

## **NORTHUMBERLAND COUNTY COUNCIL**

At a meeting of the **Northumberland County Council** held on Wednesday 17 January 2024 at County Hall, Morpeth at 2.00 pm.

### **PRESENT**

Councillor B. Flux (Chairman in the Chair)

### **MEMBERS**

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

### **OFFICERS**

Binning, G.	Chief Fire Officer
Bradley, N.	Executive Director – Adults, Ageing and Wellbeing
Denyer, L.	Deputy Monitoring Officer
Gerrard, S.	Director of Law and Corporate Governance (MO)
Hadfield, K.	Democratic Services Manager
Hunter, P.	Assistant Chief Executive
Jones, P.	Director of Environment and

Kingham, A.	Transport Executive Director – Children and Young People
Masson, N. O'Neill, G.	Deputy Monitoring Officer Executive Director - Public Health, Inequalities, and Stronger Communities
Paterson, Dr H. Reiter, G.	Chief Executive Director of Children, Young People and Families
Willis, J.	Executive Director for Resources & Transformation (S151)

One Honorary Alderman was present

#### **45. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies were received from Councillors Ball, Bridgett, Dale, Dunbar, Ezhilchelvan, Foster, Gallacher, Humphrey, and Watson.

#### **46. MINUTES**

**RESOLVED** that the minutes of the meeting of County Council held on Wednesday, 1 November 2023, be confirmed as a true record.

#### **47. DISCLOSURES OF MEMBERS INTERESTS**

With regard to item 15 on the agenda (Motion), Councillor Dodd advised that he had taken advice on this matter having paid into the LGPS and as the Council's representative on the TWPF Committee. He did not have to declare a formal interest and would take part in the debate in this matter, but not vote. The Monitoring Officer confirmed to members who had paid into the LGPS that they were not precluded from taking part in the debate.

#### **48. 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 the following people, particularly connected with Northumberland received honours in HM the King's New Years Honours list:-

##### **Officers of the Order of the British Empire (OBE)**

Mr Brian Andrew Palmer, Stocksfield - Founder and Chief Executive, Tharsus Group Limited, for services to manufacturing and skills.

Michelle Southern, Blyth - Founder and Director, Street Paws, for services to Homeless People and their Pets.

### **Members of the Order of the British Empire (MBE)**

Mr Patrick Chapman, Hexham - for services to the Creative Industries and to Higher Education.

Dr Alice Elizabeth Ellis, Morpeth - Consultant Urologist, South Tyneside and Sunderland NHS Foundation Trust, for services to the NHS.

Gwyneth Kathleen McKenzie, Riding Mill - Team District Commissioner, Hadrian District, Scout Association, for services to Young People and to the community in Northumberland, North Tyneside and Newcastle upon Tyne.

Mr Maurice Scott Weightman, Berwick-upon-Tweed - Founding Chair and Trustee, Berwick Youth Project, for services to young people in Berwick-upon-Tweed. Mr Weightman was also a former LD Group Leader for NCC.

### **Members of the British Empire Medal (BEM)**

Mr Ronald Wright, Red Row - Fleet Technical Officer, Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service, for public service.

The Leader welcomed the Peer Review members present and wished all members a happy new year. He reported to members that the Order had been laid in Parliament to establish the Mayoral Combined Authority and things were progressing well. The timetable for the opening of the Northumberland Line had now been agreed and work had begun on the new school build in Seaton Delaval. He was also pleased to report that the new Environment and Climate Fund was already over subscribed, with funding awarded to 17 organisations for projects within their communities.

Finally, he was delighted to report that the Authority's gold award status by the Ministry of Defence Armed Forces Covenant Employer Recognition Scheme had just been revalidated for a further five years. The scheme rewarded and recognised UK employers and organisations which showed outstanding support to the armed forces community. He presented the award to Councillor Jeff Watson in his role as Armed Forces Champion and thanked all those involved in providing this excellent support, including Councillor Gordon Castle and Jackie Roll.

## **49. PUBLIC QUESTIONS**

No public questions had been received.

## **50. MEMBER QUESTIONS**

**Question 1 from Councillor Fairless Aitken to Councillor Ploszaj**

In Hexham our HSHAZ - Heritage Scheme, directed and funded by NCC, is in the final stages of completion - and it's looking fabulous – thank you, our High Street is coming alive again.

However, there is one glaring omission from this - the old bus station - which has been empty and sitting in a state of disrepair for the last seven years.

During my by-election in December 2021 - £5m was promised for this by our local MP, it is still in the budget and waiting to be spent. The property is currently on the market through owners, Dysart, for £1.5m and residents in the town are desperate for it to be bought back & repurposed. So I am asking here today - would it be possible to purchase the bus station and fully complete the High Street Heritage Action Zone? Or is this not 'best value' for our town?

