

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

At an Ordinary Meeting of the County Council held remotely via Microsoft Teams on
Wednesday 24 March 2021 at 10.00 am

Present:

Councillor K Corrigan (Chair)

Councillors E Adam, J Allen, J Atkinson, P Atkinson, B Avery, A Bainbridge, B Bainbridge, A Batey, A Bell, D Bell, E Bell, J Bell, R Bell, J Blakey, L Boyd, D Boyes, D Brown, J Brown, L Brown, J Chaplow, J Charlton, J Clare, J Clark, M Clarke, J Considine, B Coult, P Crathorne, R Crute, M Davinson, S Dunn, I Geldard, O Gunn, D Hall, C Hampson, T Henderson, S Henig, D Hicks, J Higgins, A Hopgood, K Hopper, L Hovvells, S Iveson, I Jewell, O Johnson (Vice-Chair), P Jopling, C Kay, B Kellett, L Kennedy, A Laing, J Lethbridge, K Liddell, L Maddison, J Maitland, J Makepeace, R Manchester, C Marshall, L Marshall, C Martin, S McDonnell, M McKeon, I McLean, O Milburn, A Napier, J Nicholson, R Ormerod, A Patterson, C Potts, L Pounder, S Quinn, A Reed, G Richardson, S Robinson, J Rowlandson, A Savory, E Scott, K Shaw, A Shield, J Shuttleworth, M Simmons, A Simpson, H Smith, T Smith, J Stephenson, D Stoker, A Surtees, O Temple, F Tinsley, T Tucker, J Turnbull, A Watson, M Wilkes, M Wilson, S Wilson, D Wood, R Yorke and S Zair

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors H Bennett, G Bleasdale, P Brookes, C Carr, I Cochrane, D Freeman, A Gardner, J Grant, K Hawley, P Howell, S Hugill, E Huntington, G Huntington, H Liddle, E Mavin, S Morrison, P Oliver, J Robinson, P Sexton, P Taylor, K Thompson, A Willis and C Wilson

Prior to the commencement of business the Chair reported the sad news of the following deaths:

- former Durham County Councillor, Sedgefield Borough Councillor and Spennymoor Town Councillor and Alderman Ben Ord;
- Mrs Maxine Robinson, the wife of Councillor John Robinson. Maxine was John's consort during his time as Chair and Vice-Chair of Durham County Council. Maxine had also served as a Councillor on Sedgefield Town Council and had also been Mayor of the Town Council.

The Chair asked everyone to give a moments reflection out of respect and extended deepest sympathies to the families at this sad time.

1 To confirm the minutes of the meeting held on 24 February 2021

The minutes of the meeting held on 24 February 2021 were confirmed by the Council as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

2 To receive any declarations of interest from Members

There were no declarations of interest.

3 Chair's Announcements

The Chair sought agreement from the Council to waive standing orders to allow for the extension of the meeting should it go beyond 2 and a half hours, and if time allowed for motions goes beyond 30 minutes. **Seconded** by Councillor O Johnson.

Resolved:

That standing orders be waived to allow for the extension of the meeting should it go beyond 2 and a half hours, and if time allowed for motions goes beyond 30 minutes.

The Chair reported that with the local elections looming in May, this was her final Council meeting where she had an opportunity to thank all those who had supported her during her extended term of office. Neither she or Councillor Johnson, Vice Chair of the Council were standing in the local elections, however they would remain in office as Chair and Vice Chair of the Council until the Annual County Council, and would therefore have the opportunity to see returned members then.

The Chair wished good luck to those seeking re-election in May and thanked all those not seeking re-election for their dedicated service to the Council and the communities they had served, wishing them all well for the future.

4 Leader's Report

The Council noted a report from the Leader of the Council as follows:

- This week marked the anniversary of the start of the first national lockdown and it had been a challenging year for all. Everyone had been affected in some way, and the Leader passed on his deepest sympathies to all those who had lost family or friends during the pandemic and wished those who remained ill a speedy recovery. Life had changed dramatically during the past twelve months, but communities had shown resilience, courage and determination. coming together to support one another and adapt to a new way of life. Council staff had to adapt and innovate to ensure services continued to be delivered.

