the survey was commissioned and now they were being challenged on this. It was important to listen to what residents wanted and this was one method of doing this, another was going around the County to meet with residents, such as the meeting in Berwick along with the Local Area Committees. A Town and Parish Conference had been held and this had been so successful that it had been decided that it would happen twice per year going forward. All Cabinet Members had been asked to attend at least one Town or Parish Council to meet with them and understand their issues better. The Administration did spend a considerable amount of time speaking to people and that was built into every that was done. This latest survey would allow the Administration to be clear on what was needed. Berwick had had significant infrastructure spending from the Conservatives, between 2011-2017 when Labour and Liberal Democrats were in charge in Berwick the total spend was £11.7m, currently under the Conservatives it was £31.2M and once all the current work was completed it would be closer to £50m so it was hoped that the residents of Berwick liked that what they were getting.

Councillor Hunter then asked that in future, when undertaking such surveys, Members be advised so that they could explain to residents the background and encourage residents to complete the surveys.

The Leader apologised that this had not been done and confirmed that this would be in future.

#### **Question 5 from Councillor Dale to Councillor Riddle**

As a result of Climate Change we were seeing more regular storms throughout the country causing flooding and trees falling in particular. What extra resources were this Council providing for our workforce to help them with this extra workload?

Councillor Riddle advised that the Council had detailed Action Plans for responding to events that posed a significant risk to communities, such as flooding during the recent Storm Babet severe weather event and were well prepared to respond to such events with partners.

When responding to severe weather such as Storm Babet and the forthcoming Storm Ciaran, the priority was to ensure the safety and well-being of our communities and as a result staff were redeployed from other duties to focus all resources and efforts where they were most needed. Additional external support for in-house teams was also brought in when required, for example tree surgeons to assist teams in clearing fallen or dangerous trees. We also recognised that the frequency and severity of storms was increasing and this would be taken into account in the refreshed Climate Change Action Plan 2024-26.

Councillor Dale thanked the workforce for their work over the previous weekend and she welcomed Councillor Riddle's response. Since LGR the amount of service cuts to this workforce had been quite considerable. In 2008 Tynedale had six gully cleaners and 2 road cleaners, now there was one gully cleaner and it covered an enormous area with gullies only cleaned once every two years. This had been discussed during a Parish Council/County Council meeting. What she would like to see was that the Council be proactive rather than reactive as she felt that if the gullies had been cleaned and the ditches cleared there would not have

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been the level of flooding and asked if a working group could be set up.

Councillor Riddle reminded Members that there were four new gully suckers purchased in 2022 with the older ones more off the road than on. These new vehicles were state of the art efficient machines and it would be investigated if these were being used to their maximum potential. In relation to the frequency of gully cleansing, there was the new fix my street app with a lot of back office data being collected so that resources could be targeted in an efficient manner.

**Question 6 from Councillor Nisbet to Councillor Horncastle**

Could the Council confirm how many void Council Houses exist in Blyth, how long they have been empty and how many people were currently on the Council house waiting list?

Councillor Horncastle advised that the County Council had 3,646 units in Blyth, Cowpen and Newsham. In October 2023, there were 77 void properties in Blyth. The average void period was 99 days (lower than County average of 107 days). There were also 60 voids in Blyth awaiting demolition or structural works and full refurbishment. While there was no longer a "Council House Waiting List" as such, there were currently 13,990 active Homefinder applications and just over 8,600 of these were in Band 3 which meant they had no assessed immediate housing need. The delay in reletting the 77 properties was caused by a combination of demand and increased levels of works required to bring ageing stock up to modern standards before they were let. To give context to these figures, the void figure for lettable council properties in Blyth, Cowpen and Newsham was 2.1%, the County average was 1.8% and the national average was 2.2%. The void rate for all housing stock was 2.7% in the UK.

On 14 November 2023 there was to be a Policy Conference on Affordable and Social Housing. This would be an opportunity to influence priorities and understand how Members could better support residents who might be experiencing housing problems.

Councillor Nisbet asked for the same information to be provided for Cramlington in writing. Councillor Horncastle confirmed that this would be provided.

**Question 7 from Councillor Dickinson to the Leader**

Could the Leader confirm if the Advance Northumberland Managing Director has resigned and if so, did he find it appropriate that the Leader of the opposition or any Councillor for that matter, found out on the grape vine rather than being respectfully communicated with about the Council wholly owned company?

The Chair reminded all Members that Advance was an independent arm's length company. In the first instance it was for the Managing Director and the company to determine how best to communicate these issues. In general, in line with good practice, the Council did not disseminate more widely than was strictly necessary details of any resignation. Steps were being taken to ensure that the appropriate response to this resignation was taken by the council in conjunction with the company. This would, of course, follow the proper process.