Councillor Ploszaj replied that he was also very keen that the former bus station site was progressed. The site was not owned by the County Council but regular meetings were held with the site owners, Dysart about the bus station site and he understood there was interest in a potential development of the site. When a planning application was submitted, it would be publicised and a presentation given to the Town Council. He agreed to keep Councillor Fairless Aitken and other local members updated with any progress. At the moment, the price for the site was beyond the independent valuation which had been received.

Councillor Fairless Aitken asked whether it would be possible, in order to progress matters, to serve a Section 215 on the site frontage which was an eyesore. Councillor Ploszaj advised that he would need to discuss this with the Head of Planning and provide a written response.

## **Question 2 from Councillor Hill to Councillor Pattison**

What is your honest assessment of the availability and effectiveness of mental health support services in the Berwick area ?

Councillor Pattison replied that one in four people in the UK had experienced mental health issues in the last year, so the question was an important one. The assessment was that there was a strong offer of mental health support in Berwick that measured up well compared to provision across the County and the region.

The regional NHS Mental Health Trust (CNTW) had a community treatment team based in Berwick town centre that included Consultant Psychiatry, Community Psychiatric Nursing support and psychology. The team worked closely with GP services and the adult social care north mental health team providing a multi-disciplinary approach to assess mental health care needs and consider appropriate interventions or therapies for support.

They also had a team that supported adults who experienced difficulties related to trauma. Additionally, NHS trailblazers was an excellent website detailing mental health support across Northumberland.

Where appropriate, the Council commissioned domiciliary care, supported living and residential care services in the Berwick area that were used by people with mental health conditions.

She also referred to the work of the voluntary sector, offering mental health support including services such as the Northumberland Recovery College, neurodivergent and dementia groups as well as support for younger people aged 13 to 25 through the Berwick Youth Project. This was in addition to mental health support options available to schools.

Whilst she felt there was a good range of support available, there was always capacity to improve the offer with partners and she welcomed any feedback members might have. This could be something the Health and Wellbeing Overview and Scrutiny Committee could look into with partners.

Councillor Hill responded that having heard concerns from residents, she could not share this optimistic view. She asked if Councillor Pattison would come to Berwick to meet with herself and residents to discuss these concerns further. Councillor Pattison agreed to do this with the Executive Director. She then referred to the new Safe Haven opening in Ashington which members may not have been aware of. This included a virtual waiting room where people could directly access a mental health professional.

### **Question 3 from Councillor Wallace to Councillor Horncastle**

Not only are locals unable in many cases to find homes along the Northumberland coastline due to the explosion of second homes, those who are fortunate to live there must have been extremely worried about additional coastal erosion happening during recent storms.

Does the Cabinet Member not believe the County Council should meet with its partners such as the Crown, National Trust, AONB, NIFCA and the Environment Agency? Can we be seen to take the lead in co-ordinating the protection of our communities living on the coastline, ensuring resident's homes and jobs are safe, by looking at the various solutions to the eternal problem of coastal erosion and share those solutions with our resident.

Councillor Horncastle agreed that coastal erosion was a key issue nationally for coastal communities. In Northumberland, the Council's Flood and Coastal Erosion Risk Management team was an active part of the North East Coastal Group. This group brought together all relevant Councils together with the Environment Agency and other partners to manage coastal erosion issues.

Alongside this, the approach to coastal flooding and erosion was developed and documented through the Northumberland and North Tyneside Shoreline Management Plan which was led jointly by the Environment Agency and Northumberland County Council's Flood and Coastal Erosion Team. The Plan was currently being reviewed and an updated version would be presented to the County Council later this year.

Recent storms along the coast had resulted in visible changes to sand levels along parts of the coast and it was expected that beaches would recharge with sand over time. He was not aware of the recent storms having created any significant erosion risks to homes along the Northumberland coast. However, additional post storm surveys had been commissioned via the North East Coastal Group at locations including Cambois, Lynemouth and Newbiggin so the impact of such events could be understood.

He also mentioned the Council's success in delivering many actions on erosion and securing funding for coastal management schemes, such as the restoration of Seahouses Harbour Pier and protecting and reinforcing the harbour wall at Little Shore in Amble to safeguard homes and businesses.

This was an important issue for coastal communities and he hoped the answer reassured members that this was something the Council treated seriously and was playing a full part in addressing.

Councillor Wallace responded that it did give him some reassurance but it was the public who needed this reassurance the most. This was the first he had learned that coastal erosion was being looked at in the Cambois area. It was clear that damage was being caused by these storms and he welcomed any role he could play. He asked that he be kept informed so he could let residents know what was happening.

