

NORTHUMBERLAND COUNTY COUNCIL

At a meeting of the **Northumberland County Council** held on Wednesday 14 June 2023 at County Hall, Morpeth at 3.00 pm.

PRESENT

Councillor B. Flux (Chairman in the Chair)

MEMBERS

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

OFFICERS

Binjal, S.	Monitoring Officer
Bradley, N.	Executive Director – Adults, Ageing and Wellbeing
Denyer, L.	Deputy Monitoring Officer
Hadfield, K.	Democratic and Electoral Services Manager
Hunter, P.	Interim Senior Service Director
Kingham, A.	Executive Director – Children and

Masson, N.
Neilson, S.

Paterson, Dr H.
O'Neill, G.

Willis, J.

Young People
Deputy Monitoring Officer
Executive Director, Place and
Regeneration
Chief Executive
Executive Director for Public Health,
Inequalities and Stronger
Communities
Executive Director for Resources &
Transformation (S151)

One member of the public was present.

14. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillors Bridgett, Carr, Dunbar, Foster, Humphrey, Nisbet, Robinson and Towns.

15. MINUTES

RESOLVED that the minutes of the Annual Meeting of County Council held on Wednesday 17 May 2023, be confirmed as a true record subject to Minute No. 7 (page 14) being amended to confirm that Councillor Waddell was elected as Vice Chair of Tynedale LAC, not Councillor Kennedy. This had been notified to Democratic Services.

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

The Chair reported with sadness the passing of former County Councillor Anthony Murray, who had represented the Wooler Electoral Division from 2008 until 2021. Councillors Sanderson and Dickinson both spoke in fond tribute to Anthony and members stood for a minute's silence as a mark of respect.

The Leader also reported that Cabinet had recently received the results of the consultation exercise on devolution. This had received a positive response. One of the issues which had come out was the ability of Northumberland to maintain a strong voice in the region. However, he did not feel this was a concern as all authorities worked well together. The full process should begin in May next year and Northumberland would have Cabinet responsibility for Rurality and the Environment.

The Leader then paid tribute to Chief Fire Officer Paul Hedley who was retiring from the Fire and Rescue Service. He had been an integral part of the Fire and Rescue Service for many years and a fantastic officer and friend. The Leader then also paid tribute to Suki Binjal who had acted as Interim Head of Governance and MO since 2021. She had brought a level of professionalism and integrity to the Council and had turned round a significant amount of work during her time with the Authority. He wished both officers all the very best.

Councillor Horncastle added that he had learned a lot from Paul Hedley since assuming responsibility for the portfolio. He led a very professional team and he would be sorely missed.

Councillor Bawn advised members, on behalf of the Scrutiny Chairs, that as part of the review of Scrutiny just undertaken, there would be quarterly reports to Council from September on the work of their Committees.

17. PUBLIC QUESTIONS

No public questions had been received.

18. MEMBER QUESTIONS

Question 1 from Councillor Wilczek to Councillor Riddle

Due to ongoing parking issues across Bedlington, and with the upcoming Active Travel Corridor and Northumberland Line, can the administration reassure residents that the town centre car park (next to Aldi) will remain under Northumberland County Council control?

Councillor Riddle replied that the land that comprised the new Aldi store and store car park was sold to Aldi by Advance Northumberland. The remaining car park and development land was still owned by Advance Northumberland. He anticipated this would be required to provide dedicated car parking as and when these sites were developed as part of the regeneration of Bedlington Town Centre. The County Council retained ownership of the car parks adjoining Bedlington Library and there was no intention that the situation would change.

Question 2 from Councillor Hill to Councillor Horncastle

In the last 15 years, how many bodies have been buried in the wrong graves in Northumberland due to errors by this authority? How many bodies have been exhumed as a result?

