

ITEM NO 2

THE DISTRICT COUNCIL OF CHESTER-LE-STREET

Minutes of the proceedings at the meeting of the District Council of Chester-le-Street held in the Council Chamber, Civic Centre, Chester-le-Street on Thursday 31 May 207 at 6.00pm.

PRESENT:

Councillor A Humes (Chairman)

Councillors:

G Armstrong	M May
S Barr	P H May
L E W Brown	P B Nathan
R Court	K Potts
G K Davidson	M Potts
L Ebbatson	J M Proud
P Ellis	D L Robson
M J Gollan	J Shiell
S Greatwich	M Sekowski
S A Henig	T Smith
A K Holden	D Thompson
D M Holding	A Turner
C J Jukes	F Wilkinson
W Laverick	S C L Westrip
	A Willis

Officers: R Templeman (Chief Executive), L Chambers (Director of Resources), I Forster (Assistant Chief Executive), A Swinney (Head of Organisational Development), M Walker (Head of Regeneration), L Dawson (Asset and Development Manager), J Bradley (Assistant Solicitor) and K Fletcher (Democratic Services Assistant).

Also in Attendance: Civic award winners (family and friends).

Prior to commencement of business, the Chairman requested that tribute be paid to the late Councillor Gordon Kerr and one minute's silence was observed by everyone present in his memory.

The Leader advised that Gordon had died suddenly last Saturday and it was an occasion of great sadness for everyone. Gordon became a Councillor for the Central Ward in 2003 and he was always a very kind and courteous man and several people have described him as a real gentleman. In addition, the Leader advised that a mark of esteem in which he was held came spontaneously from this local Residents Association who specifically requested that their appreciation for Gordon's work within the community, be noted.

In this Council, Gordon had various roles but perhaps the one that he got to know most people in was when he was Chairman of the Council our Civic Head. Gordon carried out that role with fairness, dignity and compassion, which were qualities that he carried into every corner of his life for which she admired him. He was always willing to try something different and the last conversation the Leader had with Gordon two weeks ago was about him setting up a blog site because he could not get out of the house and he wanted to make sure people could contact him. She stated that he would be missed in many ways, and by many people, and our sympathy and condolences go to his wife Margaret who helped him so ably when he was Chairman of the Council and indeed to his family and friends at this sad time.

The Chairman advised that because the Vice-Chairman was unable to attend the last Meeting he would now be given the opportunity to address the Council.

Councillor Turner thanked all the Members for electing him to be Vice-Chairman of the Council and advised that both he and his wife Margaret were looking forward to working with the Chairman and his wife Brenda.

11 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillors J W Barrett, T H Harland and R Harrison.

12 MINUTES OF ANNUAL MEETING HELD 17 MAY 2007

The Chairman advised of the requirement to appoint membership to the Licensing Statutory Committee, which had not been undertaken at the annual meeting. It was noted that the Membership of this Committee would remain the same as the Licensing Committee.

RESOLVED: "That the Minutes of the proceedings of the Meeting of the Committee held 17 May 2007, copies of which had previously been circulated to each Member, be confirmed as being a correct record."

The Chairman proceeded to sign the minutes.

13 TO RECEIVE DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST FROM MEMBERS

There were no declarations of interest received from Members.

14 REPORT FROM THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL

The Leader reported:

That there was no executive this month, therefore no key decisions.

She asked Council to formally note the appointment of Councillor Maureen Potts as Portfolio Holder for Health and Well-being. The Portfolio covers Health and Well-being related activities, Operational Housing, and Community Safety.

The Leader advised that in the course of the month she had met with CPA Inspectors to agree their final report. This will be published on June 12th.

Several other good projects are coming to fruition. MILE house, the new Learning and Enterprise Centre is now complete.

This weekend would see the official opening of the new market place – a project which began 7 years ago.