Councillor Horncastle responded that the County Council and other agencies undertook exercises on a regional basis so could take appropriate action when such incidents occurred. Regarding the sand issue, he was informed that this would recharge itself. Modelling was done regularly so if there was any risk to communities, they would be informed.

#### **Question 4 from Councillor Nisbet to Councillor Riddle**

The home zone in Croft ward in Blyth has been neglected for the last 5yrs with me allocating small schemes to patch it up. For 6yrs I have placed it on the LTP and its been knocked back over and over. What other routes exist to get this work done for residents?

Councillor Riddle thanked Councillor Nisbet for her question but could not agree that the Home Zone at Croft had been neglected. The area had continued to receive all the appropriate routine and regular maintenance services including sweeping, weed spraying, grass cutting, highway inspection and repair.

The Council had to prioritise the use of its LTP funding across the whole highway network. Officers had considered additional requests that had been put forward for improvements and additional maintenance over time relative to other needs elsewhere. This year over £70,000 had been spent on a resurfacing scheme for Maddison Street and patching repairs had been carried out to parts of Disraeli Street and Durban Street. The Council was also taking forward housing renewal and improving neighbourhoods as part of the £90m Blyth Town Investment Plan. This would include street works and public realm.

Councillor Nisbet responded that it was the roads which were the issue. She had spent a large part of her member small schemes funding on the works at Durban and Disraeli Streets. Traffic was now much heavier on these streets as well as Wright Street and something needed to be done.

Councillor Riddle replied that he would come and visit with an officer but reassured Councillor Nisbet that everything was being done which could be.

## **Question 5 from Councillor Robinson to Councillor Horncastle**

There is a very important part of Bedlington heritage missing, namely the Hartford Hall gates. These gates have a Grade II\* listing by English Heritage and I believe there are only two sets in the country that have that recognition, these being one.

I also believe they are now in the possession of this County Council and there was a project talked about some years ago to see them renovated. My question is what is happening to them?

Councillor Horncastle responded that the Hartford Hall Gates were Grade II\* listed structures. They were manufactured at Coalbrookdale for exhibiting at the Vienna Universal Exhibition of 1873, after which they were purchased for Hartford Hall. The gates were removed for repair (without the benefit of Listed Building Consent) in 2004; some repairs were completed but works stalled due to escalating costs. The Estate went into administration in 2009 and in 2014 the workshop which held the gates refused to store them any longer. The Council was unable to find another organisation able to take them on in their current condition so, as a last resort, had taken custody of them whilst a solution was found.

Historic England funded a condition report which, at the time (2013) estimated repair costs of c£390,000, annual maintenance costs of £2,550 and maintenance repainting costs of £25,000 every 15 years. These figures would now be significantly higher.

Since then, Historic England had funded the cleaning, recording and stable packaging of the gates for long term storage and they were now securely stored in a Council depot. Discussions regarding the possibility of a museum taking them into their collection stalled whilst legal ownership of the gates was established.

This had been a complex and lengthy process as the gates went first to Bona Vacantia and then to Crown Estates, who confirmed they would not act as owner. At the moment, the gates were securely packaged and stored and the Council was starting to re-open discussions with the museum.

Councillor Robinson asked whether it would be possible to get a team together to identify some funding to have this work done. These gates were the very best examples of their type and their significance and importance in the region should be celebrated. He urged that some positive action be taken.

Councillor Horncastle understood but reminded members that they did not belong to the Council and any such team would need to be experts in this field. He would discuss the current position with the Head of Planning.

## **51. REPORT OF THE CABINET MEMBER FOR LOOKING AFTER OUR COMMUNITIES**

### **Annual Portfolio Report – Looking after our Communities**

The Annual Report from the Cabinet Member for Looking after our Communities 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.

Councillor Stewart presented the report and detailed the key points for members. There were a number of member comments including:-

- Councillor Dunn welcomed the news of the 16 CCTV cameras which seemed to have been a great success. She suggested they be rolled out further and a proper budget identified for them. She was interested to know what could be done for those areas which were not deemed as “hotspots” including her own ward. She referred to a fly tipping issue which was not on County Council land and which the Council would not get involved with. She did not think this was acceptable and asked what options there were now for action, other than the Parish Council taking responsibility for moving it. Councillor Stewart responded that fly tipping took place everywhere. He agreed that further cameras could be looked at to identify where additional funds could be sourced from. He encouraged Councillor Dunn to make contact if she wasn't getting satisfactory answers to her queries.
- Councillor Morphet referred to the Council response to the avian flu outbreak. Wildlife health impacted on human health and as the prevention of disease was better than cure, he asked that officers look at the possibility of partnering with local and national wildlife organisations on the prevention of disease outbreaks in wildlife. Councillor Stewart agreed to take this forward.
- Councillor Hunter asked whether the Fire Service still did home visits to check smoke alarms as well as the educational visits to schools. Councillor Stewart confirmed this was the case and 91% of visits last year had resulted in a positive outcome. Staff were also going into schools in association with the Prince's Trust.

