

NORTHUMBERLAND COUNTY COUNCIL

At a meeting of the **Northumberland County Council** held on Wednesday 6 July 2022 at County Hall, Morpeth at 3.00 pm.

PRESENT

Councillor B. Flux
(Business Chair) in the Chair

MEMBERS

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

OFFICERS

Binjal, S.	Monitoring Officer
Denyer, L.	Deputy Monitoring Officer
Hadfield, K.	Democratic and Electoral Services Manager
Hunter, P.	Interim Senior Service Director
O'Farrell, R.	Interim Deputy Chief Executive
Roll, J.	Head of Democratic and Electoral Services

Willis, J.

Interim Executive Director of
Finance and S151 Officer

Three members of the press and public were present.

24. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillors Ball, Bridgett, Carr, Clark, Darwin, Dodd, Ferguson, Foster, Scott, Swinbank, Towns and J. Watson.

25. MINUTES

With regard to Minute No. 21 (Statutory Report under S114 and 114a, pg 38), Councillor Robinson advised that he had said several thousand, not 700,000.

Councillor Morphet advised that he had not been listed as vice chair of the Cycling and Walking Board.

RESOLVED that the minutes of the following meetings of Council be signed by the Business Chair and sealed with the Common Seal of the Council subject to these amendments:-

- (1) Wednesday 4 May 2022 (annual meeting)
- (2) Wednesday 8 June 2022 (extraordinary meeting)
- (3) Tuesday 21 June 2022 (extraordinary meeting)

26. ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Leader advised that the Leaders had met with Louella Brian the previous week but there were still some areas to iron out. He would report back to members as soon as he had further information. At this stage, Durham CC had not decided which way to go.

The Business Chair reported to members on those who had recently received honours in HM the Queen's Birthday Honours list as follows:-

Commanders of the Order of the British Empire (CBE)

Michael Keith Brodie. Chief Executive, NHS Business Services Authority. For services to Health, particularly during the Response to Covid-19. (Ashington, Northumberland)

Members of the Order of the British Empire (MBE)

Graeme Arnold Conley. Manager, Monument View Children's Home, Sunderland. For services to Children and Young People. (Blyth, Northumberland)

Paul Matthew Cook. Principal and Chief Executive, Herewood College. For services to Young People with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities. (Blyth, Northumberland)

Dr Angus George Lunn. Vice President, Northumberland Wildlife Trust. For services to Education and to Peatland Conservation. (Newcastle upon Tyne, Tyne and Wear)

Professor Elizabeth Ruth Plummer. Professor of Experimental Cancer Medicine, Translational and Clinical Research Institute, Newcastle University. For services to Medicine. (Newcastle upon Tyne, Tyne and Wear)

Kate Thompson. Head of Extra Care Services, Joseph Rowntree Housing Trust. For services to Social Care. (Stocksfield, Northumberland)

Medallists of the Order of the British Empire (BEM)

Simon Banks. Works Supervisor, Forestry England. For services to Forestry. (Hexham, Northumberland)

Jonathan Neil Gray. Special Constable, Northumbria Police. For services to Policing. (Ponteland, Northumberland)

Margaret Mitford. For services to Education. (Cramlington, Northumberland)

Michael Scott. Special Constable, Northumbria Police. For services to Policing. (Hexham, Northumberland)

27. MEMBER QUESTIONS

Question 1 from Councillor Wallace to Councillor Ploszaj

Residents in and around the Cambois area constantly read and hear of the new job opportunities in their thousands coming on their doorstep and how this will be transformational in their lives. This part of my Ward is recognised as being low in car ownership. Where travel is necessary to shop, see a doctor, bank, get to school or work and many things most of us take for normal, to learn that the 4x daily bus service no 434, Monday to Friday (not on Saturday, Sunday or Bank Holidays), is to stop running from the 24th July is frankly, unbelievable and sickening for many. Residents and bus users wish, as do I, to know what steps has the administration taken to ensure this service is not lost forever?