Councillor Dickinson advised that some Members were becoming increasingly frustrated when members of staff who were involved in their casework left the authority without any notification being provided to those who had been working

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with them. He asked that better communication be provided in such cases so that they did not have to go through the whole case with a new person.

The Leader advised that the level of staff leaving now was miniscule as opposed to levels two years ago, however Members could always contact the Chief Executive and there were regular Group Leader meetings and that was the place to raise this type of issue. In relation to casework, if Members were not able to contact a particular member of staff, then the leadership team should be contacted.

**Question 8 from Councillor Taylor to the Leader**

As you are aware I have voted against the budget for the last two years, and as we go into this year's budget setting period, could you confirm to the Council Tax payers of Bedlington that they would see some serious investment in their town? Personally, I am hoping that we do not just have to rely on the £3 million of Borderlands funding or take our begging bowl out for some external funding that was linked to this, and for which we have to jump through hoops as it was related to projects that we have been advised we can have, and not what we actually asked for?

The Leader responded paying tribute to her, along with Councillors Wallace, Wilczek and Robinson for being such passionate and excellent Members for Bedlington. They had raised issues and he had met with them regularly and because of that the Administration had moved forward with as much as they could. However he had to be firm about spending in Bedlington and what was actually happening, and whilst it might be disappointing, it was where they were. Cash investment was going into Gallagher Park for car parking etc. Dene Park had been visited two days ago and found that there were 12 issues which needed addressing and these were now being done. Councillor Wilczek had raised the possibility of creating more of a heritage lottery funded type scheme there to reflect the incredibly interesting history and culture around what was there hundreds of years ago.

There was a new play zone which would improve the sports and play facilities, there was a new train station at Bedlington which cost over £20m and new walking and cycling routes around the town. There was new investment at St Benet Biscop School. Bedlington was the first of only seven towns to develop a new 'Place Plan' and would receive around £3m for this and more support might be able to be provided in addition to this if a project came along. There were fresh ideas for Gallagher Park led by Councillor Horncastle, which would include investment in a Queen Elizabeth II Memorial as well as new nature trails. New investment was also being provided at Plessey Woods to provide a climbing boulder park and improved refreshment offer. Whilst it was appreciated that the new Leisure Centre had been built in Morpeth, this was only a nine minute drive and there was a regular bus service and, with the reduction in bus fares at the current time, it was possible to travel there cheaply. In conclusion he stated that whilst they would like to do more and would be doing more, it would take time and asked that Members be patient. He advised that during previous Administrations between 2011-2017 £11.6m had been spent and since this Administration came into power from 2017 to 2023 £13.1m had been spent and along with everything else that was planned to happen this would bring the total to nearly £48m in that time. The Administration did take Bedlington seriously and he applauded the

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work that the Councillors had done.

Councillor Taylor thanked the Leader for the list provided, however these were not the things that residents had asked for when questioned. She would be interested to know how much NCC money was in the spending quoted. In relation to the car park at Gallagher Park herself and other Councillors had been asked to contribute from their Small Schemes for this work and she had been happy to do so. In relation to the cheap bus fares, it had been advertised everywhere that these would cease at the end of December. She stated it would be nice if the Council could look at providing transport for those who had to travel outside of Bedlington for Leisure as not everyone had a car, or could afford the bus fare and asked if subsidised travel could be provided.

The Leader advised that this could be looked at, alongside another request from a Member for residents in his area who also had to travel outside for leisure. However, if there was an hourly bus service for the fare at current levels, then it would be difficult to provide anything additional.

## 19 **REPORT OF THE CABINET MEMBER FOR LOOKING AFTER OUR ENVIRONMENT**

### **Annual Portfolio Report – Looking after our Environment**

The Annual Report from the Cabinet Member for Looking After Our Environment contained information that set out the context for delivery of the Portfolio.

Councillor Horncastle, provided an introduction to the report highlighting the achievements and examples of excellent work over the previous year, and expressed his gratitude for the hard work of officers and their expertise, without which, he would not be able to carry out his role.

Councillor Daley welcomed the report which contained many good things and asked what was to happen with the old Hexham Middle School site, and whether this could be used to provide affordable housing. Councillor Horncastle advised that a lot of work went on behind the scenes when a school closed in relation to the delisting and permissions required from Government Departments and Sport England. Special architects would soon be commissioned to develop a masterplan for the huge site which would be followed by consultations with stakeholders and then the public. It was known there was a shortage of affordable housing within the Tyne Valley and Hexham, with a number of developable sites in private ownership. However, this site was in the ownership of the Council and the Administration would do its best to ensure that as much affordable housing would be provided on that site as possible.