**RESOLVED** that the report be noted.

## **52. COMMUNITIES AND PLACE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – INTERIM REPORT TO COUNCIL**

Council was asked to receive a report from the Chair of the Communities and Place OSC. The report was presented by Councillor Oliver. He commented on the wide geographic representation of very proactive members on the Committee and he thanked officers and Cabinet members who had come to Committee over the year. He referred to some of the key points, including the new ways in which Scrutiny was now working and the major issues which the Committee had looked at, and he detailed some of the areas of focus for the forthcoming year.

Questions from members included:-

- Councillor Fairless Aitken asked whether there would be a commitment to replacing those trees which had been lost to Ash die back on a like



for like basis as there were quite a few in her ward. Councillor Oliver responded that this could be raised with officers when it came back to Scrutiny.

- Councillor Robinson referred to the tree management strategy and asked whether this would cover trees in residential areas which were causing problems. Councillor Oliver responded that the policy did include an enforcement process where a tree posed a risk, but generally it recognised that they were an important part of the landscape and should be left alone.
- Councillor Grimshaw commented on the great work done by Kris Westerby on Fix My Street. She acknowledged that this service had proved popular and hoped that there was sufficient resource to meet the demand on it. She also expressed concerns about homelessness, and the effect on this of the increasing number of landlords selling their rental properties. She asked how many properties the Council had to house the homeless, and was concerned about them having to be homed somewhere that was not suitable for their needs. Councillor Oliver responded that all of these points were picked up when the Action Plan was considered.
- Councillor Hunter also welcomed the Fix My Street facility and hoped that it would be properly monitored to prevent the progress emails coming out. Councillor Oliver agreed this was an important point about integrating the reporting systems and would be looked at over this year.
- With regard to Fix My Street, Councillor Dickinson commented that residents were getting responses advising that an issue was the responsibility of the parish council and then it didn't go any further. He suggested that Scrutiny might look at how this could be linked into parish councils. He also raised the issue of when local members or the resident were told that a job had been closed off when it actually hadn't due to timings or targets, and asked if this could be looked at. Councillor Oliver agreed to pick these points up in the review.

**RESOLVED** that the report be received.

## **53. REPORT OF THE LEADER**

### **Introduction of Corporate Safeguarding Policy**

The report outlined the recommendation to introduce a Corporate Safeguarding policy. The policy would be established in addition to the existing policies and procedures operated within the Adults, Ageing and Wellbeing, and the Children, Young People and Education Directorates.

The policy would apply to all officers, volunteers, contractors and Councillors and made it clear how the Council undertook its legal commitments in regard to safeguarding to children and adults.

The Leader introduced the report and explained the background to it. It would allow issues to be reported more easily and to be responded to. He moved the recommendations which were seconded by Councillor Hill.

- Councillor Swinburn asked if it were possible for some kind of guidance to be issued to members and the public about the signs of abuse which may not easily be recognised or were less obvious. The Leader responded that the report referred to training and awareness for staff and could be rolled out to members.
- Councillor Hill referred to the recent tragic case in Skegness where the family had been known to Social Services and which provided a reminder to people to act on concerns.
- Councillor Dickinson also supported this and agreed awareness was vital to ensure that the signs and symptoms were understood. He felt the training should be made mandatory for all members given its importance. The Leader agreed and suggested that it be included in the forthcoming safeguarding training.
- Councillor Cartie agreed all members should be trained and suggested that the voluntary sector should also be given access to it. She also commented that there was no reference to human trafficking which was an essential component of the child protection policy. The Leader responded that this would be taken on board, and regarding the voluntary organisations which were not involved with the Council, this could be considered after the training of staff, members and volunteers associated with the Council had been completed.
- Councillor Grimshaw felt that scamming of vulnerable people should also be covered in the training and the Leader agreed that it could.
- Councillor Morphet supported the policy but commented that paragraph 6.3 needed revision to provide some clarity. The Leader agreed this would be looked at.
- Councillor Murphy did not feel that the suggestion in paragraph 6.3 to not intervene was helpful. It was not in the spirit of the policy and should be looked at again.

