

NORTHUMBERLAND COUNTY COUNCIL

At a meeting of the **Northumberland County Council** held on Wednesday 2 November 2022 at County Hall, Morpeth at 3.00 pm.

PRESENT

Councillor B. Flux
(Business Chair) in the Chair

MEMBERS

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

OFFICERS

Binjal, S.	Monitoring Officer
Farrell, S.	Head of Service - HR/OD
Hadfield, K.	Democratic and Electoral Services Manager
Hunter, P.	Interim Senior Service Director
Kingham, A.	Interim Joint Director of Children's Services
Lancaster, H.	Deputy Monitoring Officer

Morgan, L.	Interim Executive Director for Public Health and Community Services
O'Farrell, R.	Interim Chief Executive
Reiter, G.	Interim Joint Director of Children's Services
Roll, J.	Head of Democratic and Electoral Services
Taylor, M.	Interim Executive Director Communities and Business Development
Willis, J.	Interim Executive Director of Finance and S151 Officer

One member of the press was present.

51. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillors Bridgett, Cartie, Castle, Dunbar, Kennedy, Jackson, Mather, Nisbet, Purvis, Taylor. Towns and Waddell.

52. MINUTES

With regard to Minute No. 45 (Motion No.1), Councillor Reid queried whether the letter from the Leader had been sent to Newcastle City Council either before or after the announcement had been made that Newcastle had been unsuccessful, or whether it had ever been sent. The Leader replied that he had raised it with the Leader of the City Council before the decision had been made.

With regard to Minute No. 47 (Revised Executive Management Structure), Councillor Morphet reported that the first line of the final paragraph on pg 23 should read "...asked **what** the remaining.....".

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting of County Council held on Wednesday 21 September 2022, as circulated, be confirmed as a true record, signed by the Business Chair and sealed with the Common Seal of the Council, subject to the above amendment.

53. DISCLOSURES OF MEMBERS' INTERESTS

Councillor Cessford declared a non-pecuniary interest in item 11 on the agenda (Community Governance Reviews) as a parish councillor for Acomb Parish Council.

54. ANNOUNCEMENTS by the Business Chair, Leader or Head of Paid Service

The Business Chair reminded members about the Service of Remembrance which would take place on Friday 11 November 2022.

The Leader gave a progress report on the Challenge Board and the Members Oversight Group (MOG). This consisted of the Group Leaders and key officers working on the Caller report recommendations. The Challenge Board felt that things were progressing well on the improvement plan and that excellent progress had been made. The Challenge Board was looking forward to more 1-1 sessions with senior members and further engagement with members and external partners. The MOG had recently met and there had been encouraging progress to report on delivery of the improvement plan. Any member could speak confidentially to the Challenge Board via the link already provided.

Regarding devolution, the Leader reported that there had been recent discussions regarding Durham CC joining the LA6. This was welcomed as long as there was no detriment to the current financial proposition. The Leaders had met with Michael Gove the previous evening. Whilst he had not given an indication of which model he preferred, he felt that an LA7 was probably preferable as the authorities worked well together. Relations with the other Leaders were cordial and he hoped if an LA7 was created, that Durham would bring the same level of co-operation. Members would be given access to the deal document when it was available.

55. MEMBER QUESTIONS

Question 1 from Councillor Hill to Councillor Renner Thompson

The current consultation on school reorganisation within the Berwick partnership area is, as these things always are, complex and final decisions are simply incapable of pleasing everyone. Could I please have an assurance that this will not be used as an excuse for the Administration to row away from the commitment to invest £40m in new school buildings for Berwick?

Councillor Renner Thompson advised that the commitment from the Administration remained a key Cabinet priority as it had with other major school projects, and the money was in the MTFP.

Councillor Hill sought assurance that £40m would be ringfenced in the next budget for the Berwick school investment programme. Councillor Renner Thompson replied that he had not seen the exact details, but confirmed that was the case.

Question 2 from Councillor Hill to Councillor Horncastle

How many fixed penalty notices have been issued in Northumberland for dog fouling over the last 12 months?