Councillor Wallace highlighted that the number of affordable housing units actually provided fell well short of the target number and requested clarification on the difference between the numbers in this report and those contained in the Corporate Performance report also on the agenda.

Councillor Wearmouth advised that this report contained up to date figures whilst the performance report provided figures at the end of the previous financial year in April 2023. Councillor Horncastle stated that the provision of affordable

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housing was very important to him and that the area in which he lived had no affordable housing. Whilst there was some affordable housing in the South East of the County, it was very difficult to provide this in more rural parts of the County due to planning restrictions within these areas. He was not happy with the figures and was doing his best to improve the numbers. He highlighted the Housing Summit which was to take place shortly advising that Housing Associations were cash rich, but site poor and officers did their best to identify sites for affordable housing. It was up to all Councillors to identify any sites in their areas and drive forward the provision of affordable housing.

Councillor Hill stated that a range of issues had been raised at the Local Area Committee in relation to the management, maintenance and future proofing of cemeteries and the provision of crematoria. She asked if there was a Cemetery Strategy or Plan, and if so when was it last refreshed or when was it due to be refreshed.

Councillor Horncastle stated he did not have the information regarding the Cemetery Strategy, but it would be provided. In relation to the provision of crematoria, he advised that the Council's Crematorium was in Blyth, however it had lost a lot of business to the new private facility at Felton and there was no financial ability to provide another Council run facility. There was also the possibility of another new private facility being provided at Arcot Hall which could further impact finances for the Council's Crematorium.

Councillor Dickinson extended the Labour Group's thanks to the staff on the ground who dealt with Councillors on day to day issues surrounding this portfolio. He highlighted that the Cemetery in Chevington was one of the highest fee paying within the County and had a severe flooding problem for which a solution had not been found and asked Councillor Horncastle to visit the Cemetery with him to look at the problem. He advised that the Labour Group were very committed to the provision of Council housing and whilst affordable housing was very high on the Administration's priorities, more was still required to be done. He asked if it would be possible that a cross party working group be set up to discuss the housing strategy where more in depth discussions could be held. The Labour Group welcomed the report but would like to see more local authority housing and inclusion on the strategy which would stretch past this Administrations term of office.

Councillor Horncastle highlighted that over the past three to four years there had been an influx of refugees from Afghanistan, Ukraine and Syria which the Authority had been pleased to welcome, however this had impacted on the availability of housing as many hundreds had been housed.

Councillor Morphet, advised that the report was welcomed along with the environmental policy statements it referred to and the ecological emergency declaration which proceeded it. The sections on flood risk management were particularly informative and relevant at the current time, however it had been noted that all talk of slowing the flow of water had been at the property level rather than the landscape level. The Cabinet Member would be encouraged to pay more attention on catchment based natural flood management in the future.

Councillor Horncastle advised that this was something that had been discussed at

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Cabinet and with the relevant officers and the comments would be taken on board.

Councillor Hunter referenced the review of grounds maintenance that would be undertaken and asked that any changes to the frequency of grass cutting be reported to Town and Parish Councils quickly to assist in their budget setting process which was starting now.

Councillor Horncastle advised that the same system had been in place for many years, however Town and Parish Councils expect 12 to 13 cuts per year and this was not always possible due to weather etc. He highlighted that the Council did not just have parks, but also had many large areas of green space and the Council were looking to enhance the experience of the public visiting these areas and were looking at what could be done better, not cutting the service. The Town and Parish Councils would be advised.

Councillor Cartie highlighted the number of long time derelict properties within Blyth which had been brought to the Council's attention on numerous occasions in the past as the situation was affecting the health and wellbeing of people living in the areas. The response given every time was that the matter was in the hands of solicitors or property owners and it was an ongoing circle. Whilst these were good properties they would take vast amounts of money to put right. Why could the Council not just take them, these people did not want them, and whilst it was accepted that there was a legal process, unless someone did something the situation would just continue.

Councillor Horncastle stated he was aware as they had spoken before on this subject, but could not go into details of individual cases, however there was one property where the owner had died and nobody had taken it over, and as a result, the neighbouring property was suffering series water ingress. He asked that S Gerrard, the Director of Law and Corporate Governance look into the matter.

