

NORTHUMBERLAND COUNTY COUNCIL

At a meeting of the **Northumberland County Council** held on Wednesday 11 September 2024 at County Hall, Morpeth at 3.00 pm.

PRESENT

Councillor J. Beynon (Chairman in the Chair)

MEMBERS

Ball, C.
Bawn, D.
Bowman, L.
Carr, D.
Cartie, E.
Castle, G.
Cessford, T.
Chicken, E.
Clark, T.
Dale, A.
Daley, W.
Darwin, L.
Dickinson, S.
Dodd, R.
Dunn, E.
Ezhilchelvan, P.
Fairless-Aitken, S.
Ferguson, D.
Flux, B.
Foster, J.
Grimshaw, L.
Hardy, C.
Hill, G.
Horncastle, C.
Humphrey, C.
Hunter, I.E.
Hutchinson, J.I.
Jackson, P.A.
Jones, V.
Kennedy D. (part)
Lang, J.A.

Lee, S.
Mather, M.
Morphet, N.
Murphy, M.
Nisbet, K.
Oliver, N.
Parry, K.
Pattison, W.
Ploszaj, W.F.
Reid, J.
Renner-Thompson, G.
Richardson, M.
Riddle, J.R.
Robinson, M.
Sanderson, H.G.H.
Scott, A.
Seymour, C.
Sharp, A.
Simpson, E.
Smith, A.
Stewart, G.
Swinbank, M.
Swinburn, M.
Taylor, C.A.
Thorne, T.N.
Towns, D.
Waddell, H.
Wallace, A.
Watson, J.
Wearmouth, R.W.
Wilczek, R.

OFFICERS

Binning, G.
Bradley, N.

Gerrard, S.

Hadfield, K.

Chief Fire Officer
Executive Director – Adults, Ageing
and Wellbeing
Director of Law and Corporate
Governance (MO)
Democratic Services Manager

Hunter, P.
Kingham, A.

Masson, N.
Neilson, S.

O'Neill, G.

Paterson, Dr H.
Willis, J.

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

One member of the public was present

21. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillors Bridgett, Gallacher, Purvis and A. Watson.

22. MINUTES

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting of County Council held on Wednesday 3 July 2024, as circulated, be confirmed as a true record.

23. ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chair reported that he had attended 12-14 civic events since the last Council meeting. He was hosting the first of his own events on 20 September at St John's Church, Ashington Brass Band would be playing and over 100 tickets had been sold already.

The Leader expressed congratulations to the three new MPs elected in the County in the recent general election. He had written to them all and invited them to County Hall. He also paid tribute to those MPs who had not been re-elected who had done a huge amount of work for the County.

24. MEMBER QUESTIONS

Question 1 from Councillor Robinson to Councillor Riddle

I have two 20MPH potential schemes on the cards in my ward area. One is a large housing estate where speed is an issue on the ring road around it. The other is the main road where we have 4 school entrances within ¼ mile. Our children's roadside safety is something we should never compromise or let up on! My concern is that these 20 MPH zones are becoming a bit blasé for drivers who encounter them.

Can we not call them Safety Zones or something along those lines just to give drivers the extra indication that they are entering somewhere that they need to pay more attention to and give a bit more concentration to their driving, as they pass through? We could easily incorporate that into the signage, so we send a very clear message!

Councillor Riddle responded that the regulations did not permit any further additional signage. The speed limit signs indicated that motorists were entering a low-speed area and that should be sufficient to convey this message. The Government stance on residential areas was that motorists should be aware from the environment that they were entering an area where they may encounter children at any time and additional signage was therefore not required.

Allowing additional unnecessary signage would result in a proliferation of sign and an overall reduction in their effectiveness. In addition to the national guidance, the Council had completed a programme of 20mph schemes outside schools in the County.

Councillor Robinson asked in that case whether the Council would be removing all the unnecessary housing development signs around the County if child friendly signs could not be put up. Councillor Riddle reiterated that the Council had to abide by legislation and could not put the additional signs up that Councillor Robinson requested. The other signs referred to were not statutory signs, and if Councillor Robinson wished to complain about that then he could do so.

Question 2 from Councillor Bawn to Councillor Wearmouth

During recent years Northumberland and this council have benefited from significant funding as part of the levelling up agenda. The new Labour government however have stalled and threaten to cancel much needed investment. Keir Starmer says it's due to a lack of money yet has found funds for inflation busting pay increases, and now is talking of restarting work on building HS2, presumably using the very money that they say is not available for projects like dualling the A1. Is it back to the old days of the Northeast being ignored by Labour and what can be done about it?