There is a new refurbished traditional market stall area; a public space; and of course, the Arch. This major work of public art is the biggest ever for County Durham. Designed by Jo Fairfax and installed by Seb Boyesen. Throughout the project local contractors had been used wherever possible, which means most of the work, including the challenging civil and structural engineering on the Arch and the culvert beneath the market. Saturday will be an historic day for Chester le Street. A day to be celebrated by young and old. The 'civic heart' was designed with the views of local people in mind. Its success will depend on local people taking it to their hearts. We invite local people to come forward with ideas of activities they would like to see in the heart of their town.

All Councillors, are, of course, invited to the official opening at 10.30am this Saturday. The Leader hoped all will enjoy the entertainments which include one of our own talented musicians, visitors from Germany and the Riverside Tavistock Brass Band in its various forms.

The future of the market place lies in the hands of local people like yourselves. It is up to us all to make the best use of it.

Local Government Review

The Leader advised that last autumn the Government published a Local Government White Paper in which there was a request for proposals on the future of local government in what are currently known as 'two tier' areas – areas where there is a district council and a shire council.

In January this year 6 district councils in Durham and the county council submitted proposals to the Department of Communities and Local Government. Both proposals would have led ultimately to unitary authorities but there were crucial differences.

Where one proposed transitional arrangements based on the strengths of existing councils, the other proposed a swift handover of functions. Where one worked towards unitaries of a size proven to be successful elsewhere, the other proposed setting up a massive authority, one of the largest in the country. Where one worked towards local authorities aligned to demographic and geographic profiles, i.e. the communities that people identified with, the other proposed an authority simplistically aligned with the arbitrary boundaries of the existing county.

Where one sought to develop something new and radical from the bottom up, the other sought to preserve the old order and impose it from the top down.

However the Department of Communities and Local Government preferred the quick – fix.

In March the Department announced a brief period of consultation on the submission made by Durham County Council for a single - county wide authority.

The Chief Executive and the Leader were delegated to produce a draft response. As a result we have been participants in a referendum undertaken by all districts in County Durham, this being the only way to give local residents a voice in one of the most critical decisions on local government. We are also consulting fully with our partners and stakeholders; and making representations to members of the House of Commons and House of Lords.

One particular issue, among many, is the status of any authority should changes go ahead.

There is now increasing equivocation and ambivalence about whether the proposed unitary would be a continuing or non- continuing authority.

In response to letters from the Leader and the Chief Executive the local MP, Kevan Jones, states that he supports the county-wide unitary but he has also contacted Phil Woolas, the Local Government minister to say that he would not support a non-continuing authority.

The future is far from certain and the timetable is tight. The deadline for a response to the Department of Communities and Local Government is June 22nd. The outcome of the referendum will not be known before June 15th. Work is continuing on the questionable financial case put forward by the County.

The Leader advised that on June 19th District Leaders and Chief Executives are due to meet ministers in London. The next full council is after the deadline of 22 June. As it would be premature to deliver the substantive response before we have collated all the information the Leader proposed a motion without notice in accordance with Part 4, rule 12 (G) of the constitution, that: 'The Council circulates its draft response to the DCLG consultation on a future unitary structure for comment by Members prior to the 21 June 2007, with authority given to the Leader and Chief Executive to submit a response by the 22 June 2007, in accordance with the deadline. The response will be circulated to Members at Full Council on 28 June 2007.'

Councillor Henig seconded the proposal.

RESOLVED: "That the Council circulates its draft response to the DCLG consultation on a future unitary structure for comment by Members prior to the 21 June 2007, with authority given to the Leader and Chief Executive to submit a response by the 22 June 2007, in accordance with the deadline. The response will be circulated to Members at Full Council on 28 June 2007".

15 REPORT FROM PORTFOLIO HOLDERS

a) Resources and Value for Money

Councillor Henig advised that over the last week he had met with Directors and Managers in the areas that he was responsible for and had considered items that are likely to be coming up in the short, medium and longer term. He advised that obviously Local Government Re-organisation potentially had a bearing on this, which would need to be carefully monitored.