Councillor Ploszaj replied that the Go North East 434 bus service was an NCC funded service, which operated 4 return trips per day providing the residents of Cambois with public transport links to local service centres at Bedlington Station and Ashington. In May 2022, Go North East served notice of their intention to withdraw the service with effect from the 24 July 2022, citing increasing operating costs and resourcing issues as the reasons for the withdrawal. Recognising the importance of this service not only to the

residents of Cambois but other communities along the route, NCC had agreed a short-term extension to the service up to the 3 September 2022. This would allow sufficient time for officers to undertake a comprehensive re-tendering of the service. Whilst officers could not pre-empt the results of the tender process, the intention was to re-tender this service on a like for like basis. Local members would be kept updated on progress.

Councillor Wallace welcomed this and asked if buses would be available on 26 July for residents. Councillor Ploszaj advised that as far as he knew, they would.

Question 2 from Councillor Robinson to Councillor Horncastle

We have 48 million in the budget for new housing in the county. Will this be social housing at an appropriate cost to tenants?

Councillor Horncastle replied that the £48 million formed part of the Housing Revenue Account Medium Term Financial Plan and he confirmed that this money, with additional grant from Homes England, would be used to support the delivery of new homes that would be owned and managed by the Council, and that all rent levels would be set in accordance with current guidance to ensure they were affordable.

In order to maximise the delivery of affordable housing, it was the Council's intention to work with partners to ensure that where possible, affordable housing was built by the most appropriate housing provider having regard to the location, or nature and type of housing.

Councillor Robinson commented that he was concerned about what "affordable" actually meant when the market was out of control and he did not feel that 85% would be enough. Councillor Horncastle replied that the Government definition was 50% below the market rate. If this did not make the houses affordable then it would be looked at.

Question 3 from Councillor Robinson to Councillor Horncastle

What is the impact on our budget of the explosive inflationary pressures currently seen by all residents in Northumberland and how are we managing them?

The Leader replied that the impact was a very serious one for everyone. The budget this year had been based on around 2.5% inflation and work was ongoing to assess the implications of the known inflationary increases being experienced by the Council. If it was felt that action needed to be taken before the budget consultation began, then members would be kept informed.

Question 4 from Councillor Hunter to the Leader

Since the start of covid Northumberland County Council have streamed all public meetings taking place in County Hall live via you tube which showed openness and transparency this allowed interested members of the public to

watch the business and decision making of Northumberland County Council. However, in June this stopped without any advance notification to County Councillors.

Please can the Leader answer the following questions:

1. Where and when was this decision taken
2. What was the cost for the streaming of public meetings on Youtube.
3. Will the Cabinet look at options for the re-instatement of live streaming of public meetings taking place in County Hall at a reasonable cost or will members of the public be expected to incur travel costs to come to County Hall to watch public meetings, which will also, have an impact on the carbon footprint.

The Leader replied that during COVID the number of live-streamed meetings had increased from 9 to 170 when the public had to be excluded from attending council meetings to safeguard the wellbeing of Members, officers and the public.

From 13 June, there was no longer a requirement to wear masks in council buildings, removing the last COVID restriction on the public attending council meetings. This would allow them to take a more active part in meetings, as demonstrated by moving the Local Area Council meetings back into the local community.

Some 4,000 hours of live video had been streamed during the period of Covid restrictions. It would cost the Council around £186,000 per annum to maintain the same level of live streaming with all committees in the Council Chamber which would be better spent on other areas of Council activity, especially as the number of people watching live at any time varied widely between one person to several hundreds.

No formal decision had been taken on this, but he proposed that key decision-making meetings i.e. Full Council, Cabinet and Strategic Planning would continue to be live streamed and other public council meetings held in the chamber at County Hall would be recorded and added to the Council's YouTube channel afterwards. This would enable residents across the County to view the proceedings of those other committee meetings without having to travel to County Hall and would minimise the much higher costs of livestreaming.

In most cases these recordings would be uploaded within a couple of days of the meetings or even the same day. Local Area Council meetings would not be recorded as they had returned to localised settings and the venues do not have the Council's recording equipment installed. An evaluation of all public council meetings would be carried out over the next three months.

Question 5 from Councillor Wilczek to Councillor Ploszaj

With the welcome news of the government approving a Transport and Works Act Order for the Northumberland Line, can the administration tell my residents how they will be affected when the work takes place? Also, once work is completed, can this council guarantee that residents living on the Bowyer Grange estate won't see rail users parking on the estate?

