

NORTHUMBERLAND COUNTY COUNCIL

At a meeting of the **Northumberland County Council** held on Wednesday 30 March 2022 at County Hall, Morpeth at 3.00 pm.

PRESENT

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

MEMBERS

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

OFFICERS

Binjal, S.	Monitoring Officer
Denyer, L.	Deputy Monitoring Officer
Furnell, L.	Interim Service Director HR/OD
Hadfield, K.	Democratic and Electoral Services Manager
Hunter, P.	Interim Senior Service Director
Masson, N.	Deputy Monitoring Officer

McEvoy-Carr, C.	Executive Director of Adult Social Care and Children's Services
Morgan, L.	Director of Public Health
Murfin, R.	Interim Executive Director of Planning and Local Services
O'Farrell, R.	Interim Executive Director Place and Regeneration
Roll, J.	Head of Democratic and Electoral Services
Sanderson, J.	Strategic Services Manager
Taylor, M.	Interim Executive Director for Communities and Business Development
White, E.	Senior HR Manager
Willis, J.	Interim Executive Director of Finance and S151 Officer

One member of the press was present

89. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillors Bridgett, Fairless-Aitken, Gallacher, Horncastle, Humphrey, Kennedy, Ploszaj, Purvis, A. Scott and Towns.

90. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

With regard to item 4 on the agenda (Local Plan), Councillor Bawn advised that as a solicitor, he had clients who had interests in Northumberland but nothing of a pecuniary nature, or directly connected to the Local Plan.

Councillor Beynon declared an interest in item 7 on the agenda (Request to Exercise the Freedom of Northumberland: 3rd Regiment Royal Horse Artillery).

Councillor Oliver sought clarification of his position regarding the land allocation within the Local Plan (item 4 on the agenda - Local Plan), for sand and gravel extraction in his ward as he had previously raised concerns about this. Following advice from Mr Murfin, the Business Chair confirmed that this was subject to a planning application which was not a decision for today.

91. JOINT REPORT OF THE MONITORING OFFICER AND THE INTERIM SENIOR SERVICE DIRECTOR

Seghill By Election Result and Political Proportionality

Council was asked to receive the result of the Seghill By Election and to determine the political proportionality of the registered political groups on the council and to allocate seats on committees in accordance with that

proportionality, in accordance with the provisions of Sections 15 and 16 of the Local Government and Housing Act 1989.

The Business Chair welcomed Councillor Eve Chicken to her first meeting of Council.

The report was proposed by Councillor Wearmouth and seconded by the Leader.

Councillor Hill sought clarification of the position regarding committees of 5 and 9. Councillor Wearmouth confirmed that for 5, it would be 2 Conservative, 1 Labour and 2 in the pool. The only other change in the report was for Committees of 8 and 15, with additional places to the pool.

RESOLVED that:-

- (a) Council notes that immediately following the Seghill with Seaton Delaval by-election and notified changes to the Labour Group, the total number of councillors in each political group on the County Council is Conservative 33, Labour 20, Independent 6, Liberal Democrat 4, Green 2 and 2 un-grouped members;
- (b) Council confirms that the political proportionality of the Groups is as follows: Conservative 49.25%, Labour 29.85%, Independent 8.96%, Liberal Democrat 5.97%, Green 2.99% and un-grouped 1.49% and 1.49%;
- (c) Council agrees to continue to use the method for determining allocations to Committees as agreed by Full Council at its meeting of 23rd February 2022;
- (d) Council approves the provisions of Appendix 1 which sets out the proportional allocation of places on committees in accordance with the proportionality approved above;
- (e) Council agrees the allocation of seats to Northumberland County principal/decision making Committees set out in Appendix 2 to the report;
- (f) Council agrees allocations to advisory/non-decision-making committees set out in Appendix 3 to the report; and
- (g) Council agrees Group Leaders will appoint members to fill the committee places allocated to their respective Groups and that Group Leaders will provide a finalised list of members for each committee (in line with their respective allocations) to the Head of Democratic Services to fill the allocated positions.

92. REPORT OF THE INTERIM EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF PLANNING AND LOCAL SERVICES

Adoption of The Northumberland Local Plan (2016 - 2036)

The report presented the Inspectors' Report into the independent examination of the Northumberland Local Plan and recommended that Council approve the adoption of the Northumberland Local Plan (2016-2036), including the Policies Map, as amended by main modifications and additional changes, following its Independent Examination by the Planning Inspectors appointed by the Secretary of State.

