

NORTHUMBERLAND COUNTY COUNCIL

At a meeting of the **Northumberland County Council** held on Wednesday 18 January 2023 at County Hall, Morpeth at 3.15 pm.

PRESENT

Councillor B. Flux
(Business Chair) in the Chair

MEMBERS

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

OFFICERS

Binjal, S.	Monitoring Officer
Elsdon, A.	Service Director, Finance
Hadfield, K.	Democratic and Electoral Services Manager
Hunter, P.	Interim Senior Service Director
Masson, N.	Deputy Monitoring Officer
Murfin, R.	Interim Executive Director for

O'Farrell, R.
Reiter, G.

Roll, J.

Taylor, M.

Planning & Local Services
Regeneration, Commercial &
Economy
Interim Chief Executive
Interim Joint Director of Children's
Services
Head of Democratic and Electoral
Services
Interim Executive Director
Communities and Business
Development

Around 12 members of the public were present.

64. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillors Chicken, Daley, Dunbar, Dunn, Foster, Hutchinson, Jackson, Murphy, Oliver and Swinbank.

65. MINUTES

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting of County Council held on Wednesday 2 November 2022, as circulated, be confirmed as a true record, signed by the Business Chair and sealed with the Common Seal of the Council.

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

The Business Chair reported that the Royal Regiment of Fusiliers 5th Battalion had requested having their St George's Parade through Morpeth Town Centre on the morning of Saturday 22 April 2023. The last time they marched through Morpeth was in April 2010 to mark the granting of the Freedom of Northumberland. He asked members to confirm at they agreed with this request, which they did.

He then reported that the following following people, particularly connected with Northumberland, had received honors in HM the King's New Years Honours list:-

Officers of the Order of the British Empire (OBE)

1. Dr Philip Frank Souter. Senior Director, Research and Development, Procter and Gamble. For services to Medical Research. (Morpeth, Northumberland)
2. Simon Taylor. Chief Executive Officer with the Three Rivers Learning Trust, which runs a number of schools in the county.

Members of the Order of the British Empire (MBE)

1. Scott Dickinson . Community Worker, Hadston House, Morpeth. For services to the community in Northumberland. (Morpeth, Northumberland)
2. Dr Ingrid Pollard. Artist. For services to Art. (Hexham, Northumberland)
3. Lucia Roberta Tough Bronze. For services to Association Football. (Manchester, Greater Manchester). Grew up in Northumberland.
4. Susan Ghulum. Works for the council. Is the Registered Manager of Barndale Short Break in Alnwick - which offers families throughout Northumberland respite care and support for children with additional needs.
5. Angus Lunn. for services to education and to peatland conservation.
6. Geoff Hodgson OBE Chair of Port of Blyth for services to the Port.

The Civic Head's Charity Race Night was planned for 10 February at Ponteland Social Club at 7.00 p.m. Tickets were £10 per person and included food. Susan Taylor could be contacted for tickets.

The Leader then gave an update on the position with British Volt. This was very disappointing for all involved but the Council would do all it could to support those who had lost their jobs. It was unfortunate that recent takeover talks had not come to fruition but he stood by the Administration's decision to take the opportunity which had presented itself. The Council had not lost any money, in fact it had made some, and the buyback clause was in place to get the land back if a gigafactory was not built on the site by the end of 2024. Efforts continued to find a solution.

Regarding devolution, he reported that Cabinet had agreed to move to the next stage of the "minded to" deal and five authorities involved had now formally done the same. The next stage involved public consultation and a member briefing was planned.

The Business Chair then reminded members that this was the final meeting for both Rick O'Farrell and Liz Morgan and he placed on record his thanks on behalf of the whole Council for their service to the Authority. Mr O'Farrell briefly addressed members in response.

67. MEMBER QUESTIONS

Question 1 from Councillor Hill to the Leader

There will not be a referendum on establishing a North East Mayoral Combined Authority and a North East Mayor. Who made that decision, and do you agree with it?