Councillor Ploszaj replied that it was inevitable that there would be some disruption during the construction period and accurate and regular communication with local communities would be essential during this time.

Communications during the construction phase would be provided via:

- a dedicated Northumberland Line website
- a bi-monthly scheme-wide newsletter.
- letters to directly impacted properties.
- press releases in local media.
- social media activity.
- hoardings / information boards at construction sites.
- a dedicated email address.

For those directly affected, bespoke communications would be provided in letter format. At a minimum, these would include:

- a non-technical description of the works to be undertaken.
- information about types of equipment to be used, including pictures or images that will aid the understanding of the nature of the works;
- the location, frequency and duration of works.
- details of who to contact in the event of queries or issues.

In terms of rail users parking on adjacent residential estates, car parks which have been included as part of each station development, would be free of charge for at least the first 12 months of operation, and designed to accommodate the predicted demand for those wishing to drive to the station. Therefore, the risk of people parking on residential streets was expected to be minimal.

Councillor Wilczek asked what plans were in place to ensure carbon emissions were curbed. Councillor Ploszaj replied that he would find out and respond in writing.

Question 7 from Councillor Waddell to Councillor Horncastle

Northumberland County Council has approved a 5% taxi fare rise. A taxi drivers' association in the county describes this as is "disrespectful to the trade" amid spiralling fuel costs. How does the County Council propose to support taxi drivers in the County without seeing costs passed on to customers?

Councillor Horncastle responded that the setting of the taxi tariff followed a period of consultation with the trade, at which time, not only were the statutory requirements met, but officers also sent out in excess of 800 emails to operators and drivers to alert them to the consultation and invite comment from them. Regrettably, only five responses were received prior to the end of the consultation and a further three after the closing date, but all were presented to the Licensing and Regulatory Committee when considering the matter.

The Council fully recognised the current pressures on businesses, including the taxi and private hire trade, who had previously been supported throughout the Covid pandemic using funds from Government specifically targeted to support licenced taxi drivers, as well as grants for home and mobile based businesses, which a number of taxi businesses were able to benefit from. Regrettably at this time, there were many businesses and residents alike who were being affected by the cost of living and fuel crisis, but the Council had no specific funding to assist either generally or to support a single business sector who may be experiencing problems.

Councillor Waddell asked if the Administration would support taxi drivers in strike action or in lobbying the Government for extra help. Councillor Horncastle replied that he would not. Only five responses had been made to the consultation when the trade had been given its opportunity to get involved.

Question 8 from Councillor Waddell to Councillor Renner-Thompson

As part of ECHP provisions, Northumberland County Council pay 30p per mile to parents and carers to transport their children. The council pays 45p per mile to staff who use their own vehicles for work purposes, this is the HMRC approved rate and is designed to cover the cost of wear and tear to the vehicle as well as fuel. People with a disability often face additional costs. We are in a cost-of-living crisis and fuel prices have soared in the last few months. The HMRC rate of 45p per mile was approved before the fuel crisis. Can the portfolio holder please confirm to us on behalf of affected residents that the ECHP mileage allowance will be reviewed in mind of current fuel prices?

Councillor Renner Thompson replied that this had been raised with him about three weeks ago and around a week later the team had managed to get the rate changed to 45p per mile when it was realised that it wasn't where it should be. The rate had also been backdated to 1 June.

Question 9 from Councillor Hill to the Leader

The Caller Report found that; the effectiveness of political leadership has deteriorated over several years and is currently at a very low level. As the political leader of the Council, what is your response to that ?

The Leader referred to the reference in the Caller report that "political and organisational leadership had deteriorated over several years and was currently at a very low level". He agreed with the Caller report that leadership and political and managerial level had been distracted by a number of issues,

and he detailed what some of those issues had been, including the top of the organisation being in a significant state of flux and adjustment, and not being reported to members. Many senior officers had left in unusual circumstances. There were issues around exit payments and there had been 4792 FOI requests in three years. There had been repeated leaks of highly sensitive reports and continued abuse of social media. He hoped members would be able to agree a zero tolerance approach to this going forward because abuse on social media badly affected the families of those it was aimed at. There was clear evidence that social media abuse could influence suicide related behaviour.

