

## **Durham County Council**

At an Ordinary Meeting of the County Council held in the Council Chamber, County Hall, Durham on **Wednesday 26 June 2024 at 10.00 am**

### **Present:**

#### **Councillor J Nicholson in the Chair**

Councillors M Abley, E Adam, R Adcock-Forster, V Andrews, J Atkinson, P Atkinson, A Batey, C Bell, R Bell, C Bihari, J Blakey, D Brown, L Brown, J Cairns, J Charlton, J Clark, I Cochrane, J Cosslett, B Coult, R Crute, M Currah, S Deinali, J Elmer, C Fletcher, D Freeman, J Griffiths, O Gunn, D Hall, C Hampson, D Haney, K Hawley, P Heaviside, T Henderson, S Henig, C Hood, A Hopgood, L Hovvels, D Howarth, C Hunt, G Hutchinson, M Johnson, N Jones, P Jopling (Vice-Chair), B Kellett, C Lines, R Manchester, C Marshall, C Martin, E Mavin, L Mavin, S McDonnell, D McKenna, J Miller, D Nicholls, E Peeke, R Potts, P Pringle, J Purvis, A Reed, G Richardson, K Rooney, J Rowlandson, E Scott, K Shaw, A Shield, M Simmons, A Simpson, G Smith, T Smith, M Stead, W Stelling, T Stubbs, A Surtees, D Sutton-Lloyd, P Taylor, F Tinsley, S Townsend, C Varty, E Waldock, M Walton, J Watson, M Wilkes, M Wilson, S Wilson, D Wood, R Yorke and S Zair

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors A Bell, G Binney, L Fenwick, A Hanson, J Higgins, J Howey, C Kay, L Maddison, S McMahon, P Molly, R Ormerod, J Quinn, S Quinn, S Robinson, K Robson, A Savory, J Shuttleworth, A Sterling and A Watson

### **1 Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting held on 22 May 2024 were confirmed by the Council as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

### **2 Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest in relation to any items of business on the agenda.

### **3 Chair's Announcements**

The Chair reminded all Members of their obligations under the Code of Conduct and asked that all Members address each other in the correct manner during meetings and show respect at all times.

Since the previous meeting, the Chair had attended a number of flag raising events to coincide with Armed Forces Day. This included a Beacon Lighting event in Durham City, to remember the soldiers who stormed the beaches of Normandy on June 6, 1944, during the Second World War. The beacon was

lit to honour the memory of the brave troops who took part in the operation that proved pivotal for the Allied Forces.

The Chair attended had also attended official openings throughout June, including the new office accommodation at Corten House, Aykley Heads and The Story at Mount Oswald.

The Chair was invited to Thornley Primary school by the local councillors, Councillors Hovvels, Miller and Varty to see a new banner created by the children to take to the Gala. During the event the children presented Councillor Varty with a thank you card which read:

'You gave us your time, you gave us your raise, you helped us and you taught us in so many ways, the effort you gave, the lessons you shared, you guided us and gave us a voice to be heard. We thank you so much for your wisdom and time and we thank you for giving us the tool to shine.'

The Chair had a wonderful experience and said that for a group of children to present this to a councillor was very moving and was the epitome of what a councillor should be. She thanked the local members for the invite.

#### **4 Leader's Report**

The Council noted a report from Councillor A Hopgood, Leader of the Council as follows:

Councillor Hopgood said that earlier in the month, The Story, the Council's new culture, heritage and registration venue, opened at Mount Oswald which was a milestone moment in an incredibly exciting project. The response received so far had been overwhelmingly positive. The Story was a place where County Durham's heritage was preserved for future generations. A place where people could not only discover more about the past, but record their own milestones, whether that be registering a birth, getting married or renewing their vows. There was a free exhibition space and café. None of this would have been possible without the hard work of teams across the council, volunteers and our partners and she wanted to say a big thank to everyone involved.

Councillor Hopgood encouraged everyone to visit The Story.

Councillor Marshall congratulated everyone on a job very well done and asked when the coalition was going to come clean on the business case and £20m costs for the new build at the DLI, given that The Story had a full interactive display of the DLI, had involvement from veterans at the opening events, and that members of the public were over the moon about the proud stories being shared of the former County regiment. In response, the Leader

said that the sale of the HQ site had helped develop the DLI museum and all information was discussed in meetings and within the Cabinet reports.

Councillor Wood asked if the thanks extended to the previous Labour leadership. The Leader re-iterated that she had thanked all of those involved. She also commented that the current Labour Leader could have attended the opening ceremony.

In response to a question from Councillor Martin, the Leader of the Council would be happy to extend an invitation to the newly elected MPs to The Story.