Councillor Wearmouth agreed that the Authority had benefitted from significant levelling up funding in recent years for various major projects and he hoped this would continue. Regarding the A1, which was very important both for economic activity and road safety, he hoped that the significant amount of work which had been done on this would not be lost and he reassured Councillor Bawn that the case would continue to be made.

Councillor Bawn asked whether the County's new MPs had been in touch to assist making the case for the A1. Councillor Wearmouth was not aware of any direct approach, but would be pulling information together with officers to continue to make the case.

Question 3 from Councillor Swinburn to the Leader

The new Labour Government have announced a ridiculous increase in housing numbers of 222% on Northumberland. Meanwhile they are proposing a reduction of 20% in Greater London. Places like Cramlington where the current housebuilding was agreed before this administration, already exceeds the town's housing need.

Can the Leader tell me what the implications are in his view for our county and communities like Cramlington that have already seen huge amounts of house building in recent years, and what will he do to help Cramlington and other areas from being nothing more than concrete jungles for multi billion pound housebuilders to take over any bit of land and valued open space they want, at the expense of our residents?

The Leader responded that the Council had agreed its Local Plan in March 2022 which included the housing figures which were appropriate for the County following much consultation. The Council was on target to achieve 579 new homes each year, but the Government now expected 1,750 new homes each year. The implications of this were huge and there was no extra funding for it.

Councillor Swinburn responded that the potential impact was a big worry for everyone and seemed to indicate a return to the north/south divide. He asked whether there would be any additional funding and whether there was any commitment from the Government to abide by the Local Plan or could it just be overridden.

The Leader replied that there would be no help with funding and it would be made clear in the response to the Government consultation that it was not possible to deliver that number of additional houses without vital infrastructure improvements.

Question 4 from Councillor Chicken to the Leader

I am sure you will share in the disgust of many residents and councillors with regard to the Labour Government's scrapping of the winter fuel allowance for some of those most in need of our help and support the most during the often cold Northumberland winter days. Will the Leader please join me in urging our MPs not to back their government's policy at the forthcoming budget debate?

The Leader responded that the Authority had a role to play in what had been agreed by the Government. All Councillors would feel let down by this decision and work was already underway with CAB, Age UK and others to reach out to the 70,000 plus people who stood to lose out. Those who may be eligible for pension credit had also been contacted.

Question 5 from Councillor Taylor to Councillor Renner Thompson

I was recently asked why Northumbrian foster carer are paid less than surrounding counterparts with NCC paying £67 per week less than South Tyneside, £125 per week less than Cumberland and £47 lower than Borders.

I understand this is causing a reduction in fostering, what plan if any are there to encourage people back into this much needed facility for children in the County and how much are we spending on private agencies to plug the gap?

Councillor Renner Thompson replied that foster carers were of crucial importance in the role they played. It had been acknowledged that the support provided by the Council to foster carers was very valued, and this had been reflected in the recent Ofsted inspection. A review of payments was ongoing and a report would go to Cabinet in October recommending an immediate uplift, with a further uplift in the next financial year. The average IFA cost was between £950 and £1,000 per week and in the last financial year the Council had spent £1,640,948. Overall use of IFAs had reduced from 40 in 2021 to 33 currently.

Councillor Taylor asked to be informed when the uplift would take place and what the Authority would be aligned to. Councillor Renner Thompson responded that these were average payment levels so straight comparisons were not possible. He could not go into further detail just yet, but figures would be available at the October Cabinet meeting.

Question 6 from Councillor Hill to the Leader

Does the Council have any plans to help those vulnerable residents who have had their winter fuel allowance taken away by the Labour Government?

The Leader replied that over 70,000 people were likely to be affected so it was right to raise this question. The Government had said this was a difficult decision but had still committed to large pay awards for junior doctors and train drivers. Regarding specific plans, the Authority was working with key partners ahead of what the Government was asking authorities to do, and he reminded members about the warm spaces around the County.

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

Annual Portfolio Report – Improving our Roads and Highways

Council considered the Annual Report from the Cabinet Member for Improving our Roads and Highways. The report 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.

This was presented by Councillor Riddle. He drew members' attention to the key points.

A number of points were made by members including:-

- Councillor Morphet welcomed the safe passing signs for cyclists and asked if he could speak to Councillor Riddle after the meeting about getting them in his ward and also about litter picking on main routes in his ward. Councillor Riddle agreed and advised that teams had been

set up to carry out litter picking on the major roads with funding set aside for it.