The Council joined in a national day of reflection, taking a moment to remember those lost, consider the sacrifices that had been made and recognise how the hardships of the past year had helped bring everyone together. The front of County Hall was also lit to demonstrate

the Council's support for everyone who had been affected by the pandemic.

Looking to the future the focus now was very much on the County's recovery. Infection rates had fallen considerably since the last council meeting, but the public health team continued to work hard to support those affected and share information to help minimise cases of coronavirus. As part of this work, more than 80 people had signed up to become Covid-19 Community Champions and were proving invaluable in the Council's mission to ensure people had clear, accurate and up-to-date information. The volunteers received training to become trusted voices in their community and he thanked them for everything they were doing.

- Cabinet had considered priorities and expectations for supporting levelling up for communities and the economy as the County emerged into recovery. An initial investment of at least £500 million was needed from the Government's levelling up and recovery funds to support the development of ambitious projects in the County and for the delivery of long-term and sustainable economic growth.
- Cabinet had approved proposals to build three new state-of-the-art leisure centres in Seaham, Chester-le-Street and Bishop Auckland as part of a wide-ranging programme to transform leisure provision across the County. Future reports would set out how the wider leisure offer would be developed for all the County's residents.
- A proposal to introduce free town centre parking after 2pm was also given the go-ahead, part of a package of measures to support residents and businesses in the economic recovery from the coronavirus pandemic.
- The Towns and Villages programme continued apace, with Cabinet endorsing the strategy's approach to tackling derelict land and buildings. Reducing the number of long-term empty properties was integral to the Council's Housing Strategy, with advice and practical and financial support being offered to owners to help remedy issues and bring buildings and sites back into use. Pilot projects to tackle derelict non-residential sites, had already taken place in areas such as Sacriston and Seaham.
- Cabinet had also backed the introduction of new Targeted Delivery Plans for areas of the County in need of social housing. These plans included measures such as buying and refurbishing empty properties to meet demand. The proposals were part of the Council's £70million five-year plan to create 500 homes for rent in County Durham.

- Cabinet heard about the Council's extensive and ongoing work to combat climate change. Provisional estimates showed that carbon emissions had reduced by 16 per cent in one year due to energy efficiency work within Council operations. These efforts would be boosted by work to encourage the uptake of electric vehicles, with work currently taking place to install more than 100 community electric vehicle charge points across the County.
- The Council's Climate Emergency Response Plan also included a range of measures to manage woodlands and expand tree coverage in the county. Trees and woodlands had a significant role to play in carbon absorption and increasing biodiversity.
- Stuart Timmis, the Council's Head of Development and Housing, and Richard Crane, Head of Education and Skills were both leaving the Authority to take up new posts, and in recent weeks Jimmy Bennett, Clean and Green Team Leader and Brian Buckley, Strategic Highways Manager had both retired. Members wished them all the very best for the future.
- In late 2020 officers had been asked to look into all options for the appeal of a national Valuation Office Agency decision that council tax not be backdated for a building in County Durham.

Officers had concluded that the prospect of success in challenging the valuation office decision was extremely low. Therefore, he could not propose such a course of action, although he was sure others may make a case for a national change, given the public interest there had been in this matter.

- This month had seen the announcement of free public wi-fi in Seaham and Barnard Castle. As well as encouraging people to spend more time in the towns once coronavirus restrictions were lifted, the wi-fi would provide another way for businesses to connect with their customers. Pilot projects were already up and running in Bishop Auckland and Stanley and there were plans to extend the scheme further.
- Plans to enhance Consett Town Centre were being forged ahead, drawing on its distinct character to create a vibrant shopping destination with thriving independent retailers. Following successful projects in Victoria Road, Wesley Street and Front Street, the focus was now on Middle Street where £1 million-worth of improvements were planned as part of the Towns and Villages programme.