Councillor Riddle replied that eleven fixed penalty notices had been issued for breaches of the current Public Space Protection Order (PSPO). Councillor Hill asked if Councillor Riddle accepted that residents would say that this was a very low number and had the Council given up trying to tackle this problem, along with many others. Councillor Riddle replied that the Authority had not given up and he didn't agree that the Council had become complacent. The Public Protection, Environmental Enforcement Team undertook regular patrols of "hot spot" areas, focusing on those areas where high levels of complaints had been received and continued to actively promote the Green Dog Walkers Scheme, which had led to a reduction of dog fouling complaints and improved responsible dog ownership. During covid, there had been a massive increase in dog ownership.

Councillor Horncastle commented that dog fouling was an issue across the County and there was only a very small team to deal with a vast geographical area. It would really help the wardens if they had the benefit of some local intelligence.

Question 3 from Councillor Swinbank to the Leader

It is understood that Northumberland County Council has submitted a list of potential Investment Zone sites via the North of Tyne Mayoral Authority to the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. In the interests of transparency for all Councillors and the communities they represent, please could the Council be updated today on the details of this Expression of Interest.

The Leader responded that Investment Zones, which could boost economic growth through tax incentives and "accelerated" planning, were in the early stages of development and the Council, with the North of Tyne Combined Authority, was in early discussion with Government to inform this.

The North of Tyne Expression of Interest was focussed on two existing economic corridors which spanned all three local authority areas.

The Arc of Energy Innovation focused on development sites and existing businesses where there were real opportunities to create thousands of green jobs; increase UK growth and exports; accelerate the transition to net zero; and increase energy security. For Northumberland, this included the Energy Central site. The Northumberland Line Economic Corridor would enable the reintroduction of passenger services between Ashington and Newcastle Central Station to deliver transformational change to communities and their access to jobs.

A fully up to date Local Plan and well-regarded ways of delivering major inward investments schemes through the Planning process via the Planning Performance Agreements were in place, and the Council had not submitted any proposals to streamline any environmental or community considerations in decision making.

The Government was reviewing investment zones so it was too early to say whether they would proceed or not but the Council had made its intentions clear through the two sites that if they became available, it would want to use them but with certain safeguards.

Councillor Swinbank asked if the Leader could give an absolute guarantee that planning safeguards would not be overruled in relation to investment sites. Residents expected the requirements of the Local Plan to be adhered to and the democratic process to not be overruled.

The Leader acknowledged the point being made but felt the Government needed to be given more time to decide what they wanted to do and what an investment zone would look like. The Council would make sure that its position was clear that this should not be to the detriment of the environment.

Question 4 from Councillor Murphy to the Leader

In the local press on 18th and 19th of October, there have been alarming reports about the perilous state of care homes in Northumberland. A local care provider has warned, "the industry is on the brink of collapse, due to the actions of NCC in recent years". This is an alarming statement, and will be causing untold anxiety to staff and residents of these homes and their families. The care provider goes on to say Northumberland County Council has refused to meet with them, refused to provide essential information to them, and is the only Local Authority in the region to have behaved this way. They also claim to have made a formal complaint of malfeasance to the Council.

Could the Leader of the council address these claims, and reassure us our homes are safe? Could he explain to us how his administration intends to help the care home sector out of this crisis? Could he tell us the implications of NCC being found guilty of malfeasance, and what penalties may apply? In the current political climate of chaos and instability, the last thing the people of Northumberland need is for our elderly and vulnerable residents to be made homeless.

The Leader responded that all local authorities were in a difficult position with staffing and he paid tribute to all care staff. Officers monitored the position in care homes and had seen nothing to suggest that the care home market was "on the brink of collapse." There were serious challenges for the care service which had increased since the pandemic and the current economic difficulties. The biggest issue was the recruitment and retention of care staff particularly those staff who cared for people in their own homes. The Council had done more than many others to support care providers, including the provision of higher fees which meant that staff could be paid higher wages and the Cabinet had recently agreed to further increase the fees paid to care home providers so higher mileage rates could be paid to staff.