Councillor Swinburn was very pleased to see the Council volunteering to be a pilot for the Housing Regulations scheme and thanked the Housing Team for their work especially in relation to the prefabricated properties within his Ward. In relation to the review of the Grounds Maintenance service he was pleased that the local communities would be involved. In relation to ash die back and the amount of work which would be needed across the County, he questioned how this problem would be addressed whilst maintaining the regular maintenance for other trees.

Councillor Horncastle commented that Storm Arwen had caused major tree damage across the County to all trees. In respect of ash trees he advised that surveys had been done trees along the A69 and A68 and the problem had not been as bad as had been expected. He had talked to tree surgeons who had advised that that it depended on the amount of leaf damage as to what was required to be done, however discussions were still needed with P. Jones, Director of Environment and Transport.

Councillor Dale referenced the new Tree Management Policy, ash die back and the high number of concerns about trees which had been reported through the fix my street app and advised that funding must be made available to respond to the

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policy and what people wanted.

Councillor Horncastle advised that at the minute it was emergency work and survey work being undertaken, and he was to meet with P. Jones shortly on this.

**RESOLVED** that the update from the Portfolio Holder for Looking After Our Environment be noted.

20 **REPORT OF THE CABINET MEMBER FOR INSPIRING YOUNG PEOPLE**

**Annual Portfolio Report – Inspiring Young People**

The Annual Report from the Cabinet Member for Inspiring Young People contained information that set the context for delivery of the Portfolio, highlighting achievements and outlined the areas for focus for the coming year.

Councillor G Renner-Thompson provided an introduction to the report. He acknowledged that the achievements would not be possible without the hard work of the staff of Children’s Services, school staff and partners along with the cooperation of parents, carers and indeed the pupils and cared for children. Council was advised that currently 95% of schools within the County were good or outstanding and it was hoped that the work undertaken by the School Improvement Team would be trailed in other local authorities. It had been said by the industry, that the new welding and fabrication centre in Blyth was the best example within the Country with investment also being made in other vocational centres across the County. Dame Andrea Leadson, Government Minister for Early Years along with others had visited the family hubs in Blyth and Berwick and had been quoted as saying they demonstrated best practice in the Country. Support had also continued to be provided to families in the school summer holiday with arranged activities and health food provided for those attending.

Councillor Kennedy offered congratulations on the excellent figures in the report. He advised that at the end of the end of the last school year he had raised an issue that the staff of the Thursday Club for special needs children, which his son attended had advised him that they, along with a number of other staff, were being made redundant. He had been reassured that the service would be reinstated and would be started again before the beginning of the new school term in September. It was now November and the service had still not been reinstated and he had now been advised by a member of staff that it would not happen this year. He had accepted the original answer that it would start again in September in good faith, however he now wished to know when the service would be reinstated.

Councillor Renner-Thompson advised that he did not have that specific information, but he would obtain the information from A. Kingham, Executive Director for Children and Young People.

Councillor Ball stated that the report entitled inspiring young people did not mention youth work and she highlighted that there had been a cut of almost £1b decline in youth work spend since the Conservative Party took power as quoted in the YMCA and UK Youth Reports. The Cabinet Member had stated when Family Hubs were being discussed at FACS OSC that there would be no loss of youth workers. She questioned where youth workers were now in the County, as

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additional strain could not be placed on the voluntary and community sector as people were destitute, poverty was through the roof and young people were very important. She had stated in this meeting on numerous occasions that for every £1 invested in youth work it saved the tax payers between £3.20 and £6.40 and there was not one youth worker in Northumberland. She continued by stating that we either inspire young people or we do not and expressed her disappointed in the report.

Councillor Renner-Thompson responded by advising that there had been no cut to youth provision. There had previously been 12 posts, and the equivalent of 3.2 full time workers had been made redundant following a big consultation taking place on this. One of the redundant posts was only looking after a club with three children and resources needed to be managed. The 3.2 full time workers had been replaced with 4 youth support workers, an increase of one post in addition to the five support posts created within schools themselves and it was the intention for another two support workers to be appointed. Work was also being undertaken with Thriving Together, the Learning Link and the North East Youth Alliance on a cross regional youth offer, and currently 387 providers had been mapped out across the County which would be supported through the Family Hubs, allowing young people who were in need to be traced through the system. Youth clubs where young people went to play pool etc. were outdated and surveys were currently being undertaken to find out what the young people wanted and provision would be matched to this going forward.

For clarity, the Chair advised at this point that he worked for Youth Focus North East which was on his declaration. North East Youth Alliance was not on his declaration but Youth Focus North East was part of the North East Youth Alliance.