Mr Murfin made a presentation to members on the key points of the report.

The Leader commented this was a testament to the hard work of officers and the member working group. It had been a hard decision to say in 2017 that the Core Strategy was not fit for purpose, but it had been clear that it was important to have the right number of houses in the right places, and that it was important to encourage industry to locate in the County. The new Local Plan provided clarity on this and he commended it to members.

A number of questions were raised by members including:-

- Councillor Hill asked for further detail on what might be regarded as the more controversial parts of the Plan. Mr Murfin referred to the elements which had previously been negotiated through the S106 process on an individual basis. The entire approach to growth had been viability tested at the Plan level and the Government agreed that the private sector should be able to deliver on the basis of what was contained in the Plan. This had meant difficult decisions on affordable housing levels which had been set at variable levels across the County and this had implications for developments progressing. In areas where by Parish the residencies were 20% and above non primary residences, then any new developments would be for primary residences only. Community led housing schemes could result in differences of opinion in some communities.
- Regarding employment land, Councillor Robinson asked if new areas would be identified or if existing areas would be expanded, particularly for the south east. Mr Murfin replied that officers needed to plan for choice, churn and mix in employment land designation to meet different types of need. A broad range of land had therefore been allowed for, including the unusual step of taking some green belt land. As further investments came along, there may be a need to release further land.
- Councillor Swinburn asked about the effect of the Local Plan on existing or emerging neighbourhood plans and how they would fit together. Mr Murfin advised that the "first generation" of neighbourhood plans were a reflection of the out-of-date district local plans. As the work on the Local Plan had moved forward, the newer neighbourhood plans were much more slimmed down and focussed only on the issues which were of concern to that local community. In

- view of this, the older plans would probably need a fundamental refresh, but the newer plans would likely be fit for purpose.
- Councillor Murphy asked what powers the Local Plan gave the Authority to influence the regional design and style of new estates which she felt had been lost. Mr Murfin replied that there were overarching policies in the plan about improving design. At the Parish level, design guides would be prepared which would set out what was meant by the local quality.
 - Councillor Dodd asked whether the five-year review of the Plan would begin in May. Mr Murfin confirmed that there was a statutory requirement to review the Plan every five years and there were at least two issues already which needed to be addressed. Issues which were currently happening such as the British Volt development and the Northumberland Line needed to be incorporated into the review.
 - Councillor Reid asked whether the Plan could be started from 2022 instead of 2016. He also asked whether there were any plans to revisit matters which had been unpopular but which had been agreed in the absence of having a Local Plan in place. Mr Murfin advised that once permission had been granted then the only way to change that would be to rescind that decision, and the day the decision was made, the application had to be in accordance with the Plan in force at the time. Any adoption of a Local Plan involved a timeframe that was partially retrospective and the plan had been evaluated in terms of needs and costings for 2016-2036 so it could not be changed.
 - Councillor Dale commented that the main modifications were not easy to read and that clarity was needed for town and parish councils for their neighbourhood plans and the green belt in the form of further guidance. She also asked if enough employment land was being identified for the skills which were needed. Mr Murfin advised that new guidance, targets etc had been issued by the Government during the Plan's consultation process and the main modifications had been agreed with the Inspector and were updates to reflect legislation as it came out and changes to the NPPF. He did not feel it was confusing and was there for clarity. When the Plan was published, the modifications would be included in it. A full training programme would be provided for NALC. The Plan was for growth, and the housing and employment offer were linked. The high housing figure would enable the Authority to respond to where the growth took place and to take a more strategic approach overall.
 - Councillor Robinson asked how S106 funding would work under the Local Plan. Mr Murfin replied that this would no longer be looked at on an application by application basis. The Government were keen to move to a tariff-based system for developer contributions. This could be modelled on the community infrastructure levy system which would provide 15% for town and parish councils, and 25% if they had a neighbourhood plan in place.

The Leader proposed the report's recommendations, seconded by Councillor Wearmouth.