Councillor Horncastle replied that the new Unitary Northumberland County Council came into effect in 2009 at which point it took over responsibility for 23 active cemeteries across the County from its predecessor District Councils. During the period from 2009 to date, there had been one instance of a body being buried in the incorrect plot, in this instance the plot was empty but had already been purchased by a family for future use. The error was quickly identified and following dialogue with both of the affected families and with the consent of the Church of England, the Council arranged for the exhumation of the grave and reburial in the adjoining correct plot. The Council accepted that even one error of this nature was not acceptable and had taken further measures to mitigate the risk of any reoccurrence and had apologised unreservedly to both of the families affected by this unfortunate error. He added that these unfortunate errors were certainly not unique to Northumberland. Similar instances in other places were widely reported across the country. For example, in October the Northern Echo had reported on seven burial errors in other authorities in the South of the region and these appeared to be largely down to human error. He pointed this out, not to excuse the one mistake made in the County. This was, of course, deeply

regrettable and was taken very seriously. However, he reassured colleagues and residents that these errors were not unique to Northumberland, and the Authority was not an outlier in this.

Councillor Hill replied that she was aware of several instances in Berwick where such things had happened. In light of this information, the failure to apologise to families and the impact on them, she asked whether the Cabinet Member would call for a full review to ensure that these errors weren't repeated.

Councillor Horncastle responded that officer research had only identified one instance and he could therefore not comment any further than that.

19. REPORT OF THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL

Leader of Council Annual Portfolio Report

The Leader of Council's Annual Portfolio Report contained issues that set the context for delivery of the Leader's Portfolio. It highlighted achievements over the past year and, outlined the areas of focus for the coming year.

The report was presented by the Leader. The report detailed achievements against the Council's three key priorities. A second Equalities conference was scheduled to take place in July which would discuss the Action Plan and action points. He detailed the support which had been provided through Northumberland Communities Together and the major investment programmes with the help of North of Tyne and Government funding throughout the County.

Support for business included free car parking and new car parks, support for better public transport and larger projects such as JDR Cables in Blyth, as well as support for skills training.

On value for money, the budget had protected front line services. The elderly had been looked after and education results were very good. Investment was being made to amenities such as public toilets and parks and open spaces and there would be more investment in the environment going forward. There had been significant investment in leisure centres and new schools and while these were not cheap, they were essential to show that the Council was providing value for money.

He was also very pleased to see the way the new Executive Management Team, led by the Chief Executive, had transformed things and were working well as a team and with members.

Councillor Dickinson referred to comments he had made at the last meeting on the Corporate Plan about the need for KPIs to be included. There was nothing in the Leader's Report to indicate that anything was being measured and he asked when this evidence would be available, and when would the Authority be working on this type of plan.

Councillor Kennedy looked forward to seeing the new public facilities in Hexham which had been long awaited and reiterated the points made by Councillor Dickinson regarding KPIs which would be helpful to assess performance.

Councillor Hill agreed on the need for more detail, particularly on tackling inequalities with respect to social housing.

Councillor Ball asked for more support for Ashington. Whilst people were using foodbanks and could not afford the rent or council tax, she would continue to lobby for this support.

Councillor Scott asked about the investment planned for Waterworld in Prudhoe.

Councillor Dale commented that the draft Statement of Accounts showed that 62% of KPIs were showing red. She felt it was important that this information be included in the Corporate Plan, although it was available on line.

The Leader responded that Cabinet members would each be giving an annual report to Council. He agreed with Councillor Kennedy's points regarding Hexham and the work which had gone on there, adding that partnership working was very important. He assured members that there would be progress in Ashington and members would be kept involved. Social housing would be discussed at the Equalities conference coming up. KPIs would be published and he hoped to be able to give an update on these at one of the Group Leader meetings. Finally, Cabinet had agreed £1.5m of investment in Waterworld.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

20. REPORT OF THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL

Challenge Board Report

Council was asked to consider and respond to the Challenge Board Report (dated 14th June 2023) which was attached at Appendix 1. The following members of the Challenge Board were present at the meeting: Pat Ritchie (Chair), Mark Edgell, Wallace Sampson, Stephen Houghton and Gillian Marshall.