The origin of the stories in the media was a press release by Care North East which represented only a minority of care homes in Northumberland. Officers did discuss fees and contract terms with them whenever changes were being considered. The press release appeared to have been stimulated by a recent correspondence between Care North East and Council officers, in which

officers repeated the Council's existing published view that there was currently no need for new care home developments in the County. This was not news, only a few months ago, officers in adult social care told the Strategic Planning Committee considering a planning application for a new care home in Ashington that in their view it was not needed. He was happy that any correspondence between the Authority and this organisation could be made available to members if they wished. However, he could not make any comments on any potential claim.

Councillor Murphy asked if the Leader could give an assurance that if any member was considering placing a loved one in a care home that members could be reassured that the home would not be closed. The Leader replied that he was not in a position to do that because he didn't know what was going to happen next in this area. However, he was meeting with key staff regularly to monitor the position and if real problems emerged, then all members would be kept informed.

Question 5 from Councillor Dale to Councillor Pattison

Following the concerns I raised at the last Full Council concerning the care service provision, please could you give this Council confidence that the Council officers are working closely with Care North East to ensure the future of care homes in Northumberland and that there is no loss in capacity available for those in need.

Councillor Dale advised that her question had already been answered.

Question 6 from Councillor Ball to Councillor Renner Thompson

As we see the last of frontline youth services delivery drift across to the community and voluntary sector, how will Northumberland County Council ensure delivery of youth services when the community and voluntary sector are under more and more financial strain as running costs increase? For clarity when I say youth services, I mean the delivery of youth clubs, diversionary activities, and the non-measurable outcomes, not the crisis point interventions that could be prevented with earlier engagement.

Councillor Renner Thompson replied a review had been commissioned in 2016 which had made a range of recommendations, one of which was the grow your own model of universal youth club and service delivery. Looking forward to today, the plan was to move the youth service staff into the family hubs which would further enhance partnership approaches to the early identification of and support to young people and their families and was a key element of the Council's plan to address inequalities. The Authority spent more on the youth service than its neighbours and he stressed cuts were not being made. Moving youth service staff to the family hubs allowed access to government funding for those family hubs.

Councillor Ball did not consider the role of a youth worker to provide career advice but to be a role model and to make sure young people did not reach crisis point. She asked Councillor Renner Thompson if he would find some funding to reinstate front line youth services, not crisis point services, through the provision of proper youth clubs in Northumberland.

Councillor Renner Thompson replied that there had been a move away from the traditional type of provision but the Council would continue to help other organisations provide those kinds of services.

Question 7 from Councillor Ball to the Leader

We are seeing strike action in many sectors what are Northumberland County Council doing to ensure our workers do not feel the need to strike and how are we supporting them as the cost of living, and inflation hits hard?

The Leader replied that GMB, Unison and Unite Trade Unions had submitted a pay claim for 22/23 requesting an increase of a number of allowances and a pay increase of £2,000 or the current rate of RPI (whichever is greater) on all pay points. National Employers, the body responsible for pay negotiation on behalf of local authorities, responded to the claim and made a full and final one year offer of an increase of £1,925 on all NJC pay points and an increase of 4.04 per cent on all allowances from 1 April 2022. In addition, from 1 April 2023, an increase of one day to all employees' annual leave entitlement was offered. The offer from National Employers was significantly higher than has been seen in recent years and was the highest flat-rate offer made to the public sector this year. The offer would see employees at the lower end of the pay scale receive a 10.5% increase in pay and more than three-quarters of employees would receive a 6% pay rise or more.

Trade Unions balloted their members, GMB and Unison members voted to accept the offer, Unite voted to reject the offer. However, following a meeting on 1 November, the pay award had now been accepted and this was now being actioned in employees' pay.

Firefighters had been offered a pay increase of 5% effective from 1 July 2022 by National Employers, who also negotiated pay on behalf of all Fire & Rescue Services across the UK. This offer was made following the rejection of the previous offer of 2%. National Employers were currently awaiting a response from Trade Unions.

To support employees who may be suffering financial pressure, the Council had developed a range of financial wellbeing resources, these included:

- Referral pathways to the Money Advice Network (MAN) via the Health and Wellbeing Service
- Payroll deduction scheme with Northumberland Community Bank
- Health and Wellbeing portal with signposting to free, non-profit debt advice agencies
- Access to the Psychological Wellbeing Coordinator to create a bespoke plan to support mental and physical wellbeing and undertake bespoke signposting
- A one-stop guide with details of where to find support.