The Leader thanked members for their comments. He asked members to agree the policy today with the proviso that all members would be contacted with responses to the points which had been raised. If any concerns remained, then it would come back to Council. There was no dissent to this.

**RESOLVED** that Council approve the introduction of the policy and agree that it apply to all officers, volunteers, contractors and Councillors with effect from 1 April 2024.

## **54. REPORT OF THE LEADER**

### **Corporate Parenting**

The report updated and engaged members on progress with implementing the Council's statutory responsibilities for corporate parenting of our cared for and care experienced children and young people.

The report was presented by the Leader. He stressed the importance of the role for every member and proposed to bring a regular update report to Council.

**RESOLVED** that members note the progress made in the last twelve months.

**55. REPORT OF THE CABINET MEMBER FOR LOOKING AFTER OUR COMMUNITIES**

**Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service Inspection Report**

His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS) undertook a third full inspection of Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service (NFRS). The report provided an Executive Summary.

The report was presented by Councillor Stewart and he detailed the key points, stressing that the result was something to be proud of.

**RESOLVED** that Council note the outcome of the Inspection Report.

**56. REPORT OF THE DEPUTY LEADER AND CABINET MEMBER FOR CORPORATE SERVICES**

**Council Tax Support Scheme 2024-25**

The report sought approval for the local Council Tax Support Scheme for 2024-25 to continue to provide support at a maximum level of 92% of council tax liability.

The report was presented by Councillor Wearmouth and he detailed the key points. He moved the report, which was seconded by the Leader.

Councillor Dunn asked whether the DWP grant was expected to come in after March 2024. She also sought confirmation that the extra help would be £100 per household compared to £200 previously. Councillor Wearmouth advised that last year the figure had been £175, and £200 the year before. However, it was anticipated that the Government would provide some extra funding, though this would not be confirmed until after the budget was set, and would have to be looked at afterwards.

Councillor Dickinson commented that this policy had been debated for a number of years,. His Group had failed to change minds but would prefer to have something rather than nothing for residents. His Group would therefore support it on the basis that the same assurances would be given around the expected funding and from the S151 Officer.

On the recommendations being put to the vote there voted FOR: a substantial majority; AGAINST: 3; ABSTENTIONS: 0.

It was therefore **RESOLVED** that the Council Tax Support Scheme, attached to the published report on the Council website, be adopted as the Council's local scheme for 2024-25.

**57. REPORT OF THE DEPUTY LEADER AND CABINET MEMBER FOR CORPORATE RESOURCES**

**Community Governance Review Stamfordham Parish**

Council was asked to consider the outcome of a Community Governance Review in the County.

The report was presented by Councillor Wearmouth and he moved the recommendations, which were seconded by Councillor Jones as the local member. Councillor Jones commented that the Parish included both Stamfordham as well as some outlying villages and isolated houses. The ward dividing line was unnecessary and created confusion, and seven parish councillors covering the whole of the parish made more sense.

**RESOLVED** that:-

- (a) Stamfordham Parish Council should not be divided into wards for the purpose of electing Councillors; and
- (b) 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.

**58. REPORT OF THE DEPUTY LEADER AND CABINET MEMBER FOR CORPORATE RESOURCES**

**Independent Chair of Standards Committee**

The report updated members on the progress of the recruitment process for a new independent Chair of Standards Committee and asked for the current Chair to be appointed for a period of one year to enable the recruitment process to be completed.

The report was presented by Councillor Wearmouth and he set out the background to the current position. He moved the report's recommendations which were seconded by the Leader.

Councillor Dickinson asked what the issue had been in finding a new Chair for the Committee and whether there was a particular theme coming back from the Panel. Councillor Wearmouth replied that it had been felt that the applicants had not had the necessary skills.

**RESOLVED** that Mr Joe Jackson be appointed to the position of Independent Chair of Standards Committee for one year, or if sooner, until a new Independent Chair can be recruited.

## 59. MOTION

### Motion No. 1

The motion from Councillor Morphet which had been received by Democratic Services on 3 January 2024, was set out in the agenda as follows:-

#### ***To Encourage the Tyne & Wear Pension Fund to Divest From Fossil Fuels***

*The Local Government Pension Scheme is a national pension scheme for those working in local government or for other participating employers. It's administered in England and Wales by 86 local pension funds, one of which is the Tyne & Wear Pension Fund (TWPF) - with which Northumberland Pension Fund merged in 2020. The TWPF is administered by South Tyneside Council. The TWPF Pensions Committee is responsible for the control of the pension fund and meets quarterly. It has eight members from South Tyneside Council, one each from North Tyneside Council, Newcastle City Council, Gateshead Council, City of Sunderland Council and Northumberland County Council, three from trades unions and three from local employers.*