The Leader introduced the report, highlighting that one of the recommendations from the Caller Report had been to invite in a challenge board to help the Authority deal with the matters which had been raised in the recommendations. Lee Rowley MP, the Minister at DLUHC had recently commended the Authority for the work they had done so far and the Leader's intention was that a peer review should take place.

Regarding the point in the Challenge Board report about female voices struggling to be heard, he found this disappointing. No member should struggle to be heard whether male or female so some work would be done

anonymously to identify where the problem was and how it could be alleviated. The results would be reported to the next Group Leaders meeting and the Group Leaders could then take this forward. He then proposed the report's recommendations, which was seconded by Councillor Reid.

Pat Ritchie thanked the Council for inviting the Challenge Board in and all of those who had engaged so well with the process. Two interim reports had been presented so far and this third report was a stock take report. It was important to focus on the report as a whole, as it contained a lot of detail, and not just on the recommendations. It was the Board's assessment of where the Council was following Caller. A huge amount of progress had been made in a short period of time but there was still a long way to go on an improvement journey that could take quite a while. The most important thing was to consider the work which had been done, and how it was embedded to drive change and improvement.

She drew members' attention to Section 3 of the report which contained a commentary on progress against each of the Caller recommendations. Members needed to be clear on how the changes were embedded in the organisation and how they would impact on the Council going forward through the Corporate Plan and the Code of Conduct.

Paragraphs 3.18 and 3.19 drew out the importance of a clear improvement plan so members could identify progress made against the various actions. Paragraphs 3.23-3.29 dealt with the need to ensure that all members were heard across the Council as a whole and that all members were supported with the right tools to do their jobs.

She encouraged the Authority to continue to be self-critical but also to celebrate success and the three recommendations would support that. She also drew attention to recommendations 5 and 6 and the recommendation that the Authority have a corporate peer challenge before the end of the municipal year. Finally, she thanked the Challenge Board members for their work and expertise.

The Chairman then invited members to ask any questions.

- Councillor Dickinson welcomed that the Council had made a response to the Challenge Board's report. He was concerned that there were still some significant areas of work still to be tackled, notwithstanding the work which had been done so far, including monitoring performance of the Corporate Plan. He was particularly concerned that each report from the Board referenced the need to engage properly. His questions were - did the Challenge Board feel the Council had engaged properly with the process, were the actions the Council had put forward robust enough and did the Challenge Board feel that the Council was ready to be cut free from external scrutiny?
- Councillor Kennedy referred to the conclusions and asked the Challenge Board how much work they felt they still had to do to challenge the Council and he asked what they felt the issues were associated with governance, systems, behaviours, trust and culture.

- Councillor Morphet asked what the ideal corporate peer challenge would involve and what powers it would have to encourage the Council to do better.

Stephen Houghton responded that there was no evidence that the Council hadn't engaged properly with the Challenge Board and everything which had been asked for had been provided. The Challenge Board's work was complete. The covering report on actions went some way to addressing whether the identified actions were enough but there were other areas to be looked at in more detail. The covering report was not the improvement plan, but a summary of the detail. The key would be the Improvement Plan. He felt it would be advantageous to the Council to have some independent oversight of the Improvement Plan going forward.

Regarding the embedding of the culture change, Pat Ritchie commented that it would take time to rebuild trust and confidence through the organisation and the work already started was the means of driving that forward. Things were moving in the right direction and there was lots of evidence of good progress but there was still some way to go, which would take time.

Mark Edgell advised that the corporate peer challenge was a normal piece of support available from the LGA. The team would be comprised of a range of different councils including a leader and chief executive and would hold up a mirror for the Authority to see how things which had been put in place had been successful and a more general health check about priorities, financial sustainability, governance and culture and capacity to improve. The review usually took about four days and would feed back to full Council through a report. An Action Plan in response to this was expected with a follow up after six months to check progress.