He advised that he had been impressed last year on the willingness of Managers to be the trailblazers in working with other neighbouring District Councils. He spoke in relation to joint working arrangements with neighbouring authorities which depending on the outcome of the Local Government Review was in his opinion the most sensible way to progress to produce savings for the Council and local people.

Councillor Henig spoke in relation to other challenging issues such as the medium term financial strategy and the Housing Transfer, which was to go ahead at the end of the year and on a short-term basis the annual closure of Accounts, which would be presented to the next Council Meeting.

He believed that the Council had enthusiastically taken on the Value for Money Agenda, which was a Government priority and indeed a priority for this Council. He felt that this Council provided excellent value for money in terms of what they provided for, in some cases at a very low cost. He advised of the need to work on demonstrating this in terms of data quality.

In relation to the Benefits Team, Councillor Henig advised that notwithstanding the number of inspections they have had recently, they had now volunteered to have an extra inspection over the next few weeks and would be part of a pilot inspection going on across the country under a new methodology. He highlighted the fact that this Authority would be the only District Council out of 350 District Councils across the Country to be involved in this pilot inspection which he felt was a very great credit. Inspectors would be on site in due course and that he would report back to Members on the outcome of this inspection.

b) Regeneration and Strategic Planning

Councillor Jukes advised that before giving his report to Council he wished to echo the words of the Chairman and the Leader of the Council on their comments in relation to Gordon Kerr and thanked them both sincerely. He advised that Gordon was someone that he got to know over a period of ten years and who in his time on this Council, was always full of reason and common sense and above all someone who always had the community served at the forefront of everything he did. Councillor Jukes advised that he was someone that he had tremendous respect for and had been a real inspiration to him over the last few months whilst working with him in the Central Ward.

Councillor Jukes advised of an article in the Local Government Chronicle, which he had come across whilst putting together his developments on his Portfolio, which to his surprise included a day in the life of the Head of Regeneration for this Authority. He made reference to the banner headline of this article which stated that 'there was no such word as can't', which he thought was very appropriate for this Council. He felt this was an illustration of Chester-le-Street being once again on the map and that he associated himself with the remarks on Regeneration projects about the difference it makes to the quality of people's lives in the District. He congratulated the Head of Regeneration for this article.

Councillor Jukes referred to developments within his Portfolio since the last meeting and advised that work on the Local Area Framework in Sacriston was continuing. He advised that he had attended a community consultation event recently, which was a key part of the process of developing the ADF. He hoped this would build upon the very successful developments of affordable housing and models of community developments such as Lilac House.

In Pelton Fell progress on the site continues as more housing units are built including key elements of affordable housing. Councillor Jukes felt confident that even more progress would be made. Support to the Local community and finding ways to sustain community resource facilities was continuing.

In the Town Centre work on the Town Centre Master plan was underway. Councillor Jukes advised that an essential part of the approach to the Master plan would be how Communities and Enterprises are consulted which was currently being developed. He advised that meetings of the Steering Group,

which would oversee the work that had been timetabled for June. He spoke in relation to the external investment that had been attracted into the District and of a project being devised with partners within the Local Strategic Partnership.

Councillor Jukes stated that the critical phase of the Civic Heart Project was now nearing completion and that the Market had relocated back to its original site. He commented on the new and improved stalls and the buzzing atmosphere following his visit at the Market last Saturday. Also feedback from Members of the Public had been favourable.

He advised of the major launch initiatives for the Market, which included a three-day continental market from Friday through to Sunday, and the opening celebrations of the new Civic Heart on the Saturday. He confirmed that the Civic Arch and Civic Square were virtually complete and would enable Chester-le-Street Residents, shoppers and visitors to experience a much more reinvigorated area within Chester-le-Street Town Centre.