#### ***This Council notes that:***

- Climate change poses an existential threat to human civilisation, and the importance of limiting warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius over pre-industrial levels is widely accepted.*
- Northumberland County Council declared a climate emergency in 2019, and has set targets for both the council and the county to be carbon neutral by 2030.*
- The County Council's Climate Change Action Plan 2021-23 estimates that hitting these targets will generate 11,000 good green jobs.*
- The County Council's Corporate Plan 2023-26 states that "Everything we now do takes account of the impact it will have on our planet" and goes on to say that "As one of the largest employers in the county, we can become a leading example.. on carbon neutral approaches" and that we can "Provide practical examples of how to become a net zero employer which can be picked up.. by other employers in the county".*
- The burning of fossil fuels makes by far the largest contribution to climate change, accounting for over 75% of greenhouse gas emissions.*
- Fossil fuel companies have intentionally delayed action on climate change in order to continue "business as usual".*
- The TWPF currently has at least £461m invested in fossil fuels. This is 5.1% of its total portfolio and well above average for UK local government pension funds.*

- *The TWPF 2022-23 Annual Report says that the County Council paid £32m in Employer Contributions, effectively investing £1.6m of tax payers' money in fossil fuels in just one year.*
- *Investing in fossil fuels is incompatible with the County Council's climate emergency declaration and carbon neutral pledges.*
- *In 2015, the Governor of the Bank of England said that the action needed to keep to even 2 degrees Celsius of warming would "render the vast majority of existing fossil fuel reserves stranded" and "literally unburnable". Fossil fuels are becoming an increasingly risky investment.*
- *It's the TWPF's fiduciary duty to protect its beneficiaries from the effects of climate change by avoiding a) investments that are becoming high risk as a result of climate change and b) investments that exacerbate climate change. Failure to do so will cause a worsening of climate change and an increased investment risk.*
- *The TWPF could invest the County Council's Employer Contributions in local initiatives that benefit both people and planet.*
- *Six pension funds in the Local Government Pension Scheme have already committed to fossil fuel divestment - most recently Wiltshire Pension Fund, which is administered by Wiltshire Council and states that "We do not see a long term place for fossil fuel investments in our portfolios and will work towards being fully divested from these companies by 2030".*
- *Dozens of UK local authorities (including Manchester City Council and Cambridgeshire County Council) have passed motions encouraging their local government pension funds to divest from fossil fuels.*
- *In 2017, UNISON passed a motion to start a campaign for Local Government Pension Scheme fossil fuel divestment.*
- *Gateshead Council has recently passed a motion asking the TWPF to review their investments in fossil fuels and invest in companies that will minimise climate risk.*
- *North Tyneside Council has recently passed a motion urging the TWPF to explore the possibility of shortening the timeframe for total divestment from fossil fuels.*

***This Council resolves to:***

- *Ask its Pensions Committee representative to encourage the TWPF to divest from fossil fuels completely by 2030.*

- *Ask its Pensions Committee representative to encourage the TWPF to engage more closely with its beneficiaries on climate change.*
- *Ask its Pensions Committee representative to provide an annual report on their involvement with the TWPF to the most appropriate County Council committee.*

A revised motion had been circulated to members on 12 January 2024 as follows and copies were available in the Chamber showing the changes:-

*The Local Government Pension Scheme is a national pension scheme for those working in local government or for other participating employers" It's administered in England and Wales by 85 local pension funds, one of which is the Tyne & Wear Pension Fund (TWPF) with which Northumberland Pension Fund merged in 2020. The TWPF is administered by South Tyneside Council. The TWPF Pensions Committee is responsible for overall investment strategy and meets quarterly. It has eight members from South Tyneside Council, one each from North Tyneside Council, Newcastle City Council, Gateshead Council, City of Sunderland Council and Northumberland County Council, three from trades unions and three from local employers. The pension fund's investment managers are responsible for individual investment decisions.*

*This council notes that:*

- *Climate change poses an existential threat to human civilisation, and the importance of limiting warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius over pre-industrial levels is widely accepted.*
- *Northumberland County Council declared a climate emergency in 2AL9, and has set targets for both the council and the county to be carbon neutral by 2030.*
- *The County Council's Climate Change Action Plan 2021-23 estimates that hitting these targets will generate 11,000 good green jobs.*
- *The County Council's Corporate Plan 2023-25 states that "Everything we now do takes account of the impact it will have on our planet" and goes on to say that "As one of the largest employers in the county, we can become a leading example.. on carbon neutral approaches" and that we can "Provide practical examples of how to become a net zero employer which can be picked up.. by other employers in the county".*
- *The burning of fossil fuels makes by far the largest contribution to climate change, accounting for over 75o/o of greenhouse gas emissions.*
- *Fossil fuel companies have intentionally delayed action on climate change in order to continue "business as usual".*
- *As of 31/3/23 the TWPF had £239m invested in fossil fuels, which is approximately 2% of its total portfolio.*
- *The TWPF 2022-23 Annual Report says that the County Council paid £32m in Employer Contributions, effectively investing over f 600,000 of tax payers' money in fossil fuels in just one year.*
- *Investing in fossil fuels is incompatible with the County Council's climate emergency declaration and carbon neutral pledges.*
- *In 2015, the Governor of the Bank of England said that the action needed to keep to even 2 degrees Celsius of warming would "render the vast majority of*