The Leader commented that he and the Chief Executive had made the decision to ask for a peer review as he was keen to ensure that the momentum was continued. All Group Leaders would be involved in the preparation for this.

Regarding the robustness of the process, Wallace Sampson confirmed that this had been robust, and there had been engagement, but there was work still to consider as part of the Improvement Plan.

- Councillor Murphy asked the Challenge Board thought they had fulfilled their public sector equality act duty in the way they had produced the report given that they had raised points about women members saying they struggled to be heard. However, no context had been provided for this and no recommendation was made on it. She thanked the Leader for picking up on this point and taking action on it.
- Councillor Hill asked the Board to expand on two points. Firstly, the reference in the report to officers speaking truth to power and the perception by some that the primary officer role was pleasing the Leader and Cabinet, and the reference in the Caller Report to the "climate of fear". Secondly, the reference to Advance Northumberland and "significant risks".

- Councillor Chicken commented it had not been her experience that female councillors were not heard and she asked if there had been any evidence of this or was it just opinion.
- Councillor Dale queried whether the Audit Committee would still be reviewing the Challenge Board's report. Also, since 2017 the County Council's accounts had been qualified because of not providing best value which was a significant challenge for the Authority. Regarding the peer review, she asked if the Challenge Board were making a recommendation that the Council itself take forward the change on behaviour issues which was required and which had been needed for a long time.
- Councillor Grimshaw commented that opposition members still did not feel trusted and asked the Challenge Board whether they felt things had moved on in this area.

In response to some of these points, Pat Ritchie replied that the point about women struggling to be heard had been made in a number of discussions. This had been raised with the Chief Executive and it was important for the Council to reflect on it. As she understood it, the equalities duty sat with the Council so it was for the Council to decide how to respond. On governance and audit, the Board had flagged up in the report the role that audit could potentially play and she recommended that some consideration be given to that. This also linked to the recommendations on change and oversight of change, and where that sat was for the Council to decide upon. On the point about Advance, a lot of the changes had happened before the Board came in but the Council needed to ensure that the reforms around the shareholder function were done in a robust way. The Board had not picked up on a climate of fear, but one where the organisation was going through change and there was need to ensure that voices were heard as part of that.

Regarding the point of no recommendation on voices not being heard, Mark Edgell responded that this was a good challenge back to the Board but it was clear that the Council had heard this message and further work was the correct next step. There was no evidence that the Council was not up to meeting the challenges moving forward but the Council needed to draw all of its improvement plans together into one place, there needed to be some ongoing, cross party and preferably independent oversight of progress and the Council should open itself up to periodic, external challenge.

On the point about speaking truth to power, Wallace Sampson commented that the Board had felt there was an important role for officers to play in this and that they had the confidence to be able to do so. Officers needed to understand that they had a role to support the Administration but also serve the whole Council.

- Councillor Dickinson referred to the point about people having a voice and sometimes feeling intimidated in meetings. He felt members worked quite well but if there were issues then these needed to be addressed. He was disappointed with the Council's response and would have liked to have seen a much more robust set of actions and consultation on those actions. His Group therefore would not be able to support the recommendations without more detail.