Councillor Foster questioned where the survey for young people was being carried out as she had a secondary age child and she had not seen this and would therefore like some information on that. She highlighted that there had been an issue with a contractor involved in the building of schools going into administration including the new Gilbert Ward Academy and schools in the Coquet Partnership. She had written to the Executive Director for Children and Young People with her concerns surrounding this and would like to thank her for the prompt response. On behalf of the Labour Group she would also like to acknowledge the work going on in the background by the Executive Director and her team to address the situation and put children and young people at the heart of what they were doing and thanked them very much.

Councillor Renner-Thompson advised that there had been a contractor who had gone into administration, however contingency plans were in place. The school building programme was incredibly important and they were trying hard to ensure that there were no delays to the programme.

Councillor Scott advised that Engage in Blyth had recently closed. Those children were the responsibility of the Council and she questioned if the Risk Protocol was sufficiently robust to support the families and schools who had one week to find an alternative place for their child.

Councillor Renner-Thompson advised that discussions were ongoing regarding the finishing of Engage and could not be discussed in this forum, however he

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would meet with Councillor Scott outside of the meeting to discuss this.

Councillor Morphet stated the Green Party welcomed the report. However they had concerns regarding the vagueness of paragraph 5.10 related to aerated concrete in school buildings and asked when would full structural surveys be undertaken in order to provide the assurance that was sought.

Councillor Renner-Thompson advised that structural surveys were carried out by both the Council and the DfE on a rolling basis and when RAC had first been identified as a problem it had been confirmed by all schools within Northumberland that they did not have any RAC.

Councillor Hill sought assurance that the Administration would support Jackie at Engage in Berwick who was doing everything that she could to ensure that there was a continuation of the excellent provision in Berwick.

Councillor Renner-Thompson stated that once a decision had been made on the future of Engage, then a Member Briefing would be held to advise Members in the areas involved.

Councillor Cartie advised for openness, that she ran youth projects in Blyth and was also a member of North East Youth Alliance, however she was absolutely baffled by Councillor Renner-Thompson's statement that old fashioned youth clubs were outdated. She assured Members that these were not, she had 15-20 young people attending four sessions per week, and they went along to play pool and meet with friends in a safe place. They were not necessarily children who had social issues but they all lived in poverty. The funding for youth services was reducing dramatically with no funding from the Council and Children in Need also cutting funding. She invited Councillor Renner-Thompson to visit her youth club.

Councillor Renner-Thompson apologised if that was how his comments had come across and advised that this type of provision was not something that the Council would fund in the future, however organisations would be supported to allow them to run this type of facility.

**RESOLVED** that the update from the Portfolio Holder for Inspiring Young People be noted.

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**FAMILY AND CHILDRENS' SERVICES OSC - INTERIM REPORT TO COUNCIL**

Councillor Daley, Chair of the Family and Children's OSC advised that interim reports from the Committee would now be presented at Council replacing the minutes of meetings which had previously been included. The membership of the Committee included co-opted representatives from different educational faith organisations along with teacher union representatives providing a detailed level of debate and scrutiny overview of the very granular detail provided in the reports.

A comprehensive introduction was provided on the report with Council advised that the Annual Report of the Principal Social Worker was a statutory report providing assurance on the work of the Social Work team. In response to the reliance of agency staff the Council had created an Academy initiative to support newly qualified social workers in their first year which had been very successful. Of the 36 key recommendations from the Home to School Transport Review 30 of them had now been adopted. The work had been undertaken in conjunction with

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an interested parent to develop a solution to issues with the system. The School Improvement Team was made up of very experienced and knowledgeable staff who worked with schools to improve attainment and attendance. A recommendation had been made to Cabinet not to reduce the funding for this service, which has been agreed. There had been a massive increase in the number of children and young people with an EHCP (Educational and Healthcare Plan) and a great deal of work had been undertaken to improve the quality of these plans and support pupils to stay in mainstream education.

He offered thanks to Councillor Richard Dodd who had previously served as Vice-Chair of the Committee and welcomed Councillor Eve Chicken to that position, and thanked all those involved with the education of children and young people for their continued work. Members were asked to contact him if they wished questions to be asked at the Committee or if there were issues that they felt required the Committee to scrutinise.

Councillor Grimshaw thanked the Committee for their excellent report and asked what was in place to ensure that the children of refugees were able to attend schools or SEND provision closest to their homes and if siblings were still being split up and sent to different schools.

Councillor Daley advised that the children of Ukrainian, Syrian and Afghanistan refugees were given priority in being offered the nearest school with available places, he was unable to answer whether siblings attended different schools, however Councillors should contact the Executive Director - Children, Young People and Education if they were aware of this as a guarantee had been given that children would attend their nearest school and that support with translation and mental health would be provided.