At this point Councillor Jukes handed over to Officers who presented a short video clip of the Civic Heart project. The Head of Regeneration spoke in relation to the clip, which he felt would allow Members the opportunity to see the Civic Heart in a way that they may not have seen it with the lightening in place, which was a fundamental part of the scheme.

c) Community Engagement & Partnership

Councillor Barr advised that he was personally delighted about the prospect of serving Chester-le-Street District as the new Portfolio Holder for Community Engagement and Partnerships. He referred to the Council's mission to work together to fulfil the needs of communities and advised that as an outward looking Council this meant continuing to develop the process of engagement and understanding. He spoke in relation to understanding local communities and their needs and how the Council and its partners can most effectively respond and work together with communities to meet those needs.

In his opinion the Council and its Members were very conscious of the different needs within the different communities which were reflected in the Council's various strategies and plans. He hoped that all areas in the District would share in this partnership and grow. One of the key aims was to update the Community Engagement Strategy and Councillor Barr advised that he would be working very closely with other Portfolio Holders and other colleagues to meet the requirements of Community led Regeneration, Neighbourhood Management and Health and Well-being.

He reported that he had already set up a series of Meetings to help make progress on Community Engagement and involvement. He also reported that Chester-le-Street is lead for Community Engagement and Communications for Local Area Agreement and a web site had been developed which he invited Members to view at the following web address www.durhamlaa.org.uk Councillor Barr advised that on 22nd May the LSP sponsored a successful

engagement event in respect of the Local Government Review and gave thanks to the Community Strategy Advisor and his team for the hard work in organising that.

He spoke in relation to Member Development and advised of the training provided to Councillors to enable them to carry out their role. He also spoke in relation to developing this role and ensuring opportunities and support were available. Councillor Barr advised that new Members would have the opportunity for a CPD discussion from September at the review stage and how Members would continue to play a key role through the Member Development Steering Group.

Councillor Barr announced that the Council had been successful in a bid to the Improvement Partnership for £10,000 for 360 degree appraisals for Elected Member development and that he would discuss with Members how this should be delivered. The Members training plan for 2007 had been tabled for information and that dates had been arranged for the new Members induction, which included a one-day session delivered through Northumbria University about the effective Ward Councillor.

Moving on to other parts of the Portfolio, he reported that a lot of progress had been made on IT within the last year for the benefit of residents and that progress would continue to make the Council more accessible to better serve communities. Councillor Barr advised that the development of the community hub at Grange Villa was an excellent example of this, as a truly led IT Community initiative. He paid particular tribute to the previous Portfolio Holders for IT and Member Development, Councillors Jukes and Westrip for the excellent work they had undertaken and gave thanks to them both.

He advised that he was currently at a stage of developing a series of Meetings with key staff and doing a lot of research and that he looked forward to providing progress reports on his Portfolio over the coming months.

d) Neighbourhood Services

Councillor Westrip thanked Councillor Barr for his kind acknowledgement of the work he had done on Member Development in the past and gave congratulations to Martin Walker for the article in the Local Government Chronicle.

Councillor Westrip spoke in relation to the realignment of portfolios and advised that the new configuration of his Portfolio included Leisure Services, Environmental Services, Planning and Licensing functions and Environmental Health. He felt that there would be a number of challenges within his Portfolio with Neighbourhood Management possibly being the biggest. He was looking forward to working with his colleagues on the Executive, Officers and fellow Members on this exciting agenda.

He felt that it would be a challenge, but one worthwhile meeting, if communities could be empowered through devolving power whilst providing effective governance. He advised that the opportunity to work in partnership with other agencies both governmental, non-governmental, the voluntary and independent sector but most importantly with our communities, would reflect our core values politically. He advised of the need to provide a sustainable service that people both needed and wanted and delivered in a manner that is inclusive of all our community members.

Councillor Westrip believed that what lay at the heart of this process was the quality and nature of the social contract built between the council and its communities, and just as importantly, between councillors and their communities. He felt Councillors were the core and foundation on which such relationships were built.

He advised that as someone who had spent most of his working life developing such relationships professionally he felt he knew what was key to their success. For a relationship to develop between individuals he felt that there was a need for qualities such as openness, honesty, genuineness, respect and especially trust as in his opinion without trust you have nothing.