- Work was now starting on Aykley Heads business park, paving the way for 4,000 new jobs and a £400 million boost to the economy. The Council had pledged £6 million for the project's first phase, with a further £6 million from the government's Getting Building Fund.
- In Seaham, former railway tracks were to be transformed into a public area that would celebrate the town's heritage, as part of the second phase of the Seaham Townscape Heritage Project. This was a £1.6 million scheme supported by the National Lottery Heritage Fund to enhance the town's historic centre.
- In nearby Horden, £4.5million from the Towns and Villages Investment Plan had been allocated for a major regeneration scheme, boosting the £1.5 million already set aside from the capital programme. It would allow the Council to demolish vacant buildings that had blighted residents lives for years and replace them with new high-quality homes.
- The Council had put a call out to Government for the reinstatement of the Leamside Line, which ran for 18 miles from the Tursdale junction near Ferryhill to Pelaw, in Gateshead. Reopening the line would provide major economic, environmental and social benefits to the region as well as providing extra capacity for the East Coast Main Line.
- The launch of new welding and painting facilities by Hitachi at its plant in Newton Aycliffe would allow the company to manufacture its signature high-tech aluminium carriage shells on site rather than importing them from overseas.
- The Leader congratulated the Youth Justice Service on their recent success at the Children and Young People Now Awards, with the Parenting Support Group winning the Family Justice Award. The service was also highly commended in the Youth Justice Award, for its work with The Skill Mill. The Skill Mill was a social enterprise business which directly employed young people who had previously offended for six months, helping to reduce reoffending and support young people into further longer-term employment.
- The Council pledged to go further in the fight against fly-tipping as the number of incidents across County Durham fell for the fourth year running. Figures released by DEFRA showed that 6,548 cases had been dealt with in 2019-2020, a 10 per cent reduction in the number of incidents compared to the previous year.
- In honour of International Women's Day earlier this month, female members of staff shared their experience of working in traditionally

male-dominated roles when the Council hosted a webinar for County Durham schoolchildren. The Council was an equal opportunities employer with a gender balanced Cabinet, leadership and senior management team. Its gender pay gap was also one of the lowest among local authorities in the region, though as ever there was still more to do

- The Council also celebrated World Social Work Day online with a series of virtual events, with some of the Council's own staff offering advice, guidance and inspirational stories to their colleagues.
- The Council's Morrison Busty depot was set to become a low carbon site as part of an £8.3 million scheme which would see a large-scale solar farm built to power its services. The depot had received £5 million from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) to carry out a major retrofit, while the Council had provided an additional £3.3 million from its own Invest to Save fund for the project. It was expected that it would save more than 1,000 tonnes of CO2 per year and reduce the Council's total emissions by up to 4 per cent.
- Work had begun on the new Durham History Centre which would bring together archive, heritage, and registration services at a single location when completed by autumn 2022. A stage 2 bid to The National Lottery Heritage Fund had been submitted to deliver an activity and innovative digital engagement and events programme.

In conclusion the Leader of the Council referred to the forthcoming elections and noted that a number of colleagues had made the decision to stand down this May, which included many extremely experienced councillors, not least the Chair and Vice-Chair of the Council but also the Deputy Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Neighbourhoods who previously led two of the County's District Councils for many years. He thanked not only Cllrs Katie Corrigan, Ossie Johnson, Alan Napier and Brian Stephens but everyone who was standing down at this election for their hard work on behalf of the County's communities.

In accordance with Council Procedure Rules, the following question was asked of the Leader by Councillor Craig Martin:

The Levelling Up Fund allows Durham County Council to bid for up to £20 million per constituency with the support of the MP. The deadlines for this are tight, with full proposals needing to be submitted in June.

Despite local elections and the restrictions this puts on council operations, can you assure us six full and feasible bids, one for each constituency, will be submitted by the deadline? That you will work with all our MPs to ensure

all of County Durham has an equal and as good an opportunity as possible to receive up to £20 million.

The Leader of the Council thanked Councillor Martin for his question and provided the following response:

We welcome the invitation and opportunity to bid into the new Levelling Up Fund and will be taking our role as the lead authority very seriously in order to maximise the benefits to County Durham from this fund. It's important that this and all funding opportunities are targeted to improve prosperity across the County.

The initial guidance issued by Government for the Levelling Up Fund seeks one proposal in total from each parliamentary constituency to focus on transport, town centres and cultural and heritage assets, submitted in June 2021 and with investments that can commence delivery 2021/2022.

It will also be important that we look at how proposals come together coherently, benefiting County Durham. Each activity needs to be developed in a way that contributes to net zero, reducing deprivation, economic inequality and has the support of local stakeholders and the constituency MP, in a very short period of time and during an election period.