- Councillor Dickinson welcomed the report. The work of the team had been tremendous and showed what cross party work could achieve. The planning service had been very good at keeping people briefed and he felt there was a lot to be learned by officers from Mr Murfin and his team's open style and transparency. He welcomed the figures on affordable housing and local allocation and sought reassurance that the Council would stand firm and not be pressured by developers to accept alternatives that were of less value. This was a good piece of work which had been achieved through cross party working and should be able to deliver on what it promised. He hoped this approach would continue.
- Councillor Cessford welcomed the Plan which addressed the provision of new residential developments and recognised the need to improve the quality of jobs and skills and attract new businesses. The Plan used an ambitious, jobs led growth scenario to identify appropriate housing numbers for the period. If the last Plan hadn't been withdrawn then green belt would have been decimated with 600-900 houses in the west end of Hexham alone built on the green belt. The Plan also made it clear that there were no exceptional circumstances to justify deletion of the green belt for residential developments and directly protected residential areas whilst still allowing for economic growth.
- Councillor Oliver welcomed Councillor Dickinson's comments and that the consensual approach had been recognised and praised. The Plan on the table in 2017 could have done serious damage to the County and he welcomed the change in approach through the Council since then. The Plan was ambitious for housing and jobs and evidence of this could be seen already in the south east. It also recognised the important role of tourism in the north and west of the County. It would improve the quality of development and the Authority needed to be robust in this in approving planning applications. The Plan gave members a clear set of uniform policies for application in its planning committees.
- Councillor Jackson acknowledged that it had been a difficult decision to move from one Plan to another in 2017 and he commended the Council's Strategic Planning team for all of their work on this. The previous plan had been a developers' charter and would have had a radically detrimental effect on the whole of the County, with no plan for economic growth. At the same time, protection had to be provided for the environment. He felt that the Plan allowed for population growth with stretch targets on affordable housing and great opportunities for economic growth.
- Councillor Darwin spoke in support of the Plan which would provide many improvements for the County – protection of the green belt, support for tourism, and improvement for rural communities. The Plan's soundness was a testament to the officers who had worked on it and he thanked them for their work.
- Councillor Ball thanked Mr Murfin and his team for their work on the Plan and sought assurances that it would be treated as a live document to deal with issues such as the ageing population and changing employment market. Jobs in the rural areas and houses that local people could afford were also very important. She stressed that

the green spaces in the south east of the County were just as important as those in the more rural areas.

- Councillor Murphy asked what was meant by “affordable” housing because it meant different things to different people. There was also a need to look at social housing to ensure that all needs were being met in this area.
- Councillor Reid welcomed the point that had been reached on the Local Plan but commented that this had been one of the most difficult things the Council had ever had to do. Joan Sanderson had kept this together and he paid tribute to her for that. The Plan would ensure that the Council got what it wanted when dealing with planning applications in future.
- Councillor Dale welcomed the fact that all councillors would have one plan on which to base decisions in future. She also thanked Joan Sanderson and her team for their representation and support during the EIP hearings. She commented that there was a need to ensure going forward that small villages were sustainable and this could be achieved through neighbourhood plans.
- Councillor Dodd hoped that the Plan would now make the climate change agenda easier to achieve.

The Leader thanked Joan Sanderson and the team for their work on the Local Plan and was very proud of the result.

RESOLVED that:-

- (a) the content of the Inspectors’ Report into the Examination of the Northumberland Local Plan (Appendix 3), together with the Schedule of Main Modifications appended to the Inspectors’ Report (Appendix 4) be noted;
- (b) Council adopts the Northumberland Local Plan (2016 – 2036) (Appendix 1), incorporating the Main Modifications as set out in the Schedule of Main Modifications appended to the Inspectors’ Report (Appendix 4) and the additional changes to the Local Plan (Appendix 5);
- (c) Council approves the adoption of the Northumberland Local Plan (2016 – 2036) (Appendix 1) to take effect from 31 March 2022;
- (d) Council adopts the Northumberland Local Plan (2016 – 2036) Policies Map (Appendix 2), incorporating the changes in the Schedule of Proposed Main Modifications to the Northumberland Local Plan Policies Map June 2021 (Appendix 6), the Schedule of Proposed Main Modifications to the Northumberland Local Plan Policies Map - Appendices, June 2021 (Appendix 7) and the additional changes to the Local Plan (Appendix 5);
- (e) Council approves the adoption of the Northumberland Local Plan (2016 – 2036) Policies Map (Appendix 2) to take effect from 31 March 2022;
- (f) Council agrees the revocation of the following development plan documents, to take effect from the 12 May 2022 (following the statutory six-week legal challenge period from the adoption date of the Northumberland Local Plan):

