

NORTHUMBERLAND COUNTY COUNCIL

At a meeting of the **Northumberland County Council** held on Wednesday 6 September 2023 at County Hall, Morpeth at 3.00 pm.

PRESENT

Councillor B. Flux (Chairman in the Chair)

MEMBERS

Ball, C.	Mather, M.
Bawn, D.	Morphet, N.
Beynon, J.	Murphy, M.
Bowman, L.	Nisbet, K.
Carr, D.	Oliver, N.
Castle, G.	Parry, K.
Cessford, T.	Pattison, W.
Chicken, E.	Reid, J.
Dale, P.A.M.	Renner-Thompson, G.
Daley, W.	Richardson, M.
Darwin, L.	Riddle, J.R.
Dickinson, S.	Robinson, M.
Dodd, R.	Sanderson, H.G.H.
Dunbar, C.	Scott, A.
Ezhilchelvan, P.	Seymour, C.
Ferguson, D.	Sharp, A.
Foster, J.	Simpson, E.
Gallacher, B.	Stewart, G.
Grimshaw, L.	Swinbank, M.
Hardy, C.R.	Swinburn, M.
Horncastle, C.	Taylor, C.
Humphrey, 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.
Lee, S.	

OFFICERS

Bradley, N.	Executive Director – Adults, Ageing and Wellbeing
Hadfield, K.	Democratic and Electoral Services Manager
Hunter, P.	Director of Strategy and Communications
Kingham, A.	Executive Director – Children and Young People

Masson, N.	Deputy Monitoring Officer
McNeil, J.	Deputy Chief Fire Officer
Neilson, S.	Executive Director, Place and Regeneration
Paterson, Dr H.	Chief Executive
O'Neill, G.	Executive Director for Public Health, Inequalities and Stronger Communities
Willis, J.	Executive Director for Resources & Transformation (S151)

Six members of the press and public were present.

21. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillors Bridgett, Cartie, Clark, Dunn, Fairless-Aitken, Hill, Ploszaj, Purvis and Towns.

22. MINUTES

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting of County Council held on Wednesday 14 June 2023, be confirmed as a true record.

23. ANNOUNCEMENTS by the Chair, Leader, Member of the Cabinet, Chair of an Overview and Scrutiny Committee or Head of Paid Service.

The Chair reported that a number of people connected with Northumberland had received honours in HM the King's Birthday Honours as follows:-

Professor Derek Alderson, Chair, Centre for Perioperative (PERI – OPERATIVE) Care and lately President, Royal College of Surgeons of England. For services to Surgery (CBE)

Dr Alice Karen Good, Founder, Sunflower Sisters. For services to Ukrainian Refugees (MBE).

Reverend Fiona Jean Sample, Founder and Chief Executive Officer, The Oswin Project. For services to the Rehabilitation of Offenders. (MBE).

Donna Marie Swan, Founder, Calmer Therapy. For services to Children with Special Educational Needs and their families in North East England (MBE).

Vikki Ewen, For services to the community in Coquetdale, Morpeth, Northumberland. (BEM).

He also reported with sadness the recent death of former County Councillor Anne Patterson who had passed away on 12 June 2023. Anne had represented the Morpeth South Ward from 1993 to 2001 and he invited Council to join him in observing a minute's silence in her memory.

The Leader also made some announcements. Firstly, he congratulated all young people across the county for their tremendous exam results during this summer. Nearly 5000 learners had completed Year 11 and 13 studies with external examinations this year.

Overall, the Northumberland provisional results were in line with a return to the pre pandemic outcomes from 2019 (the last year of similar exam procedures) which indicated that Northumberland continued to bounce back.

The quality of education in Northumberland had never been higher according to Ofsted, with 94% of schools now graded good or better. This placed the Authority joint 2nd in the North East, 4% higher than the North East average and 6% higher than the national average, and he praised the efforts of young people, teachers and Headteachers, parents and the Education Team working closely with Councillor Renner Thompson.

He referred to the Government announcement the previous day regarding the postponement of the dualling of the A1. This was very disappointing.

This was also the first meeting of Council since Councillor Veronica Jones re-joined the Council's Cabinet. Councillor Jones would bring a wealth of experience, calmness, and common sense to the Improving Public Health and Wellbeing, and he thanked Councillor Ferguson for his work on the portfolio.

The Leader also welcomed the new Chief Fire Officer, Graeme Binning. Graeme had spent recent months working with Paul Hedley on his handover as Paul approached his well-earned retirement.