After he had become Leader he had asked for an independent review of governance because of these various issues. This had proved very difficult. However, he felt that there was now a much better atmosphere within the organisation and promised that he would build on this with staff. He would work with Group Leaders on the Caller report Action Plan to deliver it in full and on time. Finally, he would do all he could to make sure the Administration was not distracted again.

Question 10 from Councillor Hill to Councillor J. Watson

The Caller Report found that; almost 4 years on from the establishment of Advance Northumberland the arrangements for an effective governance framework by the council are not yet in place and that this weakness presents a significant risk. As the Chair of Advance what is your response to that?

As Councillor Watson was not present, Councillor Hill advised that she was happy to receive a written answer.

28. REPORT OF THE INTERIM DEPUTY CHIEF EXECUTIVE

Report of Governance Review Task and Finish Group – Progress Update

At its meeting of 8th June 2022, Council considered a report by the Leader and Deputy Leader on the Solace Independent Governance Review (The ‘Caller Review’).

Following this, Council agreed to form a Cross-Party Steering Group on a task and finish basis, to consider the Council’s response to the ‘Caller Review’ and its recommendations. The Task and Finish Steering Group reported back to the County Council on 21st June 2022 (report of the Leader and Deputy Leader). The report on 21st June set out an Initial Plan of Action to implement the Caller Review recommendations. Council considered and agreed the initial Plan of Action and agreed to receive a further report setting out a more detailed timetable and assessment of resources required. This report set out the next version of the Action Plan with target dates, Member and Officer leads as well as resources. Draft terms of reference for the Advisory Board were circulated in the Chamber to all members (copy attached to the sealed minutes).

The Business Chair advised that there was an amendment to the report to add a recommendation 3, which asked Council to approve the establishment of an advisory challenge board and to agree its terms of reference (which had been circulated in the Chamber). The additional recommendation also sought a delegation to the Interim Deputy Chief Executive, in consultation with the cross party task and finish steering group, to confirm the nominations to the challenge board.

The Leader thanked the Group Leaders for their work on the Action Plan thus far and the support they had given him, stressing that it was important to maintain the pace of progress. He moved the report's amended recommendations, which was seconded by Councillor Dickinson.

Councillor Fairless Aitken welcomed the report and asked if there was a timeline. The Leader responded that it was hoped to get the Board up and running by August, but this depended on the submission of names and availability. The position would be reviewed in 12 months and if they needed to continue beyond that, then they would.

Councillor Kennedy commented that the Group Leaders and other members had worked well on this and he acknowledged Phil Hunter's work with the Group.

Councillor Reid agreed and acknowledged the Leadership's proactiveness in taking responsibility for moving things forward. He hoped the spirit of working together would continue, and asked how members would be recruited to the Board and whether they would be paid as they could be involved for some time on it.

Councillor Morphet added that he was happy to be part of the task and finish group.

Councillor Hill commented that she supported the list of actions which the task and finish group would do but she did have concerns that the Council was not going far enough. Mr Caller had said there was a need for a fundamental reset and she felt all of the problems needed to be acknowledged and the fundamental issues addressed. She saw grounds for optimism, but not the change in culture which was needed. Mr Caller had stressed the need for opposition groups to work together and be able to speak the truth to those in power. She was disappointed therefore that several members of the Conservative Group had approached her prior to this meeting advising her of plotting to silence her at the meeting and to have her removed. This had happened at a Conservative Group meeting and had been reported to her by 8-9 members of that Group. This was not working together or encouraging scrutiny.

The Business Chair suggested that Councillor Hill name these members. Following continued disturbance by a member of the public, the Business Chair adjourned the meeting at 3.50pm. It was reconvened at 4.30 pm.

Councillor Dale referred to recommendation 8 on page 58 which was very important. She commented that there was tremendous amount of work involved to be done in six months and hoped that it would not be hurried. Targets set had to be achievable.

Councillor Dickinson seconded the amended recommendations and agreed that members had to work together if they were to change the culture and patterns of behaviour.

The Leader welcomed taking responsibility for driving this forward advising there would be regular meetings of the task and finish group. Recruitment to the Board would be for the Group to decide and in response to Councillor Dale's comments, he replied that a Corporate Plan had been agreed by Council in February. He did agree that it was a challenging timescale but things needed to be progressed.