- Alnwick Local Development Framework Core Strategy (October 2007)
 - Alnwick District Wide Local Plan (April 1997) – Saved Local Plan Policies (under the Secretary of State’s Direction, 31 August 2007)
 - Berwick -upon-Tweed Borough Local Plan (April 1999) - Saved Local Plan Policies (under the Secretary of State’s Direction, 31 August 2007)
 - Blyth Valley Local Development Framework Core Strategy (July 2007)
 - Blyth Valley Local Development Framework Development Control Policies DPD (September 2007)
 - Blyth Valley District Local Plan (May 1999) - Saved Local Plan Policies (under the Secretary of State’s Direction, 28 September 2007)
 - Castle Morpeth District Local Plan (February 2003) - Saved Local Plan Policies (under the Secretary of State’s Direction, 31 August 2007)
 - Tynedale Local Development Framework Core Strategy (October 2007)
 - Tynedale District Wide Local Plan (April 2000) - Saved Local Plan Policies (under the Secretary of State’s Direction, 31 August 2007)
 - Wansbeck District Local Plan (July 2007) - Saved Local Plan Policies (under the Secretary of State’s Direction, 22 April 2010)
 - Northumberland Minerals Local Plan (March 2000) - Saved Local Plan Policies (under the Secretary of State’s Direction, 31 August 2007)
 - Northumberland Waste Local Plan (December 2002) - Saved Local Plan Policies (under the Secretary of State’s Direction, 31 August 2007)
 - Northumberland County and National Park Joint Structure Plan First Alteration (February 2005) - Saved Policy S5 (Green Belt Extension).
- (g) Council agrees the revocation and downgrading of the Supplementary Planning Documents as set out in Appendix 8, to take effect from the 12 May 2022 (following the statutory six-week legal challenge period from the adoption date of the Northumberland Local Plan);
- (h) Council notes the content of the Adoption Statement attached at Appendix 9 prepared in accordance with Regulation 26 of the Town and Country Planning (Local Planning) (England) Regulations 2012);
- (i) Council approves the Sustainability Appraisal Post-Adoption Statement (Appendix 10); and
- (j) Council authorises the Interim Executive Director of Planning and Local Services, in consultation with Cabinet Member for Community Services, to make any additional necessary minor textual, graphical, presentational or layout amendments to the Northumberland Local Plan (2016-2036) (Appendix 1) and its Policies Map (Appendix 2) to finalise the Plan prior to publication.

93. REPORT OF THE INTERIM SERVICE DIRECTOR FOR HR/OD

Pay Policy Statement of Northumberland County Council 2022-23

Council was asked to consider the pay policy statement for the 2022-23 financial year which required approval at a meeting of the County Council. It would be reviewed annually and took into account the guidance on openness issued by the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG).

Councillor Dickinson asked for clarification regarding a letter members of the Staff and Appointments Committee had received, much of which related to this report. He asked whether these members could participate in this item. The Monitoring Officer confirmed that this was in order as the report was about the pay policy of the Council as a whole and did not relate to a specific matter.

The report was proposed and introduced by Councillor Wearmouth. It was noted that the correct Government Department mentioned in the report was not MHCLG but the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. It was seconded by Councillor Stewart.

Councillor Dale asked if the Pay Policy Statement was contained in the Constitution. The Monitoring Officer advised that it was in part, definition of statutory officers being one of them.

Councillor Hill asked for clarity on “special payments” to senior officers and what this included, and if there was a bonus scheme whether there was a document which explained the criteria. She also asked about the Staff and Appointments Committee delegation from full Council to approve severance and redundancy payments to Chief Officers as she understood this was a matter for full Council. Leanne Furnell advised that anything outside normal salary constituted special payments.

Councillor Wearmouth explained that the delegation would only apply up to a particular threshold which he believed was £100,000. Anything above that would need Council approval. Councillor Hill queried whether the Policy needed amendment to reflect that. The Monitoring Officer drew members’ attention to para 23 of the Policy which stated that all exit packages over £100,000 had to be agreed by SAC. This should in fact be by full Council as per legislation.