- Councillor Dickinson thanked Councillor Riddle and the team for securing government funding for the multi-use toilet facilities at Druridge Bay Country Park, which were fantastic. The report showed the amount of work and determination which went into highways, but he would like to see more investigation into areas where repairs did not last very long and where there were failures in contractors' work, which didn't represent value for money. Fix My Street was a very good facility but there were still instances where jobs were closed when they weren't complete so the system needed some refining. Also, issues were not always being passed on to town and parish councils when they were responsible. However, he recognised the efforts which were being made.
- Councillor Riddle responded that the quality of repairs was checked with before and after pictures being taken. Revenue funding and drainage work was vital for the network but he reminded Councillor Dickinson that his own administration had removed almost £2m from the revenue budget for highways. Great progress was being made on pothole repairs and he hoped this would continue.
- Regarding pothole repairs, Councillor Foster reported that the quality of these was not always consistent, even in the same electoral division. Her second point was about the increasing number of flooding incidents and she referred to a resident in her ward who experienced this regularly because there was no drain outside her house. She asked what was being done to get drains put in where they were needed. Her final point was about average speed camera trials and she asked how much involvement councillors would have in the locations, when they would be implemented and how long they would be in place before results were available.
- Councillor Riddle responded that Fix My Street was still being refined and improved. On the consistency of repair quality, the current Administration had implemented the trial for cut out patching but the issue was the cost per square metre. He was advised by officers that not all repairs could be cut outs because they took a lot longer, and some still had to be done via the traditional patching method. Regarding drainage, he could not give a response on any new requests within the programme. On the existing network, more funding was being put in for drainage and gully cleansing to reduce the cleaning cycle. A report would be going to October Cabinet on the speed camera partnership. This had to be approved by all authorities involved and hopefully the existing fixed cameras would be digitised within the year. Regarding the average speed cameras, he would need to respond in writing.
- Councillor Grimshaw reported that Rotary Way, Ashington had been left in a really poor state of repair following recent works, which for a major route into the town was not really acceptable. Councillor Riddle advised that specific issues should be raised with him direct, or reported to the local Area Inspector. Councillor Grimshaw advised that she had done this.
- Councillor Hill felt that in comparison to other authorities, the Council's Highways Team did well. She asked about business rates and the

impact on maintenance of Tweedmouth Industrial estate as nothing had been done for years. Finally, she asked if there had been any progress on the wasted tar question she had raised at Council previously.

- Councillor Riddle responded that maintenance funding was not allocated based on how much was paid in rates. Regarding the tar, the answer which had been given was that it was recycled at the facility at Powburn. However, over the summer a hotbox had been installed at Alnwick so tar didn't need to be transported as far.
- Councillor Nisbet raised the poor condition of the roads in the homezone and Cowpen Quay, which Councillor Riddle had previously acknowledged. Councillor Riddle agreed there had been some actionable defects which he expected were now in the work programme.
- Councillor Cartie asked about the plan to put a cycle track down Cowpen Road, which was very polluted and congested. This would narrow the road and would not be used by cyclists as they could use route one more safely. She felt this would make the congestion problem even worse and as a keen cyclist, would never use this route herself. She asked that it be looked at again. Councillor Riddle responded that this was a regeneration rather than a highway project, so a response would need to be made after the meeting.
- Councillor Dale commented that watercourses had been missed from para 8.11 of the report and should be added in. She also asked if Councillor Riddle would attend the 25th anniversary of farmers markets events in December. Councillor Riddle agreed to ask officers to look at that and if he could attend in December, he would.
- Councillor Fairless Aitken reported an issue with road adoption in an estate in her ward. Given the current level of housebuilding, she asked whether there was any way of speeding up the road adoption process. Councillor Riddle advised this was an issue for planning enforcement.
- Councillor Mather welcomed the change in the way issues were being managed in a more proactive way in the Northern Highways area, and the quality of repairs. He hoped officers were receiving the time and support they needed to challenge landowners next to the highway where this was required. Councillor Riddle responded that issues would be dealt with in a friendly manner but firm action would be taken where needed.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

26. REPORT OF THE CABINET MEMBER FOR LOOKING AFTER OUR ENVIRONMENT

Annual Portfolio Report – Looking after our Environment

Council considered the Annual Report from the Cabinet Member for Looking after our Environment. The report 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 report was presented by Councillor Horncastle. He drew members' attention to the key points.