Councillor Ball had concerns about some of the language being used in county hall and the cost of living and she referred to some posters which were displayed for staff in the building. The Council needed to be supporting its

staff. If staff were struggling, she feared what it was like for the wider community. The email which had gone out had been really disappointing.

Question 8 from Councillor Robinson to Councillor Wearmouth

I asked about the inflationary pressures on this year's budget about 6 months ago and was told it was something Council were aware of and were looking at how to tackle it. We then hear the initial estimate of £17M is the figure we could well be looking at. As the Financial officer advised using contingencies and savings already accrued, still leaves a figure of over 12M and we have seen the advice and changes with regard to finance which has recently come out. My question therefore this time is a bit more precise. Are we to see any change to capital projects within the new financial 'guidelines' which have been issued and of course I'm thinking about the Bedlington redevelopment in particular?

Councillor Wearmouth replied that there was a lot of flux currently in the system for various reasons including what the local government settlement would be. The capital programme would be looked at as usual but there was no plan to look at the Bedlington scheme with the aim of reducing the funding.

Councillor Robinson asked if the scheme would be delivered within this financial year or would the funding in this year be used elsewhere. Councillor Wearmouth replied that the money was in the budget and there had to be a scheme which was deliverable, Councillor Ploszaj could provide an update on its progress.

Question 9 from Councillor Robinson to Councillor Ploszaj

Given the disturbing speculation surrounding the flagship economic development at Cambois by British Volt are there any plans to ask the management to come in and explain directly to us what's exactly happening?

The Leader replied that there were no immediate plans for this because the situation was very fluid. He couldn't comment on where the company currently was but the Council had done everything it could to bring this development and BV had invested a significant amount of money into the site. He hoped there would be some kind of development soon.

Councillor Robinson commented that the buy back clause should provide the leverage to be included in any negotiations should the site move on to another party and hoped that it would be included in that.

Question 10 from Councillor Hunter to Councillor Horncastle

Northumberland County Council have only 3 testing stations in Northumberland which are based at the following locations: Hexham, Stakeford, and Alnwick to carry out all MOT's and interim tests for all taxis as well as undertaking other work. This means a taxi based in Berwick has to travel a minimum of 60 miles round trip to obtain a MOT and compliance test, however, if for any reason the Alnwick testing station has an issue and is unable to carry out tests the only other available options are approx 100- or 150-miles round trip. As Portfolio Holder, do you support

Northumberland County Council only having the identified 3 locations for the taxi/compliance tests, as this is also impacting on the carbon footprint and climate change reductions?

Councillor Horncastle replied that the role of the County Council when undertaking its duties in respect of the licensing of hackney carriages and private hire vehicles was to ensure the safety of the travelling public. It was incumbent on the County Council to ensure that it had suitable arrangements in place for the inspection of vehicles. The use of NCC Testing Stations ensured that all inspections, which exceeded the MOT standard, were carried out independently and to the agreed standard. Further, by using NCC Testing Stations, the Council was able to authorise the MOT Vehicle Testers to suspend a vehicle licence if the test requirements were not met, and thereby, protect the safety of the travelling public.

In terms of the location of those Testing Stations, it was acknowledged that there was no NCC provision in Berwick, but, subject to the overall mileage, taxis and private hire vehicles were only required to attend an NCC testing station a maximum of two times per year. In many cases that would only be once.

With regard to the "carbon footprint", through the Licensing and Regulatory Committee, the Council had recently introduced new vehicle emissions standards to reduce carbon and overall emissions.

Question 11 from Councillor Hunter to Councillor Horncastle

As we all know the cost of heating our homes is going to rise over the winter, which could lead to the safe central heating systems we all use becoming too expensive to use for many families. Therefore, some families may no option but to look at alternative cheaper ways to heat their homes, which could increase the risk home fires, and hopefully not the loss of life, as the alternative options may not be as safe to use as the certified heating systems. Will the Northumberland Fire & Risk Service be issuing warnings about using cheaper alternative heating and how to stay safe. We all want everybody to stay warm during the winter, however, we also, want all residents to stay safe

Councillor Horncastle replied that as part of the ongoing safety messaging and communications to our residents, NFRS would be ensuring that home safety and fire prevention messaging continued throughout the winter period, and those messages would be cognisant of the potential for people to use alternative forms of heating within their homes.