Councillor Hill commented that this contradicted the Constitution. The Monitoring Officer advised that members were being asked to approve the Policy on pages 33-41 and the covering report highlighted the revisions which had been made to the previous version to ensure it aligned with the Constitution and legislation. Councillor Hill asked whether, with regard to para 23, the current policy stated the opposite to what was now being proposed in the new policy. The Monitoring Officer replied that this did not matter as

legislation dictated that all exit packages over £100,000 had to be approved by Council.

RESOLVED that the Policy Statement for the year 2022/23 attached as Appendix 1 to the report be approved and published on the NCC website in line with transparency guidance on openness issued by the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, subject to the amendment of paragraph 23 as detailed above.

94. REPORT OF THE HEAD OF DEMOCRATIC AND ELECTORAL SERVICES

Timetable of Meetings 2022-23

Council's approval was sought to suspend Standing Orders in order that the annual timetable of meetings for 2022-23 could be agreed.

It was proposed by Councillor Watson and seconded by the Leader that Standing Orders be suspended to enable this matter to be dealt with.

Councillor Dunbar asked whether it would be possible, regarding LACs, to run straight through onto Local Area business where this followed planning business and not wait for the 6 pm start. The Business Chair advised that this could be one of the changes arising from the Scrutiny review of the LACs. He was happy for flexibility, but this did need to be documented somewhere.

Councillor Dale felt it was important to be consistent with the Planning Committee start times.

RESOLVED that:-

- (a) approval be given to the suspension of Council Procedure Rule 1.1 (12) in Part 5 of the Constitution; and
- (b) the annual timetable of meetings for 2022-23 attached to the report be agreed.

95. REQUEST TO EXERCISE THE FREEDOM OF NORTHUMBERLAND: 3RD REGIMENT ROYAL HORSE ARTILLERY

Over the years, recognised organisations which have made an outstanding contribution to the life of the County or offered a service of the highest order to the country in the name of Northumberland have been awarded the ceremonial title of "Freedom of Northumberland" which has been widely appreciated and valued. In 2015, the 3rd Regiment Royal Horse Artillery (3RHA) moved to Albemarle from Hohne in Germany and in 2016, in recognition of their service to the people of Northumberland, the Council awarded them the Freedom of Northumberland, in acknowledgment of the vital tasks they carry out. The Regiment had now asked permission to exercise the right to march through Hexham on 16 July 2022 and to hold a ceremony to reflect the significant changes they are facing. The Council's support was sought for this major event.

In accordance with Minute No. 90 above, Councillor Beynon left the meeting whilst this matter was considered.

The motion was proposed by Councillor Cessford and seconded by Councillor Watson.

Councillor Cessford spoke in strong support of the motion and urged members to support it.

Councillor Morphet felt that it was not the right place or time to support militarism in any form and asked members to join him in opposing it.

A number of members spoke in support of the motion and on being put to the vote by show of hands there voted FOR: A substantial majority; AGAINST: 2; ABSTENTIONS: 1.

It was therefore **RESOLVED** that the 3rd Regiment Royal Horse Artillery (3RHA) be granted permission to exercise the right to march through Hexham on 16 July 2022 and to hold a ceremony to reflect the significant changes they are facing.

96. BUSINESS HELD OVER FROM THE 23RD FEBRUARY 2022 COUNCIL MEETING

Council was asked to consider the member questions deferred from the budget meeting of Council held on 23rd February 2022.

Question 1 from Councillor Dale to Councillor Wearmouth

At the Full Council meeting on 1st September 2021 I asked Cllr Wearmouth for an update on the cost of the refurbishment of County Hall. Please could Cllr Wearmouth give me a further update on the costs incurred to date for all the work undertaken so far. Councillor Wearmouth advised that it was £11.3m as at the end of January 22.

Councillor Dale asked whether a value for money impact assessment should be done at the end to assess the added value for Morpeth as opposed to what might have been added for Ashington. Councillor Wearmouth commented that the amount of money which had been saved from not moving away had freed up money to do many other things in the capital programme.

Question 2 from Councillor Wallace to the Leader

This was withdrawn as it had been answered.