He formally moved the recommendations, with the additional following recommendation, which had been seconded by Councillor Dickinson:-

“Council approve the establishment of an Advisory Board, and its terms of reference (as per the document circulated in the Chamber), and authority be delegated to the Interim Deputy Chief Executive, in consultation with the cross party task and finish steering group, to confirm the nominations to the challenge board”.

RESOLVED that:-

- (a) Council note and agree the Task and Finish Steering Group's Plan of Action (attached as Appendix A) in response to the Caller Review and its recommendations;
- (b) Council submit to the Task and Finish Steering Group for its consideration, any suggested additional actions or changes to the proposed actions in the Plan of Action; and
- (c) Council approve the establishment of an Advisory Challenge Board, and its terms of reference detailed below, and authority be delegated to the Interim Deputy Chief Executive, in consultation with the cross party task and finish steering group, to confirm the nominations to the advisory challenge board.

Terms of Reference

1. *The purpose of the Board is:*

- a. *To provide external advice, challenge and expertise to the County Council in driving forward the development and delivery of the Governance Review Action Plan.*
- b. *To provide assurance to public, the Council and stakeholders that there is progress in delivering this Plan.*

2. Methodology:

- a. *Providing regular advice, challenge and support to the Council on the full range of the action plan and in particular on delivery of the recommendations in Max Caller's report.*
- b. *Providing written commentaries on the Council's progress against its action plan on a quarterly basis. These reports will be in public and reported to the Cabinet and full Council.*
- c. *The Board will decide the extent to which its meetings are held in public and what, if any agenda, minutes or papers it publishes, in accordance with the usual access to information rules.*
- d. *The Board will comprise 5 individuals and include external advisors appointed on the recommendation of the Cross-Party Task and Finish Steering Group that was set up to consider and respond to the Caller report, on behalf of the Council. Given the emphasis on governance and cultural change, it is envisaged external persons with a strong, high profile and established track record in local government governance and organisational change will be required.*
- e. *We anticipate that the Board will be in existence for a minimum of 12 months and the membership and purpose will be reviewed over this period.*

29. REPORT OF THE INTERIM DEPUTY CHIEF EXECUTIVE

Blyth Relief Road

The report provided members with :

- An overview of progress to date on the development of the business case for a new relief road for Blyth which will significantly improve access to the town by all modes.
- A recommendation for the preferred route alignment to be taken forward to a public engagement exercise.
- An update on the business case which includes emerging costs, benefits and programme for the scheme.

The report had been considered by Cabinet on 12 April 2022, and Cabinet requested that full Council endorse sign off by the s151 Officer of the Outline Business Case, noting the required County Council match funding commitment and future approval gateways as set out in paragraphs 13 to 15 of the report.

The report was introduced by Councillor Ploszaj and he moved the recommendations, which were seconded by Councillor Dickinson.

Councillor Watson commented that Blyth people were very frustrated that this was taking so long, so she welcomed the report. Route five had previously included a cross town route, but this seemed to have disappeared. Residents were concerned about what had replaced it, because it was felt that it wouldn't help reduce congestion on Cowpen Road, and she sought assurances that this wouldn't be the case. She also asked the Administration to lobby for further investment for a foot and cycle bridge across the river to provide access for workers to the British Volt and JDR Cables plants.

Councillor Ploszaj replied that he had been reassured by Highways officers that the design would provide relief for Cowpen Road and Laverock Hall Road, and there would be a public engagement event at the end of the month. The bridge between Blyth and Cambois had been considered as part of the previous discussions about the relief road and there had been some negative feedback from the Environment Agency about that, but he would ask officers to look at it again and respond in writing.

Councillor Morphet was concerned that the report focussed on reducing congestion rather than minimising traffic. He asked if the relief road would have a priority lane for buses, would there be a footway which satisfied Equality Act widths and gave priority to pedestrians at junctions, and would the cycle path include provision for priority to cyclists at junctions. Councillor Ploszaj replied that the priority matters would be part of the detailed design study but he would respond fully in writing.

Councillor Reid referred to the estimate of £44m and asked what element of optimism bias had been included. If it had not been included, he asked when it would be. Councillor Ploszaj replied that there were some contingencies included in the cost but he did expect cost increases to the project as it progressed. Mr Murfin advised members that new business cases did now have to factor in provision for optimal and negative bias.