Th Leader responded that there was no provision in the legislation for a public referendum. He was personally in favour of a referendum when there was an

important decision to make but in this case, neither Conservative nor Labour had included it in their manifestos. However, a significant amount of consultation was planned.

Councillor Hill responded that this was not the same as a vote and she asked how the Leader expected to take people along on this when there was no referendum and it had not been put to Council. This was a democratic deficit. She asked if the consultation showed that Northumberland residents didn't want this, would the Leader roll back from his position?

The Leader was confident that the public would support this once they knew what was involved. He would be listening to what people said and it was important that all members were fully aware of the detail. Again, he was confident that members would be supportive, once they were fully briefed.

Question 2 from Councillor Swinburn to the Leader

Is there a process or procedure that can be followed where elected members can receive different treatment to that of residents when it comes to getting work carried out in their area, or in their own street. For example, 'preferential' treatment?

The Leader responded that he was not aware of any preferential treatment being given to councillors. The usual process was to look at the urgency or merits of an issue. The expected process was that residents could raise matters with their local councillor, who would then raise it with officers and then it would be dealt with, but he was not aware of members receiving preferential treatment.

Councillor Swinburn sought clarity that no elected member could get things done in their own areas other than by following the standard reporting process, and that all members received the same treatment as residents, with issues being dealt with on a priority basis. The Leader reiterated what he had previously said.

Question 3 from Councillor Taylor to the Leader

As the 4th largest Market Town in Northumberland how much revenue in the form of Council Tax has been paid by Bedlington residents over the last 10 years and what investment from that revenue has been made into the town? Can you provide a comparison with Berwick, Hexham, Ashington and Ponteland?

Councillor Wearmouth replied that he may need to provide a written response given the level of detail to the question. However, on tax receipts, he could provide the following figures:-

West Bedlington - £59m
East Bedlington - £37.8m
Berwick - £62.8m
Hexham - £87.2m
Ponteland - £102.9m
Ashington - £135m

He sought clarification from Councillor Taylor regarding what kind of expenditure detail she was looking for specifically around revenue or capital and then this could be provided. Councillor Taylor asked that information on all expenditure would be helpful so that a proper comparison could be done. Residents in Bedlington felt that nothing was happening in their area, for example, the town was not even on the list for HM the Queen's memorial projects.

The Leader responded that if Councillor Taylor could identify a suitable scheme it would be assessed for inclusion.

The Business Chair then advised members that he had accepted two late questions from Councillor Dickinson.

Councillor Dickinson asked, given the devastating news about British Volt, what support could the Council offer for the 300 employees and how long was it expected to be before the Council could retrieve its land through the administration process.

The Leader shared this disappointment. It was not clear how many of the 300 employees were resident in Northumberland, but it was believed that the majority were in the West Midlands. There had been discussions with DWP and the Council would do all it could. Mr O'Farrell advised that the land was owned by British Volt and it was the role of the Administrator to ensure that they secured the maximum possible for British Volt's assets. The sale contract of the land to British Volt included a number of conditions, the key one being that if it was not used to build a gigafactory to make batteries by December 2024, then the Council had the option to buyback the land at the price that was paid for it. This put the Council in a good position with the Administrator because the land could not be sold to another party unless they planned to build a gigafactory. The land would stay with the Administrator until 2024, when the Council could exercise its option, or until another party came along who wanted to build a gigafactory.

The Leader added that should the position be reached where the Council had the option to extend the deadline because it would bring in investment, he would talk to the Group Leaders beforehand.

68. REPORT OF THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL

Electoral Review of Northumberland Phase 2 Submission

The report updated Council on phase two of the Electoral Review of Northumberland County Council being undertaken by the Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE) and presented the Council's proposed submission on divisional patterns.

The Leader reported that staff had worked hard on this with all Groups to secure cross party agreement. The result was testament to the staff and to the good will of members and group leaders in finding something everyone could agree on. If there were any last minute changes required before submission,

these would be looked at. The Boundary Commission were not bound to accept the Council's submission but having cross party support gave it strength. He moved the report's recommendations, which was seconded by Councillor Bridgett.