A forward programme of policy conferences had been developed for the rest of the year which would be shared with all members. These had proved a real success and a great opportunity to input into policy development. He advised members that there would be a session on corporate parenting before the next meeting of Council in November.

24. PUBLIC QUESTIONS

No public questions had been received.

25. MEMBER QUESTIONS

Question 1 from Councillor Carr to the Leader

I would like to express my thanks to the Council after the recent refurbishment of Blyth's Iconic Beach Huts in my ward. The rejuvenation has breathed new life into what I consider to be Blyth's finest asset. But I would like to see the same effort put in to refresh the Beach Promenade as well. It's an incredibly popular spot for tourism in Northumberland and it needs care and attention. So, I would like to ask if the Council can confirm whether there are any investment plans for Blyth's beach promenade? One that would be on par with the private development opposite.

The Leader agreed that Blyth beach was a great asset for the County and the beach huts were of great value, which was why the Administration had invested in their refurbishment. There would be a project starting soon to revitalise the beach area and the Council was also working with Ridley Park volunteers and on the Isabella Heap Country Park. More of these initiatives would come forward when the new Environment policy was launched.

Councillor Carr welcomed this news and looked forward to any progress made with the beach promenade.

Question 2 from Councillor Hill to the Leader

Councillor Hill had submitted apologies so a written response would be made.

Question 3 from Councillor Taylor to the Leader (for Councillor Ploszaj)

With the ongoing development of Bedlington's Town Centre, could you please outline NCC's plans for the next phase once the four shops and 6 apartments are complete?

The Leader replied that the remaining sites were being actively marketed. Work had been continuing with stakeholders on a Place Plan for the town which would be brought forward soon. The Council was also working with Advance Northumberland and partners to support the development of projects which built on current investments underway, including the reopening of the train station as part of the Northumberland Line.

The Council had secured Government Levelling up Funds to provide new and upgraded active travel infrastructure in Bedlington which would enhance the east to west link across the town. This scheme will connect the western extent of Bedlington, key residential and employment areas with the proposed Northumberland Line train station and the eastern coastal area. Additional benefits to this route included a connection towards schools across the town to facilitate active travel. The estimated cost of this scheme was £7,716,000.

There were also several capital investment schemes in development within the Council's Parks Enhancement Programme. These included improvements to the café and seating areas and the provision of a 'bouldering course' to improve the visitor experience and offer at Plessey Woods Country Park. Approval had also been given to the creation of a QEII Memorial rose garden. He confirmed the Administration was committed to Bedlington and focussed on projects which would enhance the town.

Councillor Taylor appreciated the work which was going on behind the scenes. She felt there was a need to get information out to the public about what was happening with Borderlands. The Leader suggested that he could attend a public meeting in Bedlington in furtherance of this if necessary.

Question 4 from Councillor Humphrey to Councillor Stewart

On Newsham Farm Estate there are two blocks of privately owned flats locally known as Holystone Flats. 10 years or so they have been a hub for anti-social behaviour causing disturbance, distress and annoyance to the residents who live in the vicinity of the flats at all times of day and nights. Various efforts have

been made to stop this behaviour which will reduce, then return to a higher level after action has been taken. Would Cllr Stewart assure me that a sustained effort will be put in to stop the perpetrators of the nuisance and take the landlords to task who turn a blind eye to the behaviour being carried out in their properties?

Councillor Stewart responded that the issue was known to the Community Safety Team. They did not receive a high level of complaints from residents on this though it was understood that the Police did receive higher levels.

The Team was currently dealing with individual issues as they arose in partnership with other agencies using the powers available. These included the power to close individual flats should the evidence support such action. At present the team had one 'open case'.

Broader powers did exist, though these required clear data and evidence to support their use. Given the concerns which had been highlighted, he would arrange a multi-agency meeting to review the current situation and report back on proposed next steps and he would update the councillor on that.

Councillor Humphrey asked if Councillor Stewart would meet with him in Newsham so he could see the problem and other issues of concern. Councillor Stewart agreed to this and added that he would shortly be announcing some funding from the Government to combat anti-social behaviour. The Safer Northumberland Partnership was also being revamped to make it more fit for the future. He was running a campaign currently for the larger social housing providers to make them take action where necessary

Question 5 from Councillor A. Watson to Councillor Riddle

Now that we know there are likely to be several road disruptions in Blyth for the Northumberland line and relief road surveys, can the Leader ensure timely information is shared with members before the public, and can we make sure all options are explored to reduce disruption, including the opening of the old Laverock road with a reduced speed limit and a full assessment of timescales for emergency vehicles to the areas affected?