Councillor Hall commented that he did not think the Leaders response to the questions asked, was appropriate as she was accusing other Members of not reading the Cabinet papers to avoid answering questions. He referred to the £19 million capital from the sale of the HQ that they were using for the new DLI building and the £600,000 that they were going to fund, because it was going to make a loss every year. Councillor Hall asked if it was ever considered to use a small fraction of that money to extend the DLI exhibit at the Story. The Leader said that they could only extend within a certain space due to the land being on a brownfield site. She re-iterated the point that the Cabinet papers were available for all to read and the whole process had been open and transparent.

## **5 Questions from the Public**

One question had been received for the meeting from Mr Cannella.

Mr Cannella was unable to attend the meeting and had requested that the Chair put his question to Council as follows:

“Why are Disabled Blue Badge holders being made to pay parking charges in public car parks across the county, when the Blue Badge rules clearly state permit holders have FREE parking where pay and display meters are in effect and in any public/council run car parks, disabled bays”.

Mr Cannella would receive a written response and both the question and response would be posted on the Council's website following the meeting.

## **6 Petitions**

The Council received a petition from Mrs Hills which asked the Council to further explore the repair and replacement options for Leazes Footbridge, until a workable solution was found, and to make a functioning footbridge a top priority.

The Chair thanked Mrs Hills for presenting the petition which would be forwarded to the appropriate service for a response as part of the County Council's Petitions Scheme.

## **7 Report from the Cabinet**

The Council noted a report from the Cabinet which provided information on issues considered at its meeting held on 13 March, 17 April, 15 May and 4 June 2024 (for copy see file of Minutes).

## **8 Safe Durham Partnership Strategy 2024-2029**

The Council considered a report of the Director of Neighbourhood and Climate Change Services which presented the Safe Durham Partnership Strategy (SDPS) 2024-29 following public consultation. The final plan was attached as Appendix 2 (for copy see file of Minutes).

The Head of Community Protection outlined the public consultation which had taken place between March and April 2024. Presentations had also been provided to the County Durham Youth Council and to the Safer and Stronger Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee highlighting the ambitions and priorities of the Strategy.

In Moving the report, Councillor P Heaviside reported that when the Safer and Stronger Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee were consulted on the draft strategy in April, members referred to off-road bikes which were a major issue in some areas. He also referred to the reluctance of people to report anti-social behaviour though fear of retaliation or lack of confidence that anything would be done. The Committee acknowledged the need for increased scrutiny around sexual violence and the growing issue of hate crime. The benefits of a partnership model to tackle the three priorities was recognised by members, with several commenting on successful work carried out in their Electoral Divisions as a result of partnership working, which included the community and voluntary sector. Councillor Heaviside welcomed the new streamlined approach to the Safe Durham Partnership Strategy, focusing on areas where the partnership could make a difference. This was echoed further during the consultation by members of the public and by the Youth Council who were particularly positive about the easier-to-digest format. Anti-social behaviour continued to be the number one issue of concern for local communities, and it was pleasing to see that the work on the Anti-social Behaviour Strategy and Delivery Plan would be reinforced and overseen at the Safe Durham Partnership. Sexual violence and violent crime had a huge impact on the lives of victims and their families, and on how safe people felt in our communities. He welcomed the Safe Durham Partnership's goals around increasing confidence to report such crimes and support victims.

As Chair of the Safer and Stronger Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee, Councillor Heaviside intended to work closely with partners on the Safe Durham Partnership on these specific goals and to address the underlying contributing factors, and moved the recommendations set out in the report.

Councillor Shield said that success of the Safe Durham Partnership Plan required a partnership response between statutory, voluntary organisations and residents themselves. He said that it was great to see the Safe Durham Partnership reaffirm

its commitment to working with communities through the Approach to Wellbeing and recognised the impact of wider factors such as health, housing, employment and poverty on its priority themes. As Portfolio Holder for Equality and Inclusion, he welcomed the focus on Hate Crime. As communities became more diverse, through our Humanitarian Support programmes, it was important to get the message across that Hate Crime would not be tolerated, and partners were committed to promoting community cohesion. It was noted that the Youth Council supported this priority as an issue which impacted upon many young people's lives, and we could assure them that the Hate Crime Action Group would be reinvigorated, and more activity would take place on the back of the Hate Hurts campaign.

Councillor Shield **seconded** the recommendations set out in the report.

**Resolved:**

- (a) That the content of the report be noted; and
- (b) To agree that the Safe Durham Partnership Strategy 2024-29 be adopted.

## **9 Publication of Members Addresses**

The Council considered a report of the Director of Legal and Democratic Services which informed of the outcome of the consultation with all members regarding the Council's approach to publishing Members home addresses on their Register of Interests and consider recommendations from the Standards Committee (for copy see file of Minutes).