Question 3 from Councillor Scott to Councillor Renner Thompson

Question 4 from Councillor Scott to the Leader

Councillor Scott would receive written answers in her absence.

Question 5 from Councillor Nisbet to Councillor Watson

We recently wrote collectively to you about the Blyth Beach huts. We found your response disappointing. The Beach Huts in Blyth are being made inaccessible to local people because of the changes being made. Will you actively lobby Active Northumberland to look again at keeping these community assets accessible to local people for one off bookings? Not everyone can afford to block book the huts and while we welcome tourism into Blyth it mustn't be at the expense of local people.

Councillor Nisbet advised that this had been answered briefly at the last meeting, but she believed the huts had previously been available on a daily basis all year round so she was not happy with the response that they would only be available in the Summer. It was important that the huts were available for those with disabilities in particular.

Question 6 from Councillor Ball to Councillor Horncastle

As we have seen the past two years have caused a financial hardship for many residents across Northumberland. How many council tenants are currently subject to action due to late payment on rent?

As Councillor Horncastle was not present, a written response would be provided from him.

Question 7 from Councillor Ball to Councillor Renner Thompson

Young people are being hit hard by the long term impacts of Covid 19. Missing out on education, socialising and feeling the direct effects of falling house hold incomes. Strong youth services are key to helping these young people and improved life chances. Can we have a commitment to the young people of Northumberland that the youth service will not suffer more cuts in coming budgets and actually see investment as every penny spent in advance will reduce spend later in interventions?

Councillor Renner Thompson replied that he was aware of the impact of Covid 19 on young people. He had recently visited the Duchess High School in Alnwick and it was very clear what the impact had been and would continue to be for the next 3-4 years. He had also visited the Sure Start Centre in Prudhoe and the staff there had said the same thing about young children coming in who had had no early years help so far. Efficiencies would not be made into the front line youth services but efficiencies had been made in the management structure. Going forward, the family hubs model would be rolled out for 0-19 and up to 25 for those with extra needs, which brought in professionals from all the services not just the Council.

Councillor Ball asked what this investment actually meant in terms of numbers of youth workers delivering front line services. There had been an 80% decrease in funding in Northumberland since 2010 and she asked how this was investing in future generations. Children were being exploited but there was no intervention until a child appeared on a list. She asked the

Administration to commit to putting more youth workers back on the streets and to develop a County-wide strategy. Councillor Renner Thompson replied that the issues which had been highlighted were well known and the family hubs would ensure that the relevant sectors would get into families' lives as early as possible. The youth service had changed over the years and there was no longer blanket provision across the County. Provision was targeted to those areas where it was needed which was a better approach. Some authorities in the North East no longer had a service at all.

Question 8 from Councillor A. Watson to the Leader

Could the Leader please update the chamber on progress of the Blyth relief road? As he will know it was the Labour-led council that invested in the consultation and route identification. With so many roadworks happening in Blyth soon which will compound the problems of getting in and out of the town. Could he explain to the chamber what is holding up this urgently needed transport link and when will the relief road we were promised by both the local MP and the Conservatives on their manifesto leaflets, be delivered?

The Leader replied that there was around £18m in the capital programme for this, with £3m provided by the County Council and the remainder from Government. A report to Cabinet on 12 April would lay out in more detail the plans for how the project would begin. The Administration was committed to this and he looked forward to working with Blyth members in getting this off the ground.

Councillor Scott sought reassurances that the local members would be kept fully informed as this progressed which the Leader provided.

Question 9 from Councillor Waddell to the Leader

The Levelling Up White Paper confirms that Government will negotiate to create an expanded Mayoral Combined Authority in the North East. In the House of Commons, Michael Gove said local authorities south of the Tyne should work with the North of Tyne Mayor to bring this about. It has been government policy since the 2020 budget that we would gain devolved transport funding worth hundreds of millions of pounds if we bring all of Tyne & Wear to an expanded Combined Authority. Will the leader please confirm two things? Firstly, is he actively trying to secure this much needed new funding for Northumberland's inadequate public transport system?

Secondly, can he reassure Council that he will take a strong negotiating position to preserve all of the excellent work done by the North of Tyne Combined Authority for the benefit of Northumberland, by making sure it continues its current programmes and keeps its highly respected officer team?