Councillor Westrip stated he felt that with good quality relationships we could learn from one another come to understand ourselves, others and empower. He advised that an empowered community was one that not only had the power and ability to make decisions but also understands the notion of citizenship and what that entails for every member of that community. He felt that if we fail as councillors to deliver quality social contracts then we not only fail ourselves but we more importantly we fail our communities.

With that in mind, Councillor Westrip advised of his disappointment to see Members of the opposition, of all colours, campaign so negatively in the recent election. In his opinion making false claims and misrepresenting the Council and its achievements for what he believed was short term political gain.

He stated how proud he was of the campaign that Labour candidates carried out using a positive manifesto to commit themselves to continue to make communities safer, cleaner and greener; to promote the district to invest and regenerate to be more inclusive, listen to people and to have achievements and values that they could be proud of.

He challenged the opposition to clearly articulate their vision, their manifesto, and their plans for a positive Chester-le-Street. He questioned whether they, as he felt some had already done when it came to their own appointments, had just abstained and not bothered to participate with hope that the public they represent would not notice. He also questioned whether they would sit back and lay claim to other person's achievements when it came to elections.

Councillor Westrip spoke with reference to his portfolio and asked Councillor Nathan to explain where the alleged £1000's he claimed the Council had sat on in relation to parks and recreation were? He also requested that evidence be provided to the claim that this was a poorly performing Council that provides poor services whilst demanding higher and higher taxes.

He challenged the local conservatives, to produce the evidence that the Council was moving to a two weekly refuse collection for which there was no evidence. He felt that when politicians mislead, distort the truth, or just plain lie then they reinforced the worst beliefs that people hold of government and politicians and if they could not tell the truth they could not be trusted. He questioned why then bother with them.

Councillor Westrip suggested that if they had a different view, a different vision then they should share it and campaign on it. He felt they should not lie and mud sling for short-term political gain, as in his opinion everyone loses that way.

He advised that he wished to firmly scorch the rumour that the Council are using Councillor Nathan's mythical £1000's to build a new heliport for the "blue is the new green David Cameron" to land his helicopter on. He stated that firstly the money was not there and secondly we are serious about addressing climate change on his side of the floor.

16 QUESTIONS TO LEADER AND EXECUTIVE MEMBERS

Councillor Brown spoke in response to the comments made by Councillor Westrip and confirmed that his literature, which he had distributed to his residents, had made no reference to the Labour Party. He stated that he was totally impartial and always had been as an Independent. He advised that he was here to serve the residents and had worked along with the Labour group. He stressed that he had not used his power in any political way.

Councillor Nathan queried how Councillor Westrip's comments were relevant to his report on Neighbourhood Services. In response to these comments, Councillor Nathan advised that it was clear in his opinion that the kind of claims stated in the Election literature and during the campaign resonated with the voters. He stated that in the Edmondsley and Waldrige Ward where he stood as a candidate, Labour had lost to the Liberal Democratic candidate and the Liberal Democrat candidate came top of the poll. In his opinion he felt the voters had clearly spoken and showed their perceptions through the Ballot Box.

The Leader spoke in relation to Councillor Nathan's query on the connection between the report given on Neighbourhood Services to the comments passed by Councillor Westrip. She advised that Councillor Westrip had spoken about trust and honesty which in her opinion, were essential ingredients to roll out the Neighbourhood Management project successfully and give people the confidence to believe that we will deliver what we say we will in their Neighbourhoods.

Councillor Nathan went on to pay compliment to Councillor Westrip for the words he had spoken on decent values and providing excellent services in delivering high quality Neighbourhood involvement of people who live in our Wards. He advised that he backed his approach to the work he was doing in his Portfolio and hoped that he could work together with him to generate the best possible community.

Councillor Proud confirmed that within her manifesto she had stated that she was proud to be part of this Council and that this was something she had said with honesty.