Councillor Hill asked if individual members would be consulted if they were affected by any last minute tweaks, and the Leader agreed this would be done.

Councillor Bridgett thanked Phil Hunter and the team for their work on this and asked if the Council was prepared for the Boundary Commission to not accept the Council's proposals, which would require extensive consultation with local parish councils to ensure they were able to make the case on behalf of their communities. Phil Hunter confirmed this was the case.

Councillor Dale asked how Parish Councils had been informed about the review as she had received an email from a parish council about it. Members were informed that all parish councillors had been invited to a briefing on 12 December and all parish clerks had received an email the day before from the Boundary Commission reminding them about the need to respond.

Councillor Dickinson felt that the process had been as inclusive as it could be. The staff had tried their best to please everyone which he knew was very difficult. A broad consensus had been reached but he cautioned of the need to be aware going forward of where communities could be having their needs cancelled out by being moved into a more affluent area. This could be about available funding or the organisations which serviced those areas.

Councillor Kennedy agreed that there had been good joint working on this between the Group Leaders. He referred to a number of electoral divisions in the old Tynedale area which were below the average number and which had been determined by the Boundary Commission based on the justification they had provided at the time. He felt there may be some challenges to meet if it was all about numbers going forward, rather than communities.

Councillor Reid agree that officers had done a fantastic job in the timescales involved and the criteria which had been set for them. He felt this needed to be accepted now because ultimately, the Council would need to consider in detail what the Boundary Commission came back with in April. He would not be surprised if the Boundary Commission did not accept any of the Council's proposals and members would need to be prepared for that.

Councillor Mophet commented that officers had generally done a good job but the Green Party did not support the proposal to split Alnwick into two divisions. A two councillor division for Alnwick served to promote effective and convenient local government by allowing resident's to choose which councillor to go to. It also encouraged councillors of different parties to work together for the benefit of residents. The boundary proposed by the County Council split the historic heart of Alnwick away from the rest of the town at the expense of community identity and interest.

Councillor Castle agreed that a two member division could be made to work but it relied too heavily on a good relationship. However, the figures were inescapable and he had 8000 residents to deal with, some of whom took advantage of the two member situation. He felt that two divisions was a better solution.

Councillor Dale suggested that the Council provide evidence for those cases where they were supporting a large variance in numbers.

The Business Chair commented that he acknowledged his own electoral division would change significantly following extreme population growth in his area and he commended officers for their work, and councillors who had worked in a co-operative way on what could have been a very difficult topic.

Councillor Bridgett expressed his thanks to Phil Hunter and his team, particularly Ryan Gilchrist who had worked exceptionally hard on this project. He felt it was the best possible solution, and it was fair. The solution to be put forward respected the integrity of the communities which had ties with each other. The key thing for the Boundary Commission was electoral equality but they did listen to reasoned arguments about variances and he hoped that would be the case here.

The Leader thanked all members and Group Leaders for their work on this.

On being put to the vote there voted FOR: a substantial majority; AGAINST: 1; ABSTENTIONS: 0.

It was therefore **RESOLVED** that:-

- (a) the update on the Electoral Review currently being undertaken by the Local Government Boundary Commission for England be noted;
- (b) the submission by the interim Senior Service Director being made on Divisional patterns be noted;
- (c) authority be delegated to the interim Senior Service Director to make any final changes to the Council's submission on Divisional patterns, to be exercised in consultation with Leader of the Council and all other Group Leaders, before submitting to the Boundary Commission; and
- (d) it be noted that political groups, individual Members, partners, community groups, residents and other bodies may make their own separate submissions to the Boundary Commission during this phase of consultation.

69. REPORT OF THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL

Response to the Challenge Board Interim Report 1 for the Member Oversight Group

Members were asked to consider and respond to the first interim report of the Challenge Board, provided to the Member Oversight Group on the 23.12.22.