Therefore, it's a complex fund with a complex process, with full bidding guidance still to be released.

Officers are currently developing the engagement process and will be working with members, key stakeholders and MPs and we will be developing the right projects beyond County Durham that gives the greatest chance of success.

Councillor Hopgood referred to the Senior Management changes reported by the Leader and wished Stuart Timmis and Richard Crane every success in their new roles. She also offered very best wishes to Jimmy Bennett and Brian Buckley in their retirement.

Councillor Hopgood also conveyed best wishes to those members who were standing down at the forthcoming elections. Their service to their communities had been unquestionable.

This was endorsed by Councillor Richard Bell who also thanked Councillor Alan Napier and Brian Stephens for their decades of service.

5 Questions from the Public

Two questions had been received from members of the public.

The first question was asked in person by Dr Lawrence Welch on behalf of 'Keep our NHS Public North East' and asked what County Durham was doing to prevent 'the steady and insidious NHS privatisation process. The Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Adult and Health Services provided a response to the question, which would be posted on the Council's website.

The second question asked what percentage of new build had renewable systems of electricity supply and/or heating systems approved at the planning stage. The questioner was unable to attend the remote meeting, but the Cabinet Portfolio Holder would respond to the question in writing following the meeting, and the response would be posted on the Council's website.

6 Petitions

There were no petitions for consideration.

7 Annual Review of the Constitution

The Council considered a report of the Head of Legal and Democratic Services which presented proposals for the revision of the Council's Constitution (for copy see file of Minutes).

Moved by Councillor S Henig and **seconded** by Councillor A Hopgood.

Resolved:

That the proposed revisions to the Constitution as set out in the report be approved.

8 Motions on Notice

Moved by Councillor T Tucker, **Seconded** by Councillor A Reed

During these unprecedented times it has become even more difficult for our vulnerable residents to make ends meet. Unemployment, furlough, zero hours contracts, disability. There are lots of reasons why our residents struggle in 'normal' times but in these times, one reason has become more apparent - the costs associated with energy for your home.

Residents in a 2 bed property who are allowed to pay by direct debit pay on average £75 to £82 per month dual fuel.

Residents in the same type of property with prepayment meters pay on average £100 to £150 per month, even though they are paying for their

energy upfront as they use it. The standing charge for prepayment meters per day is higher than for direct debit customers. The cost of gas and electricity is also higher.

I personally, was recently offered a reduction in my energy by my supplier, if I owned my own home. There are different tariffs, different contract types, why? Gas is gas and electricity is electricity! Why can't it be one price for everyone? In the meantime, our vulnerable residents with prepayment meters are having to choose between eating and heating their homes. In short they are being discriminated against for their circumstances.

We, as a council, offer all manner of support to our residents with fuel poverty issues and other financial help, but if one of the root causes is not tackled then this will never change.

I call upon Full Council to support my motion and to write to the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to ask for communication to be undertaken with providers to ensure that his office is not only ensuring that the country has secure energy supplies that are reliable, affordable and clean but to also ensure that they are 'affordable' for all residents, no matter how they pay their bill.

An Amendment was **Moved** by Councillor K Shaw and **seconded** by Councillor A Surtees

During these unprecedented times it has become even more difficult for our vulnerable residents to make ends meet. Unemployment, furlough, zero hours contracts, disability. There are lots of reasons why our residents struggle in 'normal' times but in these times, one reason has become more apparent - the costs associated with energy for your home.

Residents in a 2 bed property who are allowed to pay by direct debit pay on average £75 to £82 per month dual fuel.

Residents in the same type of property with prepayment meters pay on average £100 to £150 per month, even though they are paying for their energy upfront as they use it. The standing charge for prepayment meters per day is higher than for direct debit customers. The cost of gas and electricity is also higher.

I personally, was recently offered a reduction in my energy by my supplier, if I owned my own home. There are different tariffs, different contract types, why? Gas is gas and electricity is electricity! Why can't it be one price for everyone? In the meantime, our vulnerable residents with prepayment meters are having to choose between eating and heating their homes. In short they are being discriminated against for their circumstances.