Councillor Gallacher wished to acknowledge the work undertaken by the School Transport section who had professionally dealt with problems caused by Covid, cost of living crisis and increases in fuel prices along with contractors entering into liquidation. There was always an open dialogue between the Section and the contractors in developing different ways to provide the service.

Councillor Daley stated that as part of the review, Officers spoke to other local authorities and looked at different models and they had now developed a pilot model offering different ways of providing the service and was a really innovative solution for both urban and rural mix. He would ask A. Kingham to pass on the thanks and comments to the team.

## 22 **HEALTH AND WELLBEING OSC - INTERIM REPORT TO COUNCIL**

Councillor Dodd, Chair of the Health and Wellbeing OSC provided an introduction to the report and started by thanking Councillor Veronica Jones for her work as Chair for the past two and a half years. The Committee played a vital role in public health and adult social care and covered a great deal of topics. The first two topics outlined in the report had similar traits in relation to the recruitment and retention the workforce, with shortages impacting on the number of people waiting to access services. Initiatives had been commenced to alleviate these shortages and make the conditions better by increasing rates of pay for carers and mileage to make the positions more attractive. There had been some consideration of bringing the service in-house, but this did have financial risks. Concern was

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expressed regarding the closure of the 100 hour pharmacies in Cramlington and it was feared that this would not be a one-off situation and a number of pharmacies providing this would follow if the problem was not addressed. He Highlighted that a Task and Finish Working Group (T&FWG) had been set up to look at the issue which was Chaired by Councillor Nisbet.

In respect of the HM Senior Coroner's Annual Report, Members were asked to take an interest in the various areas of review coming forward advised that the North East Ambulance Service was to attend a meeting shortly. A further T&FWG had been set up to look at the provision of defibrillators, identifying where they are and who has responsibility for replacing the batteries/pads, how they can be accessed and how were people trained to use them.

Councillor Dickinson agreed that it was right to set up the T&FWG to look at the closure of pharmacies, but advised that another major problem within his own area and others was the closure of dental practices which impacted on access to services for children and Northumberland residents. He had been invited to the Committee when this was discussed to provide a local view and had been assured that access would not be affected, however they had now lost two practices and he had been advised that there was a waiting list of 800 to join another practice. This was replicated across Northumberland and whilst it was a national funding problem, there needed to be local monitoring and a spokesperson to give our voice.

Councillor Dodd agreed that this would be added as an agenda item for a future meeting.

Councillor Cartie advised that there were concerns regarding the closure of pharmacies in Newsham and Blyth. There had been a lot of new houses built within the area along with an aging population and the situation needed to be addressed either by making sure these were kept open or providing the pharmacy within another shop to ensure that the service was maintained. She welcomed that something was being done, and asked to be kept involved.

Councillor Dodd advised that part of the problem had been supermarkets wishing to provide everything and then backing out when it was no longer a profit making exercise, along with the availability of internet deliveries. He assured Council that the issue was being looked at and would keep Members updated.

Councillor Swinburn thanked Councillor Nisbet for the invitation to the T&FWG as the pharmacy was in his Ward and highlighted that the issue was not just with the removal of the extended hours, but also with stock availability with patients not able to access items. He advised that the pharmacy had also left the site prior to the end of the notice period which had put a strain on the pharmacy that remained with large queues. He did, however question how much control the Council would have but wished to be kept advised so that he could respond to questions from residents within his Ward.

Councillor Dodds confirmed that this issue would affect everyone and that these extended hours pharmacies were needed. The OSC would work with the Health and Wellbeing Board on what could be done.

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Councillor Morphet thanked Councillor Dodd and that the Green Party welcomed the comments regarding care workers but highlighted that it was not just about improving salaries and conditions, it was also about making them feel valued and to be proud of their work in order to solve the crisis.

Councillor Dodd noted the comments.

Councillor Grimshaw stated that the probable closure of pharmacies was of concern which must be addressed, and deliveries to vulnerable residents must also be part of this.

Councillor Dodd noted the comment.

Councillor Bridgett commented that he was pleased that the issue of defibrillators was being looked at as this was an important issue. He questioned if Members were aware of how they should be used as he had not been. There was no map of the locations of the equipment with some needing a 999 code to access. It was important that all Councillors were aware of where the equipment was, how to access it and how to use it.

Councillor Mather advised that he was a community first responder and there was a programme which was used called "The Circuit" which listed the location of defibrillators. He paid tribute to all the community and voluntary organisations and parish councils that had raised funds to have these provided. Training was very important and everyone should know how to use them, however there were protocols in place for their use to stop people going straight for these in an emergency. There were other more important things which needed to be done prior to using a defibrillator and the Council should be working with the ambulance service to promote this key message. He would be happy to work with the Committee on this.