The Deputy Monitoring Officer informed Council that 109 responses had been received from Members to the consultation, with over half favouring an opt in approach. Constitution Working Group had referred the matter to the Standards Committee where it had been recommended to agree to the opt in approach, with the addition of the to show the electoral division for each Member.

The Deputy Monitoring Officer advised that this would only apply to Members home addresses and not to other properties owned, unless deemed sensitive, on a case by case basis.

The Leader of the Council said she was grateful to the Monitoring Officer and her team for consulting members on this important issue. The high proportion of responses received to the consultation demonstrated the strength of feeling and concern that Members had regarding the abuse and intimidation experienced by local Councillors.

The research by the Local Government Association (LGA) indicated that sadly, the number of incidents of abuse experienced by local Councillors was increasing. In responding to the consultation, many of our Councillors had referred to their own experiences.

Following publication of the LGA research, the Minister for Local Government wrote to Councils to ensure that all Members were aware of the ability to request that an interest be treated as sensitive and to request that all such requests be treated

sympathetically. The Monitoring Officer had and did treat all such requests sympathetically and would proactively recommend that interests were treated as sensitive in response to particular incidents.

In light of the increasing number of calls for changes in legislation, the findings of the LGA research and the views of County Councillors, the proposal in this report was proportionate. The Standards Committee made the helpful recommendation that the Electoral Division in which a Member lives is recorded on the form instead of the home address. Members who wished to have their home address published could opt to do so. The Leader **moved** the recommendations.

Councillor R Crute **seconded** the recommendations.

In response to a question from Councillor Wood, the Deputy Monitoring Officer advised that there was no disclosable interest within the report for members to have to declare an interest.

In response to a question from Councillor Tinsley, the Deputy Monitoring Officer advised that these changes if approved, would come into effect before the elections in 2025, and as soon as practicable once checks had been carried out.

**Resolved:**

- (a) That the responses to the Member consultation and feedback from the Standards Committee on 7 June 2024 be noted; and
- (b) That all Members' home addresses will be treated as sensitive and only the electoral division in which they live will be published unless a Member opts to have their home address published, be agreed.

## **10 Annual Report of the Standards Committee 2023/24**

The Council considered a report of the Director of Legal and Democratic Services which provided an overview of the work of the Standards Committee during 2023/24 and to set out the future direction which the Committee intended to take during 2024/25 (for copy see file of Minutes).

Councillor Rooney, Chair of the Standards Committee presented the annual report of the Standards Committee for the period 2023/24.

The report set out the Membership of the committee and included an update on the three new independent persons appointed by the Committee in June 2023.

Councillor Rooney confirmed that Alan Fletcher, existing Independent Person agreed to extend his term for a further two years until September 2025. The Committee were fortunate to have four Independent Members to support the Monitoring Officer and the Committee with member code of conduct issues. All of them had received induction training and had the opportunity to attend external training in relation to their role.

The Committee's Work Programme was consistent with the terms of reference set out in the report at paragraph 13 and was attached at Appendix 2 to the report. The Committee had continued to monitor standards and governance issues nationally.

The Committee had kept up to date with developments in relation to the Debate Not Hate Campaign since it had become a signatory to the Local Government Association Debate Not Hate statement in January 2023.

It was reassuring that the Council already reflected the majority of best practice recommendations in relation to its arrangements for supporting Councillors who experienced abuse. Some of those arrangements had been used by the LGA as case studies to demonstrate best practice. The Committee was overseeing the development of a Zero-Tolerance Approach to Abuse Policy, which would be shared with members and presented to a future meeting of Council during the coming year.

In respect of complaints, there had been fewer complaints received in 2023/24 when compared with the previous year. There was also a decrease in the number of complaints where local resolution had been recommended. A similar trend was observed in relation to complaints where no further action had been recommended. However, the number of complaints referred to investigation was higher than last year. A breakdown of the costs to the Council of dealing with Member Code of Conduct matters had also been provided within the report.

The report also set out the training that had been provided to the Independent Persons and elected members. Looking ahead the Committee had agreed a work programme for 2024/25 which included the usual standing agenda items, the zero tolerance to abuse policy, and a review of the Procedure for Member Code of Conduct complaints. The work programme would continue to be a living document, which could be updated to reflect any developments within the Committee's remit throughout the year.

Finally, Councillor Rooney thanked the Monitoring Officer and her team for their continuing work with the Committee in assisting to ensure that high standards were achieved by all locally elected members.

In response to a question from Councillor Bihari, the Deputy Monitoring Officer clarified that the figure quoted in paragraph 25 of the report in relation to costs incurred for Parish and Towns should read £44,163.92 and not £44,163,92.

**Resolved:**

That the report be noted.

## **11 Questions from Members**

There were no questions from Members.