*existing fossil fuel reserves stranded" and "literally unburnable". Fossil fuels are becoming an increasingly risky investment.*

- *The TWPF has a fiduciary duty to consider investment risk, and a duty to avoid high risk investments such as those in fossil fuels.*
- *The TWPF could invest the County Council's Employer Contributions in local initiatives that benefit both people and planet.*
- *The TWPF's Climate Change Policy commits it to transitioning its investment portfolios to net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050 or sooner and to reduce emissions by 50 to 60% by 2030 based upon a 2019 baseline. However, all six of the TWPF's member councils have committed to becoming carbon neutral by 2030 at an organisational and/or geographical level. Divesting from fossil fuels by 2030 would help the TWPF to reach net zero by 2030 and better align itself with the policies of its member councils.*
- *Gateshead Council has recently passed a motion asking the TWPF to review their investments in fossil fuels and invest in companies that will minimise climate risk.*
- *North Tyneside Council has recently passed a motion urging the TWPF to explore the possibility of shortening the timeframe for total divestment from fossil fuels.*
- *Dozens of UK local authorities (including Manchester City Council and Cambridgeshire County Council) have now passed motions encouraging their own local government pension funds to divest from fossil fuels.*
- *UNISON has also passed a motion to start a campaign for Local Government Pension Scheme fossil fuel divestment.*
- *Six pension funds in the Local Government Pension Scheme have already committed to fossil fuel divestment - most recently Wiltshire Pension Fund, which is administered by Wiltshire Council and states that "We do not see a long term place for fossil fuel investments in our portfolios and will work towards being fully divested from these companies by 2030".*

*This council resolves to:*

- *Ask its Pensions Committee representative to encourage the TWPF to divest from fossil fuels by 2030.*
- *Ask its Pensions Committee representative to encourage the TWPF to engage more closely with its beneficiaries (those people with a TWPF pension) on climate change.*
- *Ask its Pensions Committee representative to provide an annual report on their involvement with the TWPF to the most appropriate County Council committee.*

This amended motion was moved by Councillor Swinbank and seconded by Councillor Fairless Aitken. Councillor Swinbank advised that the amendments had been made after consultation with the S151 Officer to clarify the figures and to add context to the motion.

- Councillor Swinburn asked what specific fossil fuel investments had been made and if the TWPF decided to divest itself of these investments, would the Council have any control over who purchased them because the new investor could then do whatever they wanted with them. Councillor Swinbank responded the majority of the investments were in oil and gas. Regarding divestments, it would be for the TWPF to set the investment strategy.



- The Leader commented on the work done on climate change so far and the environment policy which he was very proud of, but his Group felt that no measures should be taken which would impact on those in receipt of pensions now and in the future. Whatever the Council's decision, it would have little bearing on the TWPF as it had its own strategy.
- Councillor Dickinson referred to some of the measures which the TWPF had undertaken in regarding to climate change investments and asked what the difference was if any to what was proposed in the motion. He agreed no action should be taken to destabilise the Fund. He was confident from the feedback he got from the Fund and the Council's representatives that the impact on the environment and the fossil fuel industry was being considered, but until there was a firm action plan to allow a safe move away from these minimal investments, his Group could not support a motion to accelerate this, potentially risking the Fund.
- Councillor Wearmouth asked what was actually meant by divestment of fossil fuels and what was trying to be captured. Councillor Swinbank responded that it was companies whose main business was fossil fuels – exploration, production and refining of fossil fuels. His understanding was that the TWPF did in fact invest in such companies.
- Councillor Robinson commented that the motion only encouraged the TWPF to take this action and annual reports were already received in any case. This was just an understanding and nothing for members to be concerned about.
- Councillor Oliver agreed that the country needed to move away from fossil fuels and that it was important to recognise that the UK was one of the leaders in this direction of travel, and that these oil and gas companies were very large investors in renewable energy activities. If the Council moved too quickly there could be an adverse impact on the economy such as had been seen as a result of the war in Ukraine. He agreed with the principle but did not feel it was up to the Council to determine the matter, so he would not be supporting the motion.
- Councillor Murphy commented that the Pension Board had a statutory obligation to invest wisely and not invest in poorly performing areas of business so if disinvesting meant losing money, then they wouldn't be able to do that. This did not support the arguments of the Conservative and Labour Groups. She felt that motion was itself quite weak but she agreed with the principle of encouraging investment in other areas.
- Councillor Kennedy commented this was the third version of the motion members had had in a week. The original motion contained a number of errors and circulating a further version of the motion at the last minute did not represent effective communication. However, he would support the motion as it only asked the Council to "encourage". Hexham Town Council had passed a similar motion recently which had been much shorter, but effectively said the same thing.
- Councillor Hill remarked that it was always disappointing when an important issue such as this was raised, but from the wrong angle. Public sector pensions faced a financial timebomb and there were real issues to tackle, but this was not one of them. Nor did she feel there was much public interest in it as politicians thought, and she would not be supporting it.
- Councillor Watson commented that the Pension Fund was always a complicated issue. The Council had one representative on a Board of 12 which was an inherent part of the Border to Coast Pension Partnership and