Councillor Dodd commented that this was a topic which was important to people and he thought there should be some sort of visible sign to alert people to where defibrillators were located and asked Members to email himself, Councillor Nisbet or Chris Angus for any suggestions on how this could be done. He would be interested to know the number of defibrillators within the County and highlighted that maintenance of the machines was important with the life of the battery only five years from the build of the machine and not from when it was actually installed at a venue.

23 **REPORT OF THE DEPUTY LEADER AND CABINET MEMBER FOR CORPORATE SERVICES**

**Corporate Performance – Quarter 4 2022/23 Outturn Report**

Councillor Wearmouth, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Corporate Services provided an introduction to the report which provided a summary of the progress against the Council's three Corporate Plan priorities using the Council's performance at the end of Quarter 4 of 2022/23. Thanks were provided to the customer services team who had answered 92% of calls in an average time of 136 seconds, which was exceptional and related to a wide variety of questions. In relation to the financial position of the Council it had been a turbulent year however the year had been ended with an underspend of £5.8m for 2022/23. He

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had been very pleased to see the improvement in using local contractors and this would be continued to be pushed forward through the BEST programme and other projects. Good progress was being made with the provision of superfast broadband, noting however that there was always more that could be done. There was a great deal of data contained in the report which would be of interest to Members.

Councillor Dale highlighted the digital phone switchover which would have a massive impact for residents especially in rural areas where additional equipment might need to be purchased to ensure phone connectivity during storms etc. The possibility of having a partnership between the Council, BT and other organisations with an interest was suggested to make sure all worked together and as people were rightly concerned about this.

Councillor Wearmouth advised that this would be addressed during Policy Conferences and this would also be picked up by Scrutiny. There was need for discussions with the relevant Companies and residents needed to know that this was going to happen and innovative ways of providing resilience would be required.

Councillor Ball questioned when the levelling up money was to be spent in Ashington and when a consultation on how this was to be used would take place as she had been told this would take place in autumn and she had heard nothing with residents becoming disillusioned and frustrated.

Councillor Wearmouth responded by thanking her for bringing to Members' attention the Government funding which Ashington had attracted and, with which he believed, good progress was being made. Councillor Ploszaj and the Regeneration team would be providing more information in due course. This funding was in addition to that already being provided for the new station in Ashington and College with lots of things for the residents of Ashington to look forward to.

Councillor Carr was pleased to see the broadband targets were being met, however he also had concerns when in 2025 the pstn lines would cease to exist and questioned if anything was being done to identify the small demographic of residents who did not have internet connection and would be trapped with no way of contacting the Council as often they also did not have mobile phones.

Councillor Wearmouth advised that this would be work the team would be undertaking as it was definitely something that the Council needed to understand, however it would not be straightforward to identify which residents would need to be contacted and that they would be provided for as they wished.

Councillor Morphet stated that it had been noticed that the Council's inequalities work was more focussed on health inequality and poverty prevention rather than wealth inequality. It was suggested that focus should be on the maximum to minimum income ratio, the maximum to minimum land ownership ratio and maximum to minimum total wealth ratio for the County to monitor the progress in tackling inequality as the problem as a whole would never be solved unless the big picture was looked at.

Councillor Wearmouth responded by stating that there was a whole variety of KPIs which were constantly being reviewed. Ultimately he thought there was a great deal being done to bring investment into the County, creating jobs and making sure that people were being given the best start in life. Credit should be given to the Council and the Leader for putting inequalities at the heart of everything that the Council were doing.

Councillor Grimshaw highlighted the impressive performance of the Communities Together team, for which she had great respect in that they did an absolutely fantastic job in responding to requests and she wished to ensure that the service was fully funded and staffed in order to provide help to vulnerable people within the County.

Councillor Wearmouth also joined her in thanking the staff of Communities Together with the focus now moving from the Covid and Ukraine response to achieving the right focus for the future.

Councillor Dickinson stated that he welcomed that the Leaders were now having a discussion regarding KPIs and he would like to meet with Councillor Wearmouth separately on this. Whilst he was pleased to see some improvement and there was a lot to see, he felt that there could be more evidence/data provided to give weight to the document. He asked if the revised KPIs would be implemented in time for the next report.

Councillor Wearmouth advised that KPIs were constantly being reviewed and the Administration was keen to receive feedback through scrutiny etc and Group Leaders had the ability to provide feedback through the Group Leaders meetings. However, he did ask that KPIs were not changed repeatedly as then the thread of what you were trying to monitor could be lost.