Although a thorough discussion was always held with residents by NFRS Community Safety personnel and operational staff conducting Home Safe and Well visits, the staff would also be briefed to be extra vigilant for signs that residents were not following safe practices regarding home heating. Staff would liaise with Northumberland Communities Together to ensure that where necessary, those residents would be signposted to whatever additional support may be available to them.

Councillor Hunter asked that this include information about cheap heating sources and information put on the staff Facebook page so it could be shared. Councillor Horncastle replied that NFRS had its own Facebook page and this information was included on it.

Question 12 from Councillor Dickinson to the Leader

After seeing some disturbing interviews from the Conservative Party conference can the Leader of the Council confirm that he does believe charities and hard-working families when they say they skip meals to feed their children?

The Leader replied that for the first time, the Council had tackling inequalities as one of its key priorities supported by an action plan and a budget. He referred to the leaflets which had been circulated by NCT to all members. There were now 147 warm hubs across the County and he expressed thanks to all partners helping on this. In 2021, 28% of parents said they would skip a meal for their children. In 2014 it was 20%, in 2012 it was 20%, in 2004 under Labour Government it was 46%. He would listen to anyone who needed help but he was grateful to the Cabinet and all members for supporting the work being done to tackle inequalities.

Councillor Dickinson thanked the Leader for reminding members about all of the good work done by NCT. It was unfortunate that demand for foodbanks was higher than ever. He asked if the Leader would join him in apologising for the recent remarks of a Cabinet Member. The Leader replied that he would not agree with something that The Journal had printed. He had complete commitment to the work being done by NCT and the work done to tackle inequalities.

The Business Chair suspended the meeting at 3.50pm due to disturbance by a member of the public. The meeting was reconvened at 4.25 pm.

56. REPORT OF THE INTERIM CHIEF EXECUTIVE AND HEAD OF PAID SERVICE

Appointment of the Preferred Candidate for the Position of Head of Paid Service, Chief Executive & Returning Officer

The purpose of this report was to advise Council that due to the timings of the recruitment process for the Head of Paid Service & Chief Executive, it had not been possible to submit a full report for consideration by Full Council with the agenda papers for the meeting. The agenda papers for the StAC to be held on Wednesday 2nd November 2022 had been published and were available on the Council's website for members to view beforehand.

The Business Chair advised that the recommendations from Staff and Appointments Committee that morning had been emailed to all members before the meeting and copies were available in the Chamber for those who required a paper copy (copy attached to the sealed minutes).

The Leader proposed the recommendations, which were seconded by Councillor Watson.

Councillor Dale asked if the Council would apologise for not including the Independent Group in the selection process for the HOPS as required by the Constitution. She had received an apology at 12.45 am by email.

The Interim Chief Executive replied that he had apologised following his return from holiday for the error, and he repeated that in the meeting. He had mistakenly indicated that it wasn't appropriate for Councillor Dale to attend the interview panels, but that it was appropriate for her to attend the StAC that morning. The Independent Group had not been excluded from the selection process however, and Councillor Kennedy had been invited to nominate a deputy in his stead, but had not done so.

Councillor Dale commented that the whole process had been conducted incorrectly and that Councillor Kennedy had not been invited until very late into the process.

The Interim Chief Executive responded that it had been a fast-moving situation and the lessons learned would be applied through the next stages of recruitment.

Councillor Hill was disappointed that there had not been an Independent Group member involved but she accepted that it was an honest mistake. She asked if the proposed candidate had scored the highest during the process and were there any questions asked of the candidate about her time as Head of Children's Services at Sunderland, and if so, could a summary of the response be given.

The Interim Chief Executive responded that the process had been very robust and there had been 0.01 of a point difference between the first and second candidate. There had been no questions asked that Councillor Hill had referred to but four different panels had asked their own questions and taken scores.