Councillor Riddle responded that it was great to see the Northumberland Line project being delivered on the ground and also progress on the preparations for the Blyth Relief Road. These projects would ultimately benefit thousands of people, from local residents in Blyth to those who travelled to work or visit the town. They were an investment for current and future generations.

They would require complex construction works which inevitably would affect the highway network in the short term. The Northumberland Line project required the construction of two new roundabouts on the existing A1061 South Newsham Road which would connect to the new bridge over the railway line which replaced the level crossing.

Consideration of the traffic management arrangement for the works were currently ongoing, including whether some elements of the work could best be achieved through the use of temporary traffic lights or through the use of a one

way system. Officers were exploring all options to minimise disruption. Following further discussion with utility companies and contractors about the options, he would update members and the public about the proposed traffic management in advance of any works.

Regarding the suggestion about the opening of the old Laverock Hall Road bus only route to all traffic during the works, this would be considered. However, the use of the bus link by traffic before the camera enforcement was installed had caused real road safety concerns for residents, leading to a major campaign to improve its enforcement as 'bus only'. So, increased road safety risks would need to be carefully considered. He was aware that the length of the traffic order had caused concerns but this was a legal document to cover all eventualities.

Councillor Watson acknowledged that the order had not meant to be issued without the supporting context. She welcomed the Northumberland Line and the benefits it would bring but reminded members that there was still a cost of living crisis and the works would affect some people more than others. She asked that all of the closures were looked at through an inequalities lens so the financial effect of the diversions could be fully appreciated.

Councillor Riddle responded that this would be taken into account. There were lots of options to be considered and local members would be kept updated.

Question 6 from Councillor Ball to Councillor Stewart

Motorbike, E bikes and E scooters disorder is a complaint many councillors have in their inbox on a weekly basis. What is the plan to tackle the issues many residents are facing?

Councillor Stewart responded that this was a challenge across Northumberland and tackling it was not straightforward. The Police had the power to seize and uplift bikes but they were not permitted to pursue the bikes and scooters.

There had been some successes - the Police used drones to carry out an operation where a number of bikes/scooters were seized in the North of the County, and this could be considered across Northumberland by each Neighbourhood Policing Team.

Other measures were being explored, such as plain clothes Police operations and working with other services within the Council to see how the Council could use design to discourage use of bikes or naturally slow them down making it possible for Police to seize vehicles.

Identifying where bikes/scooters are being stored was also important, therefore Crimestoppers were currently launching a campaign around anonymous reporting in the Hirst area of Ashington. Publicity around this launch would actively encourage the reporting of bike disorder.

Councillor Ball commented that she was seeking clarification on what the County Council's response was, not the Police, as she felt the Council did have a role to play and had some responsibility. She asked what the Community Safety Team were going to do to tackle the issue for residents.

Councillor Stewart agreed this was a major issue in many towns across the county. The Council was working with the Safer Northumberland Partnership and he would raise it at a forthcoming meeting. Communities had a role to play in tackling this issue and more information was needed from the public, which would be treated in confidence.

26. REPORT OF THE CABINET MEMBER FOR IMPROVING OUR ROADS AND HIGHWAYS

Annual Portfolio Report – Improving our Roads and Highways

The Annual Report from the Cabinet Member for Improving our Roads and Highways contained issues that set the context for delivery of the Portfolio. It highlighted achievements over the past year and outlined the areas of focus for the coming year.

The Chair advised members that he would be limited members to ten minutes for questions and one question per member on the report.

Councillor Riddle introduced his report which covered work for the past year. During this year, there had been considerable inflationary pressures but the service had tried to innovate and secure value for money as much as possible. The Local Transport Plan programme totalled £23.4m and there had been some challenges to deal with in the past year. Much of the investment was steered by the Transport Asset Management Plan and that had been refreshed this year. Some new back office systems had also been implemented. He highlighted some of the other key points of the report and thanked all of the staff for their hard work.

Councillor Dickinson welcomed the report. He asked whether future portfolio holder reports would detail some of the challenges which the services had faced as staff had done a tremendous job to deliver what they had with limited resources. He asked whether the economic impact work of dualling the A1 which had been done some time ago needed to be refreshed, bearing in mind the recent Government announcement about a further delay to the dualling of the A1.

The Leader responded that this matter was not in the report but the Council would work together to maintain the campaign and to encourage the DoT to spend as much money as other Government departments had done in Northumberland to ensure the work would begin next year.

Councillor Kennedy felt the A1 needed to feature in the report as part of the strategic vision for the County. There was much to celebrate in the Portfolio Holder's report but he asked if the A1 could feature in a Local Transport Plan because of the significance of this route through the County.