Councillor Nisbet supported the proposals which would help small businesses which had been suffering from reduced footfall as a result of road closures.

Councillor Reid commented that this had been going on a long time. He felt this was the least worst option and was not really a relief road but would make getting out of Blyth from the south end easier. He did feel £44m was optimistic and the time taken to draw the plans up seemed excessive. Completion was still a very long way off and he urged the Administration to make progress as quickly as possible.

Councillor Watson asked that the residents of Blyth be kept informed, including about the consultation at the end of July.

Councillor Wearmouth commented that submitting a planning application within a year given all that was involved was a reasonable timeframe and officers had done an excellent job on the various iterations of the route.

Councillor Gallacher commented on the impact of the congestion on the A189 and suggested that better signage was needed, working with local residents.

Councillor Riddle commented that there was a 3m wide cycle path included in the proposals and agreed there would be some necessary disruption during workings, but it would be kept to a minimum.

Councillor Dickinson felt this was a great story for Blyth and he urged members to work together to ensure it was delivered for the residents and businesses of Blyth. A lot of funding was needed and he welcomed the residents' consultation on the latest plans.

Councillor Ploszaj urged members to support the recommendations. This was a very important project for Blyth.

RESOLVED that:-

- (a) Council note the progress of the project to date;
- (b) Council note the decision of Cabinet to confirm the revised Route 5 as the preferred option to take forward to a public engagement exercise; and
- (c) Council endorse the sign off by the s151 Officer of the Outline Business Case, noting the required County Council match funding commitment and future approval gateways as set out in paragraphs 13 to 15.

30. STORM ARWEN SCRUTINY REVIEW

The report detailed the outcomes of the review conducted by the Storm Arwen Task and Finish Group.

The report was presented by Councillor Reid. He thanked everyone who had contributed, the members who had been involved and Sean Nicholson and Helen Hinds. This was a good example of how members of all parties could work together and come up with some meaningful recommendations. Efforts had been made to ensure that the recommendations were things which could actually be done. Scrutiny would be revisiting the recommendations in future to monitor how they had been implemented and he hoped other task and finish projects would follow. The main problems had been caused by trees and tree management might need closer investigation. He moved the recommendations and encouraged Scrutiny to come back to them to ensure that they were implemented, and to progress identified actions with other organisations. This was seconded by Councillor Mather.

Councillor Dickinson thanked the Group for its work. It had shown how well Task and Finish Groups could identify the important issues and how members of all parties had different communities to represent with their own different issues to deal with. He paid tribute to Communities Together staff and Council staff and everyone who had mobilised to help communities, as well as the communities themselves. He agreed the recommendations needed to be monitored, and organisations needed to be pressed to ensure that all work

resulting from the storm damage was completed. He wanted to see more of this excellent type of work.

Councillor Hill felt this was a constructive report with good actions identified. Regarding the relief effort, she felt there were resources which should be available to help the outlying areas as towns had better resources and were less likely to be cut off.

Councillor Murphy commented that the Plan needed to be adaptable across all weather conditions as extreme heat could also be very dangerous and was becoming a more regular occurrence.

Councillor Horncastle agreed that staff needed to be commended for their efforts but was very disappointed with the criticism Council staff had received from the public which had been totally unfounded. He had witnessed the lengths that staff had gone to support residents in all types of conditions and he wanted to place on record his thanks to all of them.

Councillor Dunn supported the recommendation for the retention of the Community (COVID) Support Officers. They had been very effective during the pandemic and would be invaluable going forward. It was also vital to recognise the value of town and parish councils, and communications with them should be strengthened. Looking forward, some areas were regular flooding spots so a long term plan was needed to improve the current failing infrastructure.

Councillor Robinson felt that the power companies should be looking to improve their infrastructure, rather than maintenance, to improve future resilience.

Councillor Mather reported that he had enjoyed being part of the Task and Finish Group and he endorsed previous comments made regarding the Council's staff. He had been critical at the time regarding decisions about calling a major incident, and the investigation had showed that it was the lack of communication between the Council and other bodies that had let things down. The report went some way to addressing that and the companies who had taken part had agreed that communication failings had affected the decision making, and if all information had been available at the time then the decisions would have been different. He paid tribute to Helen Hinds and advised that a meeting had already been held in his division to look at how town and parish councils could work more effectively with the County Council in emergency circumstances.