which oversaw a Fund of £43 billion. He felt the motion was verbose, inaccurate and meaningless because what it asked for was already being done, and he could therefore support it.

- Councillor Morphet responded that this was not the third version of the motion, but the second which made some minor changes to the original. The paper copy circulated in the Chamber simply showed those tracked changes. The points made about fossil fuel companies engaging in renewables came down to the argument about whether they could be trusted or not. Fossil fuel companies had in the past deliberately spread misinformation and delayed action on climate change so he did not think they could be trusted. The TWPF had £239m invested in fossil fuels as of 31 March 2023 and were continuing to invest in fossil fuel companies who had announced their intention to explore for new fossil fuel reserves and/or to expand production. The figures which had been included in the first version of the motion had been from UK Divest and after discussion with the S151 Officer, they had decided to go with the official figures.
- Councillor Castle commented that the closer this was examined, the weaker it got. "Encourage" suggested the decisions should be left with those who made the decisions and he supported this. This was a complex matter and should be left with the experts, and he supported the principle of encouraging those experts to lower their investments in fossil fuels, where this could be done.
- Councillor Dodd spoke as the Council's representative on the TWPF Committee. The TWPF was worth about £12 billion and invested in many concerns both locally and across the globe. The figures which had been included in the motion were misleading. The TWPF had a plan to get to net zero. The Fund currently paid out £30m per month to retired employees which represented around 25% of Northumberland households and made a significant contribution to the economy of the County. He had received advice from TWPF that as a representative, supporting the motion would be clear breach of his fiduciary duties. He would therefore abstain from the vote.
- Councillor Hardy advised that, as Councillor Dodd's substitute he would not vote either but he felt the motion was very weak. The TWPF was already encouraging investment in other areas and he reiterated Councillor Dodd's point that the Fund was in transition. Fossil fuels were still essential in everyday life and to run the economy.
- Councillor Renner Thompson commented that he did not have an issue with the long term aim of the net zero policy but disinvestment was not the way to achieve it because this meant less public control. Oil and gas revenue was worth £10billion to the UK Government annually, it reduced reliance on foreign dictators and was responsible for 280,000 British jobs so he could not support the motion.

Councillor Fairless Aitken supported the motion because it was brave and idealistic. She acknowledged the errors in some of the detail but felt that the Council needed to move forward with this change from the bottom up and nudge those further up the decision making chain. The motion sent a message and it was the spirit which was important.

Councillor Swinbank commented that 2023 had been the warmest year on record and was now 1.4 degrees Celsius higher than the baseline figure. 2015-23 had been the nine warmest years on record and CO2 levels continued to rise. The

pledges made by countries across the world as part of the Paris Agreement would lead to a position where temperatures were 2.5 to 2.9 degrees higher by 2100 which was not far away. The motion encouraged TWPF to divest from fossil fuels by 2030 rather than 2050. The Northumberland target as part of its Climate Change Action Plan was net zero by 2030 and this had been put in for a reason because it was the area under the curve which was important. He acknowledged the fiduciary duty to the Pension Fund but this also meant a need to consider the risks of the investment and these were greater than members thought they were. Sooner or later the fossil fuel companies would find themselves with stranded, or irrecoverable, assets and managed divestment was the sensible way out. He urged members to support the motion.

On the motion being put to the vote there voted FOR: 10; AGAINST: 16; ABSTENTIONS: 27. The Chair therefore declared the motion lost.

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Chair of the County Council

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Duly Authorised Officer