The Leader briefly introduced the report and was grateful to the Challenge Board for providing the necessary challenge and highlighting the areas being done well and where improvement was needed. Good progress was being made.

Councillor Castle commented that the last couple of years had been very difficult, but things were improving with signs of more consensual behaviour emerging. He commended the Leader for how he had led the Council through this and welcomed the fact that things were now going in the right direction.

With reference to page 31, point no.3 (...a clear three year financial plan..), Councillor Morphet asked whether this was the MTFP, or if not, what was the difference. Mr O'Farrell responded that this was the MTFP and this point was being discussed with the Challenge Board but the thinking was to link this more closely to the Corporate Plan and the strategic change programme to provide a more comprehensive picture.

Councillor Reid asked how the Council could provide a three year plan when the Government would only provide a one year financial settlement. Mr O'Farrell responded that the Council was obliged to provide a three year financial plan using best estimates available at that point in time.

Councillor Dickinson commented that the Challenge Board report was a snapshot in time and recognised that the Council was on a three year journey which members were working on together. The need for cross party integration and design should be strengthened. It emphasised that the Council needed to engage with the process, but he wasn't sure what was meant by this. There was still a lot of work to do on member behaviour. He also hoped the report would reflect more how his Group felt in the next version, after the Board had met his Group. He acknowledged the progress which had been achieved so far and hoped that the areas identified for improvement would be taken on board.

Councillor Reid commented that until members were able to work with each other properly on the budget from the start of the process with officers then no real progress in working together and moving forward had been achieved.

The Leader thanked members for their positive comments. Progress had been encouraging in the last couple of months and his Group was keen to be able to get along with all Groups in the Council. If the level of trust continued he did not see why the Administration should not share more when it came to the budget next year. He thanked officers for their work and was keen to see the pace continue.

RESOLVED that the initial findings and suggested next steps proposed in the Challenge Board's first interim report be noted.

70. REPORT OF THE HEAD OF DEMOCRATIC AND ELECTORAL SERVICES

Independent Remuneration Panel Members

In September 2021, Council agreed the re-establishment of an Independent Remuneration Panel of three members for the duration of four years. The report recommended endorsement of the appointment of a fourth Member.

Councillor Wearmouth introduced the report highlighting the key issues. He moved the recommendations which was seconded by Councillor Sanderson.

Councillor Dickinson sought assurance that the Monitoring Officer was satisfied that proper recruitment processes had been followed. The Monitoring Officer confirmed this was the case. The report had been brought back to members as the delegation had been to appoint a third member. However, when interviews had taken place, a potential fourth member had been identified and Group Leaders advised at the time that they would be appointed, subject to ratification by full Council.

Councillor Reid queried whether the decision had in fact already been made. Councillor Wearmouth referred to the explanation provided by the Monitoring Officer and the alternative (appointment of a fourth member) being put to members today.

The Monitoring Officer explained the delegation to appoint three members from September 2021 and the potential to appoint a fourth member which had emerged. This had been agreed via email with the Group Leaders, subject to ratification by full Council. The applicants had been told that their appointments would be subject to Council agreeing them.

On the report's recommendations being put to the vote there voted FOR: a substantial majority; AGAINST: 0; ABSTENTIONS: 2.

It was therefore **RESOLVED** that:-

- (a) the appointment of a fourth member of the Panel be ratified; and
- (b) the appointments of Eric Richards and Hayley Hall as Independent Remuneration Panel Members for a period of four years from 18 January 2023 until 17 January 2027 be endorsed.

71. REPORT OF THE INTERIM CHIEF EXECUTIVE

Community Governance Review – Hepscoth Parish

Council was asked to consider the outcome of a community governance review in the County.

RESOLVED that:-

- (a) the number of Parish Councillors on Hepscoth Parish Council be increased from seven to nine;
- (b) Hepscoth Parish Council should not be divided into wards for the purpose of electing Councillors; and

- (c) 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 2000.

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

.....
Chair of the County Council

.....
Duly Authorised Officer