RESOLVED that the recommendations in the report be agreed.

31. REPORT OF THE DEMOCRATIC AND ELECTORAL SERVICES MANAGER

Independent Members of the Audit Committee

The report sought Council's agreement to extend the appointment of the independent co-opted members, currently serving on the County Council's Audit Committee.

The Business Chair presented the report. He proposed that the term of office of both co-opted members be extended to 31 July 2024. Councillor Towns, as Vice Chair, was supportive. He moved the recommendations, which was seconded by Councillor Reid.

RESOLVED that Council agree to extend the appointment of Mr Peter Topping as an independent co-opted member of Audit Committee, and Mr Stephen Watson as independent co-opted Chair of Audit Committee, for a period of two years to 31 July 2024.

32. CABINET MINUTES

RESOLVED that the following minutes of Cabinet be received:-

- (1) Tuesday 12 April 2022**
- (2) Tuesday 26 April 2022**
- (3) Tuesday 10 May 2022**
- (4) Tuesday 7 June 2022**

33. COMMITTEE MINUTES

(1) Corporate Services and Economic Growth OSC

These were presented by Councillor Bawn.

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

(2) Family and Children's Services OSC

These were presented by Councillor Daley.

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

(3) Communities and Place OSC

These were presented by Councillor Reid.

With regard to Minute No.5.1 (Development of the Potland Burn Biodiversity Net Gain Site), Councillor Gallacher reported that he had contacted both Parish Councils involved and there had been no communication with either of them. He asked that this be corrected.

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

(4) Health and Wellbeing OSC

These were presented by Councillor Jones.

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

(5) Health and Wellbeing Board

These were presented by Councillor Sanderson.

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

(6) Audit Committee

These were presented by Councillor Oliver.

RESOLVED that the minutes of the Audit Committee be received.

34. DELEGATED DECISIONS

Council was asked to note the Delegated Decisions taken since those reported to County Council on Wednesday 5 January 2022.

RESOLVED that the delegated decision be noted.

35. REPORT OF THE INTERIM DIRECTOR OF GOVERNANCE AND MONITORING OFFICER

Registering Interests – Membership of Organisations

At the meeting of the Council on 4th of May 2022, the Leader of the Council requested advice on the requirement to register membership of the Freemasons and similar organisations. The report set out the legal position and suggested options for members consideration.

The Leader introduced the report and referred to the additional advice regarding declarations which members had been provided with. The recommendations were in the report for members to decide upon. He proposed that Council suspend Council Procedure Rule 14.2 for the reasons set out in paragraph 11 of the report, which was seconded by Councillor Reid.

RESOLVED that Council Procedure Rule 14.2 be suspended for the reasons set out in paragraph 11 of the report.

Councillor Reid moved that the Council adopt the revised wording as detailed in Appendix 1, which was seconded by Councillor Hill.

Councillor Wearmouth proposed an amendment as follows:-

“to declare administrator, editor, and similar rights for all online and social media where it is not clear from the information freely available to the public. This includes all websites, Facebook profiles, pages, groups etc, twitter accounts, Instagram accounts and all other such media”. This was seconded by the Leader.

Councillor Hill fully supported the work which had been done on this and welcomed the proposal to include membership of all organisations. She also supported the amendment but was interested to have the Monitoring Officer's advice on it, and also felt that a timeframe needed to be put on it.

Councillor Wearmouth replied that he felt it should be immediate on the vote being agreed.

Councillor Murphy questioned how this could possibly be policed. Councillor Wearmouth replied that hopefully members would be honest, and if they weren't then the onus would be on them.

Councillor Reid sought clarity about whether this amendment to his motion needed to be accepted by him. The Monitoring Officer advised that with regard to Councillor Hill, the Council could agree any other registrable interests which weren't in the statute as long as they were in line with openness and transparency. Councillors should adhere to this in line with the Nolan principles. Page 66 paragraph 13 onwards provided the guidance on this so it was lawful to put forward that amendment. Regarding Councillor Reid's point, members were now debating Councillor Wearmouth's amendment and Councillor Reid could accept that or not.