The Leader responded that this was not possible because the A1 was not the responsibility of the County Council. The role for the Council was to remain positive, to work together and to demonstrate to Government that the significant funding coming into the Council should also be spread across the A1.

Councillor Reid asked that future reports include the challenges within the portfolio. Councillor Riddle commented that the report reflected the good work which had gone on in the service and there were other avenues available to raise the challenges. The purpose of the report was to inform members about achievements and he was proud of it.

Councillor Swinburn welcomed the FixMyStreet initiative which provided a direct link for both members and residents to report issues. He asked if there would be some performance data available in the future. Councillor Riddle replied that there would and acknowledged that there had been some teething problems, but the reporting back was getting much better after the initial spike of reports.

Councillor Foster commented on the lack of cycleways in her ward and the designated cyclist/pedestrian routes were leading to some cyclists believing they could cycle on the path. This was causing impacts with pedestrians and sometimes conflict. She asked what would be done to make cyclists aware that they couldn't cycle on every path and how could pedestrians be kept safe.

Councillor Riddle responded that more emphasis would have to be put on cycleways as part of the next budget round. There could be a need for refreshed marking and the Cycling and Walking Board had a role to play in educating the public.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

27. CORPORATE SERVICES AND ECONOMIC GROWTH OSC – INTERIM REPORT TO COUNCIL

Council was asked to receive a report from the Chair of the Corporate Services and Economic Growth OSC. The report was presented by Councillor Bawn. This was part of the new reporting arrangements from Scrutiny to Council.

The three main issues which would be the focus of the Committee's attention in the coming months were regeneration, BEST delivery and the capital programme. Regular updates were also now provided from Advance Northumberland.

He highlighted some of the areas of work which the Committee had looked at in detail.

Councillor Dickinson asked whether, given the timetable of meetings for the Committee and the current financial challenges, the Chair felt the Committee

was meeting enough. Councillor Bawn responded that there was an annual budget meeting and regular financial performance reports were received. Additional meetings were called as necessary.

Councillor Kennedy felt more detail was needed on debt recovery to explain the size of the problem. Councillor Bawn responded that the benchmarking on debt recovery showed that the Authority was performing well and that there was not a specific problem. Detailed figures could be provided.

Councillor Reid asked the Scrutiny Chair whether he felt this part of the Scrutiny process served any purpose in terms of the weight given to recommendations by Cabinet. Councillor Bawn responded that the Administration had embarked on a review of Scrutiny to make it work in a more effective way and to get away from the pre-Scrutiny process. The revised way of working allowed Scrutiny to both help frame policy at an earlier stage and to review what decisions had been made and how they had worked.

Councillor Dale felt more work needed to be done to reduce the large number of current vacancies which was affecting service delivery, particularly in council tax. Councillor Bawn replied that work continued to monitor vacancies. If there was a specific issue, this could be raised with the S151 Officer or himself.

Councillor Wallace commented that it was three years ago that the announcement had been made about British Volt coming to Cambois. He asked when he would be informed about work actually coming to the site, so he could answer residents' questions.

Councillor Bawn responded that things were going on but he wasn't able to say when there would be a resolution to everything. He understood it was frustrating, but this was in the hands of others. As soon as there was something to report, this would come to Committee.

Councillor Wilczek asked why £250,000 was not being spent in the parks and green spaces programme. There was a great need for basic investment in play parks and the country park in her ward by the Council so why was £250,000 unspent?

Councillor Bawn replied that the actual parks were an issue for Communities and Place OSC but regarding the finance, there had been delays with contractors which meant that the budget hadn't yet been spent. The position would be monitored and the budget would be used.

28. REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF LAW AND CORPORATE GOVERNANCE AND MONITORING OFFICER

Political Proportionality

Council was asked to determine the political proportionality of the registered political groups on the Council and to allocate seats on committees in

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

The report's recommendations were proposed by Councillor Wearmouth and seconded by Councillor Reid.