**RESOLVED** that the progress against the three Corporate Priorities, as summarised in the report, be noted.

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**REPORT OF THE DEPUTY LEADER AND CABINET MEMBER FOR CORPORATE SERVICES**

**Treasury Management Annual Report for the Financial Year 2022-23**

Councillor Wearmouth, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Corporate Services provided an introduction to the report which provided details of performance against the Treasury Management Statement 2022-23 which had been approved by Council on 23 February 2023. The report provided a review of borrowing and investment performance for 2022-23 set in the context of the general economic conditions which had prevailed throughout the year. It had been a difficult time, but had been well led by the S151 Officer and whilst there had been little bumps from time to time the financial heart of the organisation was still good.

Councillor Grimshaw commented that this had been a difficult time but Officers had done an excellent job.

**RESOLVED** that the report be received and the performance of the Treasury Management function for 2022-23 be noted.

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**Annual Report from the Audit Committee**

Councillor Towns, Vice-Chair of the Audit Committee provided an introduction to the report which was the annual report of the Audit Committee to Council for 2022/23 and which had been agreed by the Audit Committee at their meeting on 27 September 2023.

Councillor Towns thanked the officer team who had worked with the Committee to produce the interesting and detailed reports provided to the Committee. He continued on behalf of the Committee by thanking S Watson the former Independent Chair, who had fulfilled that role in an excellent manner and who had stepped down recently. Council was now looking to recruit another Independent Chair to fulfil that role.

He advised that the Council's Audit Committee, as part of its Group Audit function, had audit oversight of Advance Northumberland who also had their own Audit Committee. The two Committees had worked well together and as part of his Independent Chair role, S. Watson had been attending the Advance Audit meetings. As Vice-Chair, he would continue to do this to ensure liaison between the two entities until a new Independent Chair was appointed. Audit Committee were to receive a further detailed report, as indicated at the last meeting, which would wrap up all outstanding issues related to severance payments. As that would be an issue for that Committee to comment on once all information had been provided to them he would not be commenting or answering any questions related to that issue.

Councillor Grimshaw also added her thanks to S. Watson who in her opinion had been an excellent Chair and had handled difficult meetings well. She echoed the comments in thanking all the team who worked behind the Audit Committee.

Councillor Dale highlighted the statements made by the Tax Payers Alliance in relation to the sign off of accounts by the County Council and advised that it should be made clear that the Statement of Accounts had been signed off and it was actually the Value for Money report which had not been signed off as these two things were being confused.

Councillor Dickinson thanked the Committee for their work, and advised that he had raised with the Leader certain behaviours at the Committee which had not been ideal for Members of his party and he hoped that this would improve going forward.

Councillor Hill highlighted that reports in the press had used incorrect legal terminology and asked that if Councillor Towns was to Chair the meeting that he would ensure that the correct terminology was being used.

Councillor Towns advised that Audit Committee looked forensically at information and that it was important that the correct legal terminology was used and he would step in if this was incorrect or misleading.

**RESOLVED** that Council note the Audit Committee Annual Report for 2022/23,

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attached as Appendix A to the report.

S. Gerrard, Director of Law and Corporate Governance (Monitoring Officer) left the meeting at this point.

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## **REPORT OF THE CHAIR OF THE STAFF AND APPOINTMENTS COMMITTEE**

### **Director of Law and Corporate Governance (Monitoring Officer) – contractual change from fixed term to permanent status.**

Councillor Sanderson, Leader advised that the Staffing and Appointments Committee had met on 25 October 2023 to consider the proposal to seek approval that the current postholder in the role of Director of Law and Corporate Governance (Monitoring Officer) be contracted on a permanent basis. An additional report of the Staffing and appointments Committee asking that Council consider their recommendations had been circulated in advance of the meeting. The Leader continued by stating that following some solid work by S. Gerrard, and the fact that the Council wished to appoint a full time permanent Monitoring Officer, that he was happy to propose the recommendation as outlined in the circulated report which was seconded by Councillor Towns and it was

**RESOLVED** that Council approved the recommendations from the Staffing and Appointments Committee held on 25 October 2023 as follows:-

1. The current postholder be offered a permanent contract in the role of Director of Law and Corporate Government (Monitoring Officer);
2. That permanent contractual status be offered from 2 November 2023; and
3. It be noted that all other terms and conditions of employment, including salary of £139,366 per annum would remain unchanged.

S. Gerrard returned to the Chamber to a round of applause.

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