On the recommendations being put to the vote there voted FOR: 50; AGAINST: 3, ABSTENTIONS: 2. It was therefore **RESOLVED** that the recommendations from the Staff and Appointments Committee held on 2nd November 2022 be approved as follows;

- (a) To appoint Dr Helen Paterson as the full-time permanent Head of Paid Service, Chief Executive and Returning Officer;
- (b) To note Staff and Appointments has agreed the remuneration for the post of Head of Paid Service and Chief Executive will be at £199k per annum with access to staff benefits in line with all Council employees. In addition, as Returning Officer for the Council, in the event of an election, an additional fee of £12,145 will be payable; and
- (c) To note the appointment will be subject to the Council's standard pre-employment checks.

Dr Helen Paterson then addressed members briefly. The Business Chair advised that there would be a formal meet and greet session arranged in due course.

57. REPORT OF THE INTERIM EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF FINANCE AND SECTION 151 OFFICER

Council Tax Support Scheme for 2023-24

The report sought approval for the local Council Tax Support Scheme for 2023-24 to continue to provide support at a maximum level of 92% of council tax liability.

The report was presented by Councillor Wearmouth, detailing the key points. He proposed the recommendations which was seconded by the Leader.

The S151 Officer reminded members that this scheme had been in place since 2019-20. If members were not minded to accept Cabinet's recommendation that it be accepted, there would be a requirement to undertake a full equality impact assessment and then formal consultation. The scheme had to be agreed by 31 January so the timetable would be very tight.

There had been extensive discussion at Scrutiny about other means of financial assistance and it was agreed that officers would look to continue the hardship scheme which had benefitted more low-income households. There was a current claimant caseload of just under 25,000 of which about 10,000 were pensioner households who would automatically get 100% relief, leaving around 15,000 working age claimants. The hardship scheme would assist all of these, but returning to 100% council tax support would not, and the latter would cost roughly double.

A number of member comments were made including:-

- Councillor Dickinson commented that his group had tried unsuccessfully to have this scheme changed back for three years. The S151 Officer had referred to the rising number of claimants which was worsening with the cost of living crisis and it was very uncertain what the Government was going to do next. He stressed that the report's recommendations had only be endorsed at Scrutiny on the Chair's vote which showed that members felt it needed to be rectified.
- Councillor Dunn advised that she would continue to advocate that the support scheme be returned to 100% and felt the Council should be lobbying Government to fund it. A simpler and easier manage system was essential which didn't need to rely on emergency funding support. The Council should be supporting its residents as much as possible if it was truly committed to tackling inequalities. Scrutiny members had raised many concerns including a temporary 100% support option. 92% was not enough and she couldn't support the recommendation but would note vote against it either as she did not want to jeopardise those receiving support who needed it.

- Councillor Grimshaw reiterated her longstanding concerns about this and agreed with her colleagues that support should be at 100% given the existing pressures on low income families, in line with what Durham County Council provided.
- Councillor Oliver commented that the support being planned would be more generous and would include more people than if the 100% council tax support was returned.
- Councillor Foster asked why the planned support could not be provided alongside the 100% council tax support. It was very sad that so many people now had to rely on foodbanks to feed their children. Even those families who were working were struggling to make ends meet given the current cost of living.
- Councillor Ball supported 100% support as she expected the council tax would rise again next year. Using foodbanks was becoming normal and that was wrong. If the Council could not provide 100% support when other authorities could, then there was something fundamentally wrong.
- Councillor Ferguson commented that there was a lot of support available and the Council had a role to ensure that people were fully aware of what was available for them, rather than just simply increasing the support to a higher level. He questioned where the £1.3m would come from to fund the difference between 92% and 100%. Everything had a cost and he did not wish to see additional burden put on working people, who also needed support.
- Councillor Bowman commented it was a reality that some people had no food. This was a disgrace in a country which was the 6th richest in the world. The Council should be supporting at 100% or existing poverty levels would be worse next Spring.
- Councillor Morphet asked what the process would be if the Council did not approve the report's recommendations and would it be possible that less support would be available as a result. The S151 Officer advised that the scheme had to be approved by Council by 31 January 2023. If they did not agree it could be sent back to Cabinet to reconsider, or an alternative motion could be moved for debate. Any change to the scheme would also require formal consultation.

Councillor Wearmouth then summed up and on the report's recommendations being put to the vote there voted FOR: 33; AGAINST: 2; ABSTENTIONS: 20. It was therefore **RESOLVED** that the Council Tax Support Scheme 1 be adopted as the Council's local scheme for 2023-24.