A number of points were made by members including:-

- Councillor Morphet commented that there was not much in the report on flooding, though last year, Councillor Horncastle had agreed to look at measures to reduce the flow of floodwater on a landscape scale. He asked whether anything had been done on this and whether the Cabinet Member would meet with the Green Party to discuss the possibilities. Councillor Horncastle asked Councillor Morphet to provide more details by email and he would respond.
- Councillor Cartie asked about progress with the scheme for the entrance to Ridley Park as this seemed to be taking a long time. Councillor Horncastle agreed to try and establish a firm date for delivery of the gates.
- Councillor Wilczek asked for an update on the Queen Elizabeth II memorial garden in Gallacher Park and when it would be completed. Councillor Horncastle agreed to provide this after the meeting.
- Councillor Scott commented that the Council had agreed in February to repair the riverside car park in Prudhoe. She asked when this was likely to be completed. Councillor Horncastle agreed to respond after the meeting.
- Councillor Castle commented that he had asked twice for an update on the Lindisfarne field without a response. Councillor Horncastle replied that this was subject of regular discussion with officers so was on his radar.
- Councillor Dale asked how many social houses had been built and whether there were plans to employ more planning officers to reduce the number of undetermined planning applications. Councillor Horncastle replied that the Planning team was now fully staffed and the number of applications was coming down to a more manageable level. He would respond to Councillor Dale on the housing figure after the meeting.
- Councillor Swinburn asked if the Council would have the necessary design codes in place to provide the robust infrastructure needed to ensure developers finished their developments in a timely manner and to an acceptable standard for both the Council and residents. If they did not adhere to the rules, they should be stopped from submitting further applications in the County. Councillor Horncastle advised that work on design guides had been ongoing for a number of years and was almost complete. He acknowledged the historic problems around proper completion of developments but officers had tightened up on this much more. However, he did not believe that developers could be prevented from submitting new planning applications if there were issues with other developments.
- Councillor Ball asked for an explanation on the difference between the figure given earlier of 2,200 currently on Homefinder, and the figure quoted in paragraph 7.7 of 14,000 people being supported on the housing register. Councillor Horncastle replied that 14,000 people on Homefinder did not necessarily mean that they were all in housing need, some just wanted to move house, or move into the County.

Actual housing need figures stood at about 310. Ways were being looked at to make the overall figure more accurate and definitive.

- Councillor Hunter asked if Planning Enforcement could be appropriately funded so that action could be taken when it was needed. Also, on approved planning applications, developers were sometimes coming back with non-material variations instead of a variation of conditions, which were not consulted upon. Councillor Horncastle acknowledged there had been an issue with enforcement due to the loss of two staff this year. The team was currently at full complement but a backlog of cases had built up. Any serious enforcement issues could be raised with himself or Rob Murfin. On the second point, he suggested this be taken up with Rob Murfin direct as he couldn't comment on it.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

27. REPORT OF THE CHIEF EXECUTIVE

Interim Overview and Scrutiny Reports

Council were presented with the interim following reports:

(1) Communities and Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee

This was presented by Councillor Oliver. He detailed the main points.

Councillor Robinson asked if it was possible to have an interactive map of the Great Northumberland Forest so that members could track what was happening with it. Councillor Oliver agreed that should be possible.

(2) Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee

This was presented by Councillor Bawn. He detailed the main points.

Councillor Cartie asked why the public had not been consulted about closing the Keel Row Shopping Centre. Councillor Bawn replied this had been discussed extensively in an OSC meeting when it had been made clear that the shopping centre was not economically viable and it would therefore have been a waste of resources to consult on a potential outcome which was not possible, and would have been misleading to the public.

Councillor Dickinson asked if the estates review would include any engagement with Councillors on affected sites within their wards. Councillor Bawn replied that this was the intention and there would be ongoing consultation on each site affected.

Councillor Fairless Aitken commented that councillors knew their own areas best and asked if a strategic estates site map could be provided to councillors for their own area. Councillor Bawn replied that the detail of each area would be published as the project progressed and members would have the opportunity to review that.

Councillor Nisbet commented that Blyth market place had been consulted on with residents, but Keel Row had not. Councillor Bawn replied that the Council did not own Keel Row, nor had they shut it down. This had been done by Northumberland Estates as the owner. The Council got an interest after it was closed, and there was never any indication that the Council were going to re-

open it or consult on doing so. There would be no point in consulting on a potential course of action which was not possible. Councillor Nisbet did not agree this was correct.