- Councillor Kennedy agreed with these points. The Council was at a starting point and there was still a long way to go before culture was changed.
- Councillor Reid felt things had improved in the last 7-8 months and relationships were better. He felt officers were able to speak truth to power and do their jobs properly. He was content that the Council was at the point where it should accept the recommendations and move on. Councils worked because of relationships and these could not be regulated. If any member felt they could not speak up in front of a particular person, then they should raise it with them.
- Councillor Morphet commented that his Group were grateful for the Challenge Board's help and would support the recommendations.
- Councillor Castle commented that things were now improving in Council meetings. He understood it was the opposition's role to hold the Administration to account but there needed to be a sense of common purpose for residents. The Council as a body should operate with common cause and he believed that it was now going in the right direction. "Huge and rapid progress" was an important statement and the process of improvement would not end. He was disappointed that Labour could not support the report because it was the right way to go and he commended all members for contributing to the progress which had been made.
- Councillor Ball thanked the Challenge Board for their work and was disappointed that they would not be part of the next stage of the journey because behaviour and culture change would take time, and she felt this would come about more quickly if the scrutiny was maintained. She looked forward to seeing improvement through KPIs and how staff would be positively impacted by the changes.
- Councillor Renner Thompson reassured members that the Labour shadow portfolio holder for children's services received the same information on KPIs as he did and these would be available on the Council's website very soon.
- Councillor Oliver felt the Council was much more focussed on delivery for residents and was a happier place to be. The report was excellent and he welcomed the emphasis on individual responsibility but would have liked to have seen a little more on accountability. He welcomed the Action Plan report coming to Audit Committee and the plan for a peer review. He thanked the Leader and other Group Leaders and the members of the Challenge Board for their work, which had made a difference.
- Councillor Ezhilchelvan felt the Council had now turned a page and that it should be able to be self-managing without the need for external oversight. He commended the Leader for initiating the governance review. Regarding the comments which had been made about female members being heard, he was not concerned about this and felt each comment needed to be taken in context. In his opinion, the Challenge Board had been extremely inclusive in its workings.
- Councillor J. Watson thanked the Board for highlighting these issues to be addressed. He referred to a comment about the robustness in relation to Advance Northumberland. Having been the Chair for 18 months with everything that entailed and all of the in depth work which had been done, he was disappointed at the suggestion that there were still things wrong and that the achievements of the company had not been recognised.
- Councillor Ferguson felt the recommendations in para 4.7 were vague and open ended. This was not a criticism but showed that there was still a long

way to go. The Council needed to take ownership of its improvement and he felt asking the Challenge Board to stay would prevent that happening.

- Councillor Hill commented that things had definitely improved and the Leader had skilfully managed a difficult situation within the Council. However, she was not comfortable about some things which she felt had been covered up. Regarding female members not being heard, she felt it was not so much that, as being heard without being shouted at or disrespected. A pattern of this negative behaviour had developed, though it had got better recently.
- Councillor Grimshaw agreed with these comments. She had been in meetings where female members had been treated with a great deal of disrespect and criticism. She welcomed the improvement which had been made and hoped that it would continue.
- Councillor Wearmouth thanked the Challenge Board. In response to some of the points which had been raised, he commented that it was the County Council part of Advance governance which needed work not Advance itself. Regarding voices being heard, he could relate to this and appreciated the Leader's comments on work to be done. It was important to learn how members wanted to engage as not everyone wanted to stand up in the Council Chamber and some of this would be picked up in the changes in Scrutiny. Speaking truth to power and officers' feedback was also an important issue. His own approach was to ask for feedback from officers. One issue which had been raised with him was members going round officers when they did not like an answer and he encouraged members to think how this could be changed. There was work still to be done on changing culture but this would take time.

The Leader noted the views which had been expressed. He was content that the Council was moving in the right direction and that members would work together to get where they needed to be.

On the report's recommendations being put to the vote there voted FOR: 36; AGAINST: 21; ABSTENTIONS: 2.

It was therefore **RESOLVED** that:-

- (a) the Challenge Board report as attached at Appendix 1 be noted and received;
- (b) the Challenge Board Recommendations be noted and received;
- (c) the Council's responses to each of the Recommendations as set out in paragraph 5.10 of the report be approved;
- (d) the work of the Challenge Board is now complete and that their work with the Council will conclude; and
- (e) the Chair and all Challenge Board members be thanked for their support, advice and guidance during the past year.

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Chair of the County Council

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Duly Authorised Officer