We, as a council, offer all manner of support to our residents with fuel poverty issues and other financial help, but if one of the root causes is not tackled then this will never change.

I call upon Full Council to ~~support my motion and to write to the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to ask for communication to be undertaken with providers to ensure that his office is not only ensuring that~~ ensure that the country has secure energy supplies that are reliable, affordable and clean, and tackle fuel poverty by providing warm homes for all, bring in proper measures to reduce bills and introduce measures which commits our energy market to put consumers first to reduce their bills ~~but to also ensure that they are 'affordable' for all residents, no matter how they pay their bill.~~

Upon a vote being taken the Amendment was **carried** and therefore became the Substantive Motion.

Upon a further vote being taken the Substantive Motion was **carried**.

Moved by Councillor A Surtees, **Seconded** by Councillor K Shaw

This Council notes that in Durham we are seeing a crisis of food poverty which is having a devastating impact on families and communities in our County. This crisis has accelerated significantly through the politics of austerity since 2010, whilst the economic contraction over the last year has laid bare the fragility of family finances in too many households in our County. The situation is truly shocking for one of the richest nations in the world and highlights the gross inequality of the UK in 2021.

The National Food Strategy is the first independent review of England's entire food system for 75 years. Its purpose is to set out a vision for the kind of food system we should be building for the future, and a plan for how to achieve that vision. It is headed by Henry Dimbleby and next reports to Government early this year.

The Right To Food campaign is arguing that the 11 million people in food poverty should be central to this strategy.

Enshrining the 'Right To Food' into law would clarify Government obligations on food poverty and would introduce legal avenues to hold Government bodies accountable for violations.

This Council calls for the 'Right To Food' to be incorporated into the 'National Food Strategy'. We ask the Chief Executive to write to Henry Dimbleby, Independent Lead of the National Food Strategy to further this request.

Upon a vote being taken the Motion was **carried**

Moved by Councillor L Hovvels, **Seconded by** Councillor A Laing

As we approach a year since the first lockdown of the COVID Pandemic the County Council of Durham wishes to acknowledge the debt and gratitude of the Community, owed to the numerous groups and individuals, for the service given to protect and assist us all.

We wish to thank:

- all the staff and volunteers across the whole of the County Council, in all the various roles undertaken to support business, community and individual residents;
- all the teaching and non-teaching staff who have kept our schools open for the children of both key workers and those requiring support;
- the blue light emergency services, Fire, Police, Ambulance, Mountain and Coastal Rescue who have continued to keep our communities safe;
- our colleagues in the National Health Service, residential and nursing homes and Community Care Services, services for which we will be eternally grateful;
- KEY WORKERS from all parts of the County who have kept the arteries of our society working, and feeding the nation;
- the Community Hubs, Community Groups across the whole County who supported those shielding and in need of support; and
- all the residents who have and continue to act to be safe, to save lives and save the NHS

This has been and continues to be challenging for us all but everyone has risen to the challenge to which we thank them, and ask this thanks be formally recorded for posterity.

We must not forget those who have been so greatly affected by the Pandemic, the families who have lost loved ones, those who have had and continue to be affected by the virus.

Our thoughts and support go out to them all.

Upon a vote being taken, the motion was **carried**.

9 Questions from Members

In accordance with Council Procedure Rules the following question was asked by Councillor T Tucker

The substance used for filling potholes appears to not bond with the existing road surface and during bad weather 'pops' out again which means the hole then has to be refilled.

Can this chamber have assurance that officers have sourced the best product on the market and that this is cost effective because at present this looks like very poor value for money given the money available to make highway repairs.

Councillor R Yorke Cabinet Support Member for Neighbourhoods and Local Partnerships thanked Councillor Tucker for her question and provided the following response.

Our highway maintenance policy is always to prioritise planned maintenance to maximise the life and the quality of the highway.

However where we can't make a permanent repair it becomes necessary to fill potholes on a temporary basis to ensure the integrity of the running surface.

The winter has proved particularly challenging for highway damage and we have repaired more than 10,000 potholes already this year.

The materials and processes used in this work meets all of the necessary specifications and requirements, and is to industry standards.

I can assure Council that this policy which is set out in our approved plan every year, ensures that our highway maintenance teams provide the best possible value for money in difficult circumstances.