58. REPORT OF THE INTERIM SENIOR SERVICE DIRECTOR

Electoral Review – Part One Council Size Submission

The report updated Council on the Electoral Review of Northumberland County being undertaken by the Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE) and to present for agreement the Council's Council Size Submission on part one of the Electoral Review.

The Leader thanked Group Leaders for their input on this. Members felt that 67 was about the right number but it was felt that the Boundary Commission should be asked to consider 70 as well in view of the increasing population and housing numbers. They were also to be asked to look at the Alnwick ED to see whether it should be two, not one. He proposed the recommendations, which was seconded by Councillor Dickinson.

Councillor Cessford pointed out that on page 76, there was an error in the number of councillors listed for Tynedale LAC.

Councillor Morphet asked how many members had responded to the questionnaire. Mr Hunter understood that it was around 36, but he would check.

Councillor Reid agreed that Group Leaders had worked well on this and thanked officers for their efforts. The next part would be more difficult due to the County's unique population distribution. He hoped there would be some flexibility on this and that members could work constructively together on it.

Councillor Dickinson agreed that this had been a very good piece of cross-party work which had shaped the report. It was very important that communities were recognised in the next stage.

RESOLVED that:-

- (a) Council note the update on the Electoral Review currently being undertaken by the Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE);
- (b) Council agree the Council Submission on Council Size on part one of the Electoral Review; and
- (c) authority be delegated to the Interim Senior Service Director in consultation with Leader of Council, to make necessary, final amendments to the submission document prior submitting this to the LGBCE.

59. REPORT OF THE INTERIM EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF FINANCE AND SECTION 151 OFFICER

Treasury Management Annual Report for the Financial Year 2021-22

The report provided details of performance against the Treasury Management Strategy Statement (TMSS) 2021-22, approved by the County Council on 24 February 2021. The report provided a review of borrowing and investment performance for 2021-22, set in the context of the general economic conditions prevailing during the year. It also reviewed specific Treasury Management prudential indicators defined by the (CIPFA) Treasury Management Code of Practice and CIPFA Prudential Code for Capital Finance in Local Authorities, (the Prudential Code), and approved by the Authority in the TMSS.

The report was presented by the S151 Officer. She reported that PWLB rates were now at 4.69% which was significantly higher than six months ago. It was not clear which way interest rates would continue and this was why the Autumn Statement from the Chancellor was very important. Regarding current borrowing, the weighted average rate would increase significantly as the Authority continued to borrow externally, instead of using internal borrowing. This would probably happen sooner than expected because of interest rates rising. Given the size of the capital programme, even a modest increase in the cost of borrowing had a significant impact on the revenue budget and she advised members that consideration would need to be given to the size of the capital programme going forward. She felt there would be an impact both on the current capital programme and sustaining the levels of investment in future years.

The report was proposed by Councillor Wearmouth and seconded by Councillor Sanderson.

A number of member comments were made:-

- Councillor Dickinson hoped for some stability within the Government so the Authority could work with them in confidence. He felt it was important to nail down the capital programme to a level which was affordable because of the impact on the revenue budget. He asked the S151 Officer if she could provide a figure for the covid grants which were fraudulently claimed, how much was recovered and how this would be reported back. The S151 Officer replied that a report had been made to Scrutiny on the outcome of the business grants which reported that a very low level of fraud had been detected and reported through the normal channels. A much wider national exercise was ongoing – the post payment assurance process – and she had just signed off the returns on the various grant schemes. It was expected that results would be published by the Government across the whole programme and they would feedback to the Authority if they detected anything suspicious.
- Councillor Reid thanked officers for their work on this very important report and asked if a simple member briefing could be delivered on it. Councillor Wearmouth agreed this could be arranged. The Leader suggested that training opportunities with neighbouring authorities should be investigated, or possibly a policy conference in January which would allow people to have a dialogue.

RESOLVED that the report be received and the performance of the Treasury Management function for 2021-22 be noted.

60. REPORT OF THE INTERIM CHIEF EXECUTIVE

Community Governance Reviews

Council was asked to consider the outcome of three community governance reviews in the County.