The Leader did not agree that Northumberland suffered from an inadequate transportation system or funding. Good progress had been made in the last couple of years in transport funding. He had good relationships with the Leaders of the other local authorities and he looked forward to working more closely with them.

Councillor Waddell asked whether the Leader had ever tried to travel on public transport in her ward as her residents would disagree that it was adequate. The Leader reiterated that good progress had been made, though more funding would always be welcome. If the Councillor had specific issues where improvements could be made, he asked her to write to him.

Question 10 from Councillor Grimshaw to the Leader

This was withdrawn.

Question 11 from Councillor Robinson to Councillor Ploszaj

Question 12 from Councillor Robinson to Councillor Wearmouth/Pattison

These were withdrawn as Councillor Robinson had left.

Question 13 from Councillor Taylor to Councillor Ploszaj

Councillor Taylor did not wish to put her question but reported that she had spoken to Councillor Ploszaj recently. The presentation to the LAC recently from Advance had been disappointing in terms of what was planned for the development in Bedlington and it had been reported that there was no interest now in retail. The Leader responded that it would be helpful to have the Bedlington members meet with Rick O'Farrell, Councillors Watson and Wearmouth and himself, and he would arrange this.

Question 14 from Councillor Taylor to Councillor Wearmouth

There is significant funding for toilets outlined in the new budget, Bedlington doesn't have town centre toilets and every town should have such a basic provision for its residents and visitors. Which towns will benefit from this funding and can Bedlington be put on that list?

The Leader responded that the Administration did take public toilets very seriously as evidenced by the funding being made available. Councillor Taylor asked if Bedlington could be added to the list where improvements were being made.

Councillor Riddle replied that there were 54 public conveniences across the County and it was correct that Bedlington was not on the list for investment as it was a programme of investment in existing facilities. The 'You're Welcome to Use Our Loos' scheme' was promoted by the Council and in Bedlington the Red Lion public house was a member of this.

Question 15 from Councillor Swinburn to Councillor Watson

The new library and hub at Cramlington has been a significant success and is now used by a variety of people and groups on a daily basis. When this building was previously used there was a large sculpture inside, a piece of artwork that I was informed came from a local artist, and residents have asked

where it has got to. This sculpture disappeared when the building was closed and mothballed back in 2016, and I would like to ask if the council can find out where it has vanished to and hopefully reinstate it please?

Councillor Watson agreed that the Community Hub was proving to be a popular and highly valued community resource. The installation 'Carbon Bond' was commissioned by Blyth Valley Borough Council in 2005 as part of the 'Your Link' building project. The figure element of the installation remained in storage within Concordia Leisure Centre, the remaining elements of the sculpture (the spheres) remained on site in some capacity. One of the spheres could not be re-hung because of the sound baffle boards which must have been fitted when the building was previously in operation. Now the building had been significantly repurposed he had asked officers to assess the possibility of reintroducing the full installation.

Question 16 from Councillor Swinburn to the Leader

The old library site on Forum Way was previously grassed over and when asked about the possibility of using this for parking we were informed by the former Managing Director of Advance Northumberland that this could not be used for this due to upcoming development work in and around this area, that was due to start within 12 months. Following numerous concerns raised from residents, could you advise when this work is due to start please?

The Leader advised that the former Cramlington Library site was acquired by Arch (now Advance Northumberland) in 2016 as part of the purchase of Manor Walks Shopping Centre. The former library car park was open to the public for parking on a temporary basis to support the shopping centre' and the area comprising the demolished library itself was not, as there had been the possibility of early development on it.

While Manor Walks Shopping Centre and Westmorland Retail Park had performed relatively well during Covid, the impact on retail and leisure markets had required Advance to pause and reappraise its previous plans. This work would form part of the Blueprint For Cramlington which Councillor Swinburn and his colleagues had asked for. It would be down to the local members to identify the best way forward for the area.

Councillor Swinburn responded that 4 years ago members had been told that work would begin in 12 months and the surrounding area now looked derelict. He asked what steps could be taken to improve the area whilst the long-term solution was being decided upon. Councillor Wearmouth replied that there was now an upturn in retail interest in the area and he was sure an update could be provided either through the Cramlington hub or direct from Rick O'Farrell.

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

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Chair of the County Council

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Duly Authorised Officer