Councillor Oliver welcomed these developments and felt any transparency campaigners should support them. It was important to stamp out on bad social media practice. When it was hidden behind anonymous accounts it was particularly nasty, and he hoped all members would support it.

Councillor Ezhilchelvan was concerned about the proposed amendment as he could not see how it would be enforced. There would need to be a clear mechanism for that. Also, the untruths spread by anonymous blogs should be fought with truths. If a councillor's wife became an admin of a blog, should that be declared as well? The amendment was going too far and he felt it was difficult to support.

Councillor Dickinson remarked that he detested anonymous blogs and the effect they had on mental health, but he could not support the amendment being effective from today as he had lots of evidence of unpleasant comments regarding a previous Leader when he had been in ill health. There were also difficult issues which had been identified around policing and reality. Members would have to be relied upon to be open and truthful and those who were running such blogs would never declare them because they didn't care. The effects were disgraceful, but members had to be realistic about what they could achieve .

Councillor Wearmouth asked the Monitoring Officer to suggest a reasonable timeframe for compliance in view of the comments which had been made. A suggestion of 7-10 working days was suggested and Councillor Wearmouth accepted 10 working days.

Councillor Dale reported that she had suffered very badly from Facebook posts since 2014 and had been subjected to horrific treatment. She asked why

this was only being highlighted now when it had been going on for years and nothing had been done to prevent what she had suffered when members knew what she was being subjected to.

Councillor Oliver commented that on any Facebook page or twitter account there was an option to include those involved at the top of the page so there were different ways of ensuring transparency.

Councillor Murphy proposed an amendment to set up a cross party group of members to take a deep dive into social media and identify where there were breaches of public principles and to hold the individuals to account.

Councillor Kennedy commented that if a councillor put something out on paper to the public then it had to include an imprint which identified that as being from that councillor. The key message was about individual members being responsible for their messaging whatever form that took. Many other Councils must have had the same debate and maybe something could be learned from them, or advice sought from the LGA,.

The Business Chair proposed that the meeting be extended to 6.15, which was seconded by Councillor Wearmouth. This was agreed by members.

Councillor Renner Thompson supported the motion and the suggested timeframe for compliance. He looked after Anne Marie Trevelyan's Facebook page and many members would have seen the abuse that was posted on there, often from anonymous accounts. Such abuse impacted on MPs and their families and this was a debate which was also happening at a national level. He was keen that members look forward with this now.

Councillor Grimshaw expressed sympathy for those members who had suffered through social media and asked if there was any support available for those with ongoing issues. Councillor Flux replied that some actions had recently been agreed to support members in their mental health and a reminder could be sent out about this.

Councillor Hardy commented that a social media policy for the Council needed to be in place which members should adhere to.

Councillor Reid agreed something needed to be done but felt the amendment should be referred to Standards Committee for further consideration. The amendment should not be tagged onto the original motion and needed to be properly evaluated to ensure it was the right solution to the problem. What would sanctions be for example? The two issues needed to be detached.

Councillor Wearmouth responded that Standards Committee would decide on any appropriate sanctions in respect of complaints about member conduct, on social media or otherwise. He repeated his amendment detailed above. In respect of Councillor Murphy's point, social media had been looked at in the past via a working group, which could meet again to discuss matters further so he did not feel that it needed to subject to another amendment.

The Monitoring Officer confirmed that there was an existing social media policy, which was linked to the code of conduct, developed by national bodies which the Council had signed up to. One suggestion might be for a task and finish group to be established which could look at this policy to see which parts were not clear, and have that circulated as guidance.

In response to a question of clarity from Councillor Daley, Councillor Wearmouth confirmed that the member would be declaring in ten days, whatever they were involved in or a member of at that point.

On the motion as amended being put to the vote there voted FOR: a substantial majority; AGAINST: 1; ABSTENTIONS: 5. It was therefore **RESOLVED** that:-

- (a) Council agree to adopt the revised wording as attached at Appendix 1 to the report to be included in the Members Code of Conduct; and
- (b) members be required to declare administrator, editor, and similar rights for all online and social media where it is not clear from the information freely available to the public. This includes all websites, Facebook profiles, pages, groups etc, twitter accounts, Instagram accounts and all other such media.

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

.....
Chair of the County Council

.....
Duly Authorised Officer