Councillor Robinson commented on the community asset transfer protocol and the need to ensure community groups were robust enough to take on asset transfers, without it being too onerous. Councillor Bawn commented that part of the process would involve putting together a set of ground rules to manage asset transfers and to ensure groups were robust enough.

RESOLVED that the reports be noted.

28. ANNUAL REPORT FROM THE AUDIT COMMITTEE

Council was asked to consider the Annual Report for 2023/24 from Audit Committee to Council, which was agreed by Audit Committee at its meeting on 31 July 2024.

The report was presented by Councillor Towns. He detailed the key points and felt the Committee had worked well together in the last twelve months, along with its independent members and new independent Chair.

With regard to the Best Value for Money Workstream (page 63), Councillor Dickinson asked about terms of reference for that workstream and what kind of report it would bring to the Audit Committee.

Councillor Towns responded that he could not do that in the meeting. In terms of VFM which had been mentioned in the meeting several times, he felt there was some confusion over the VFM terminology. In the context of local government this was about economy, efficiency and effectiveness and a lot of work had been done by the Committee on this because of the qualified statements. At the last meeting, the external auditor had been clear that the reason for previous qualifications on VFM was around the effectiveness issue, due to legacy governance issues, but also that the Council had moved on significantly since then.

The S151 Officer would provide a response to Councillor Dickinson on the terms of reference as requested.

29. REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF LAW & CORPORATE GOVERNANCE

Constitution Update – Strategic Planning Committee Terms of Reference

Council was asked to consider an update the terms of reference for the Strategic Planning Committee and Local Area Committees in respect of their planning functions.

The report was presented by Councillor Thorne, Chair of Strategic Planning Committee.

With regard to appendix 1, page 81, Councillor Reid advised that the reference to Chair and Vice Chair was incorrect and needed to be amended to reflect the actual position of Vice Chair (Planning).

RESOLVED that:-

- (1) the Constitution be amended to replace the terms of reference of the Strategic Planning Committee with that set out at Appendix 2; and
- (2) the Constitution be amended to amend the terms of reference of the Local Area Committees in respect of their planning functions to include the terms of reference set out at Appendix 2.

30. REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF LAW & CORPORATE GOVERNANCE AND THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF RESOURCES & TRANSFORMATION (S151)

Constitution Update – Finance and Contract Rules

The report informed members of amendments made to the constitution by the Director of Law and Corporate Governance, in consultation with the Executive Director of Transformation & Resources, under the powers delegated by Council, and sought approval for proposed changes to financial approval thresholds.

RESOLVED that:-

- (1) Council approve the amendments made to the financial approval thresholds within Part 10 of the Constitution, as set out in the schedule of amendments at Appendix 1 to the report;
- (2) Council note the amendments made to the constitution by the Director of Law and Corporate Governance, in consultation with the Executive Director of Transformation & Resources, as set out in the schedule of amendments at Appendix 2 to the report; and
- (3) Council approve the incorporation of the updated Part 10 – Finance and Contract Rules section into the Constitution as shown at Appendix 3 to the report.

31. REPORT OF THE RETURNING OFFICER

Council noted the return of the person elected as Councillor for Cramlington Eastfield on Thursday 22 August 2024 as follows:-

Electoral Division	Surname and Other Names	Place of residence	Description
Cramlington Eastfield	Smith, Alan	53 Chesterhill, Cramlington, NE23 6JW	Conservative

32. REPORT OF THE RETURNING OFFICER

Review of Polling Places and Polling Districts

The report set out the Acting Returning Officer's final proposals for polling districts and polling places arising from the compulsory review having considered all responses received during consultation undertaken during the review process.

A relevant local authority is required to formally consider the results of the compulsory review of polling places and polling districts (hereafter referred to as 'the review'), decide on future polling district and polling place arrangements, and to publish its findings.

RESOLVED that:-

- (a) Council note the outcome of the review of polling places and polling districts and approves the Acting Returning Officer's proposals as set out in this report and appendices;
- (b) Council authorise the Acting Returning Officer to publish the outcome of the review of polling places and polling districts (as agreed by Council) at County Hall, Morpeth in at least one conspicuous place within the Authority's area and on the Authority's website; and
- (c) authority be delegated to the Acting Returning Officer in consultation with Group Leaders, to make any necessary in year changes to polling places and polling districts.



J. Beynen
.....
Chair of the County Council

N. Maclean
.....
Duly Authorised Officer