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

Councillor Morphet asked why the request from Allendale Parish Council to reduce the number of Parish Councillors had been rejected and an explanation was provided by Councillor Horncastle.

RESOLVED that:-

- (a) Council note the outcome of the Community Governance Review for Allendale Parish and agrees that the status quo be retained;
- (b) Council agree that Tasset with Greystead Parish is no longer subdivided into wards and resolves to make an Order to this effect;
- (c) Council agrees that the number of Councillors on Acomb Parish Council be increased from seven to nine; and
- (d) the Monitoring Officer be authorised to make, sign and seal the appropriate Orders by virtue of the powers contained in the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007.

61. REPORT OF THE MONITORING OFFICER

Appointment of Additional Independent Persons

The report updated members on the recruitment process for two additional Independent Persons.

The report was introduced by the Business Chair. He thanked the Chair of Standards, Mr Joe Jackson and Councillor Liz Dunn and the MO for their support on this. He proposed the recommendations which was seconded by Councillor Dunn.

Councillor Hill welcomed the report and, with regard to the second recommendation about the delegation on renewal of the appointments, asked if there were any concerns would those identified make the decision in any case as only one of them was a councillor. The MO advised that this would be a delegation to the MO, in consultation with the Chair and Vice Chair. If there was some question over the appropriateness of the independent person, then that delegation would not be exercised. Contracts were specified in such a way to say that they were renewable after two years but would not happen automatically. Two years term of office was also was a best practice recommendation.

Councillor Hill asked if the delegation could include Group Leaders. The Leader agreed that this could be discussed at the Group Leaders meeting and if supported could come back to the next Council meeting.

RESOLVED that:-

- (a) the appointment of Mr Simon Openshaw and Mr Arne Beswick as Independent Persons for a two-year period until 1st November 2024, be approved, renewable for a further two-year period maximum thereafter; and
- (b) the renewal of the appointments for a two-year period from the 1st November 2024 be delegated to the Monitoring Officer in consultation with the Chair and Vice Chair of Standards Committee.

62. CABINET MINUTES

(1) Wednesday 21 September 2022

RESOLVED that the minutes be received.

63. COMMITTEE MINUTES

(1) Corporate Services and Economic Growth OSC

These were presented by Councillor Bawn.

RESOLVED that the minutes be received.

(2) Family and Children's Services OSC

These were presented by Councillors Dodd and Daley.

With regard to Minute No. 30 (Family Hubs Development), Councillor Ball did not feel that the minute fully reflected the discussion on this matter. Councillor Dodd advised that he would look at this.

With regard to Minute No. 41 (Northumberland Strategic Inclusion Plan 2022-26), it was noted that Councillor Swinbank should have referred to Councillor Swinburn).

RESOLVED that the minutes be received.

(3) Communities and Place OSC

These were presented by Councillor Reid. He referred to the remarks he had made at the last meeting regarding the purpose of the minutes being on the agenda and apologised that he had been incorrect. The Constitution referred to reports from Committees being on the agenda and Council could not verify the minutes of other Committees. The MO confirmed to members that the Constitution did not match current practice and needed to be changed.

With regard to Storm Arwen, Councillor Dodd urged members to look at trees in their patches for the effects of Ash die back which was affecting many trees in the County making them vulnerable to creating further damage in any future

storms. The Leader supported this and commended Scrutiny for the ongoing work on this.

RESOLVED that the minutes be received.

(4) Health and Wellbeing OSC

These were presented by Councillors Jones and Dodd.

RESOLVED that the minutes be received.

(5) Health and Wellbeing Board

These were presented by Councillor Ezhilchelvan.

RESOLVED that the minutes be received.

(6) Audit Committee

These were presented by Councillor Oliver.

With regard to Minute No.34 (Consideration of Going Concern Status for the Statement of Accounts for the Year Ended 21 March 2022), Councillor Dickinson commented that he had concerns about the settlement delays and the potential push into January. The Business Chair advised that he was taking comments only on the accuracy of the minutes.

RESOLVED that the minutes be received.

The Common Seal of the County Council

of Northumberland was hereunto affixed

in the presence of:-

.....
Chair of the County Council

.....
Duly Authorised Officer