Councillor Westrip in response advised that he was not branding every independent or every Member of the opposition in the same way and that he was merely responding to some of the literature that had been distributed not only in Chester-le-Street but also in County Durham.

17 REPORT OF AUDIT COMMITTEE HELD ON 19 APRIL 2007

Councillor Armstrong advised that there were two Members who had served on Audit Committee former Councillors Carr and Richardson (no longer District Councillors) and took the opportunity on behalf of the Committee to thank them for their time and contributions.

RESOLVED: "That the report of the Audit Committee held on 19 April 2007, copies of which had previously been circulated to Members, be accepted."

18 EUROPEAN CHARTER FOR EQUALITY OF WOMEN AND MEN IN LOCAL LIFE

Consideration was given to a report from the Performance and Improvement Manager which sets out the background, purpose, and plan of action for the adoption of the European Charter for Equality of Women and Men in Local Life.

The Assistant Chief Executive briefed Members on the report and advised of a new statutory duty for local authorities on gender equality that came to force in April 2007. He explained that to address this duty Local Authorities are required to have a Gender Equality Scheme. He referred to the Equalities Plan that was adopted in January 2006, reviewed in March in accordance with changes in legislation to develop a Gender Equality Action Plan, and approved in March 2007. One of the agreed objectives within the Gender Equality Action Plan was that the Council adopts the European Charter for Equality.

He advised that Members were to consider the implications of adopting the Charter, and feed back their comments and issues, so they can be addressed before the final report and action plan is presented at the Council Meeting in September 2007.

Councillor Westrip advised that he welcomed the opportunity to review this document and been given the chance to look at the more challenging articles within the Charter such as agenda based violence, same sex relationships and human trafficking.

Councillor Barr echoed the comments made and supported the report welcoming the opportunity to participate in this. He felt this Charter would encourage those persons least likely to be heard to express their views.

The Leader advised how much she welcomed this charter and the challenging articles as mentioned by Councillor Westrip. She advised that she looked forward to receiving any comments or questions on this and would be happy to discuss this further if required.

The Leader also advised that she was looking forward to the launch of Local Democracy Week, which was currently being planned to engage with people who would not normally be involved with the Authority in a number of events over the week. Councillor Ebbatson proposed to move the recommendations in the report, which was seconded by Councillor Westrip.

RESOLVED:

- a) That the implications of adopting the European Charter for Equality of women and men in local life be noted.
- b) That Members provide comments to, or raise issues with, the Leader of the Council and/or the Performance & Improvement Manager by 30 June 2007.”

19 COMMON SEAL

The Council Resolved: -

“That the Action of the Officer in affixing the Common Seal of the Council to the following documents be confirmed:

Transfer in duplicate relating to 7 High Barnes, Great Lumley

Transfer in duplicate relating to 9 South View, Pelton

Form DS1 in respect of 28 Auckland, Chester-le-Street

Form DS1 in respect of 11 Sevenacres, Great Lumley

Transfer in duplicate relating to 7 East Avenue, Chester Moor

Transfer in duplicate relating to 64 The Crescent, Chester-le-Street

Lease in duplicate relating to 18 Cumbrian Avenue, Chester-le-Street

Lease relating to former Mechanics Institute Building, Chester-le-Street

Transfer in duplicate relating to 78 Brecon Place, Perkinsville”

The Meeting terminated at 7.00pm.

Following the conclusion of business, the Chairman of the Council presented the following Community Awards:

Young Achiever Award Winners

Adam Hollows – in recognition of sporting achievement 2006

Tom Wright – in recognition of sporting achievement 2006

Cameron Polglaze-James – in recognition of personal achievement

Young Achiever Team Award Winner

Chester-le-Street Junior Schools FA (Chester Boys District Team) – in recognition of sporting achievement

Long Service Award Winners

Edna Sanderson – in recognition of long service to the Town Twinning Association

Jennifer James – in recognition of long service to the local community

Civic Award Winner

Kenneth Clasper – in recognition of outstanding contribution to the community