RESOLVED that:

(a) Council notes that following the notification by the Labour and Independent Group Leaders of changes to the number in the Labour and Independent groups, the total number of councillors in each political group on the County Council is now Conservative 33, Labour 19, Independent 8, Liberal Democrat 4, Green 2 and 1 un-grouped member;

(b) Council confirms that the political proportionality of the Groups is as follows: Conservative 49.25%, Labour 28.36%, Independent 11.94%, Liberal Democrat 5.97%, Green 2.99% and un-grouped 1.49%;

(c) Council agrees to continue to use the method for determining allocations to Committees as agreed by Full Council at its meeting of 30 March 2022;

(d) Council approves the provisions of Appendix 1 which sets out the proportional allocation of places on committees in accordance with the proportionality approved above;

(e) Council agrees the allocation of seats to Northumberland County principal/decision making Committees set out in Appendix 2 to this report;

(f) Council agrees allocations to working groups set out in Appendix 3 to this report; and

(g) Council authorises the Director of Law and Corporate Governance, in consultation with the Group Leaders, to give effect to the wishes of the Group Leaders to fill the committee places allocated to their respective Groups in accordance with the provisions of Sections 15 and 16 of the Local Government and Housing Act 1989.

29. REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF LAW AND CORPORATE GOVERNANCE AND MONITORING OFFICER

Establishment of the Rights of Way Committee and Other Governance Matters

Council was asked:

1. To make arrangements for the discharge of the non-executive functions of the County Council through the appointment of the Rights of Way Committee, following the LAC Review undertaken earlier this year and agreed by Council in June, to appoint Members to that committee in accordance with

the proportionality of the Council, including the Chair and Vice Chair, and to agree its terms of reference.

2. To receive the name of the Cabinet Member for Improving Public Health and Wellbeing.

3. To appoint a number of Chair and Vice Chair places on Committees.

4. To nominate members to the outside bodies listed in paragraph 5.3.

Councillor Dale asked a question about whether Councillor Jones should be Chair, or Vice Chair of the Inequalities Working Group, as the report indicated. It was confirmed that Council was being asked to appoint her as **Chair**.

The report's recommendations, as amended above, were moved by Councillor Bawn and seconded by Councillor Dale.

RESOLVED that:-

(a) a Rights of Way Committee be established, with the size and terms of reference as detailed in paragraph 5.1 of the report, and Councillor Hutchinson and Councillor Wallace be elected Chair and Vice Chair respectively;

(b) the appointment of Councillor Jones as Cabinet Member for Improving Public Health and Wellbeing by the Leader be noted;

(c) the following members be elected to the positions detailed below:

Councillor Richard Dodd as Chair of Health and Wellbeing OSC

Councillor Eve Chicken as Vice Chair of FACS OSC

Councillor Catherine Seymour as Vice Chair of Licensing/Licensing and Regulatory Committees

Councillor Anna Watson as Vice Chair of the Local Plan Working Group

Councillor Veronica Jones as Chair of the Inequalities Working Group.

(d) the following nominations to outside bodies be made:-

Rural Services Network – G. Sanderson, J. Riddle (sub)

Northumberland Coast AONB – L. Bowman to replace M. Murphy

North East Combined Authority – L. Grimshaw to replace M. Murphy and A. Wallace to replace L. Grimshaw as the sub; and

(e) the Director of Law and Corporate Governance be authorised, in consultation with the appropriate Group Leader(s), to make any changes to memberships of the main outside bodies/ joint bodies approved by Council, which may become necessary during the course of 2023/24.

30. REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF LAW AND CORPORATE GOVERNANCE AND MONITORING OFFICER

Report of the Independent Remuneration Panel

Council was asked to consider the report of the Independent Remuneration Panel, and to decide if any or all of its recommendations should be adopted.

Councillor Morphet asked about recommendations 10 and 11 in the report which seemed to duplicate other recommendations in the report. The Deputy Monitoring Officer advised that they were slightly separate and flowed from the report and should be retained.

Councillor Dale referred to paragraph 6.7 of the report regarding the link to the staff pay and asked if the Deputy Monitoring Officer could recommend to the IRP that this be continued. The DMO replied that this was not within his power. The IRP made recommendations to Council, which then made decisions on those recommendations. Councillor Wearmouth added that the IRP would consult on any future changes with all members.

Councillor Dickinson asked whether there was a timescale for a full review. The DMO suggested that it was likely to be time for the next financial year.

The Leader proposed the report’s recommendations, which was seconded by Councillor J. Watson.

Councillor Dickinson commented that he had found the process with the IRP very professional and robust and that it was important that whilst members could not make recommendations to the IRP, they were able to express their views.

Councillor Wearmouth thanked the Chair and the Panel for their work.

RESOLVED that:-

- (a) the recommendations of the Independent Remuneration Panel be adopted, and the Panel be commissioned to conduct a Full Review of the Members Allowance Scheme; and
- (b) the Constitution of the Council be updated with a revised Member’s Allowance Scheme to reflect any necessary changes approved by Council.

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Chair of the County Council

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Duly Authorised Officer