

Durham County Council

At an **Ordinary Meeting** of the County Council held in the **Council Chamber, County Hall, Durham** on **Wednesday 25 September 2024** at **10.00 a.m.**

Present:

Councillor J Nicholson in the Chair

Councillors E Adam, R Adcock-Forster, V Anderson, V Andrews, J Atkinson, A Batey, A Bell, R Bell, C Bihari, J Blakey, D Boyes, D Brown, L Brown, J Cairns, J Charlton, J Clark, I Cochrane, J Cosslett, B Coult, R Crute, M Currah, S Deinali, T Duffy, K Earley, J Elmer, K Fantarrow, C Fletcher, D Freeman, J Griffiths, O Gunn, D Hall, C Hampson, A Hanson, K Hawley, P Heaviside, L A Holmes, C Hood, A Hopgood, L Hovvels, D Howarth, J Howey, C Hunt, G Hutchinson, M Johnson, N Jones, B Kellett, C Lines, L Maddison, R Manchester, E Mavin, L Mavin, B McAloon, M McGaun, D McKenna, I McLean, J Miller, P Molloy, D Nicholls, D Oliver, R Ormerod, E Peeke, R Potts, P Pringle, J Purvis, J Quinn, S Quinn, A Reed, G Richardson, K Robson, K Rooney, J Rowlandson, A Savory, E Scott, P Sexton, A Shield, J Shuttleworth, A Simpson, T Smith, M Stead, W Stelling, A Sterling, D Stoker, T Stubbs, D Sutton-Lloyd, P Taylor, F Tinsley, S Townsend, C Varty, E Waldock, M Walton, A Watson, J Watson, M Wilkes, M Wilson and S Wilson

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors P Atkinson, C Bell, G Binney, J Chaplow, L Fenwick, S Henig, J Higgins, C Kay, C Martin, S McDonnell, S McMahan, S Robinson, M Simmons, A Surtees and D Wood

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The Chair formally reported the deaths of former Councillors Ronald Dodd and Peter Harker.

Ronald Dodd represented the Tanfield Ward on Derwentside District Council from 1973-1989. He was also an Honorary Alderman.

Peter Harker was a former Councillor on Wear Valley District Council. He served two separate terms of office, representing the St Helens Auckland Ward from 1995 to 1999; and the West Auckland Ward from 2003-2007.

Members stood for a moments silence out of respect to Ronald and Peter.

1 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 17 July 2024 were Moved by the Leader and Seconded by the Deputy Leader, and 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.

The Chair had attended Castleside Primary School to view the premiere of a short film based on Consett Steelworks. The film was made in collaboration with Digital Voice as part of a Heritage Lottery Fund project which invited stories from people who remembered the works. Children across the school then worked to learn new digital skills as well as learn about their own heritage. The film would be played at the conclusion of meeting.

The Chair announced that in her previous year in office charitable donations raised for charities was £5,252.28 and had been shared between the two chosen charities for 2023/24 - The Durham Association of Boys and Girls Clubs and The Alzheimer's Society. She thanked everyone who had contributed to all the civic events held throughout the year.

4 Leader's Report

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

Councillor Hopgood said that September had got off to a flying start with the 20th anniversary of NETPark. From a bold vision, developed and delivered in partnership, NETPark had established itself as one of the UK's leading science, engineering and technology parks. It was currently home to more than 40 pioneering companies employing more than 700 people. These companies were developing cutting-edge products that helped people to live healthier lives, keep people safe, generate sustainable energy and much more. The £100 million Phase 3 extension was underway, and we were delighted when the leading tech firm Filtronic signed up as its first tenant earlier this month.

Councillor Hopgood said that September also meant the start of the new academic year, and this year we had been proud to pilot a scheme that automatically enrolled eligible families to receive free school meals. Everyone understood the importance for children to receive a nutritious and satisfying lunch, and thanks to this scheme, nearly 2,500 children would get a free school meal in County Durham in 2024/25. This would save each family an average of £400 a year on food costs. The Leader placed on record her thanks to Councillor A Shield and the teams involved in the pilot of this important initiative.

5 Questions from the Public

There were no questions from the public.

6 Petitions

There were no petitions.

7 Report from the Cabinet

The Council noted a report from the Cabinet which provided information on issues considered at its meeting held on 10 July 2024 (for copy see file of Minutes).

8 Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme 2025/26

The Council considered a report of the Corporate Director of Resources which sought approval for the continuation of the current Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme (LCTRS) for a further year into 2025/26, which would continue the protection afforded to all claimants in line with what their entitlement would have been under the former Council Tax Benefit system (for copy see file of Minutes)

The proposals were considered by Cabinet at their meeting on 18 September 2024 and it was resolved to recommend to Council the continuation of the scheme into 2025/26.

In Moving the report Councillor R Bell, Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Finance informed Council that Durham County Council remained the only council in the north east to have a scheme that continued to provide support equal to that which was available under the old Council Tax Benefit scheme. He added that the decision came at a cost in terms of lost council tax revenues in terms of working age households at a total cost of £67 million, with 38% of the 53,800 cases being pensioners who must remain protected. Support of £25 million was given to pensioners and support to working age claimants was £42 million.

Councillor Bell added that a review of the position in a years' time would be required should no further funding from the new government be forthcoming, as the deficit would be £20 million in 2025/26, and a deficit of £60 million over the MTFP period. The Council would also need to reflect on the administrative burden regarding universal credit. Unless further funding was received from government this would need to be closely monitored and could be the last year this could be offered.

In Seconding the report Councillor A Shield, Portfolio Holder for Equality and Inclusion thanked Councillor Bell and the officers who had supported vulnerable people during this last year. He was pleased to note that new claims were being processed within 15 days and changes in circumstances within 16 days which was well within the target. Councillor Shield said that the Council should be proud that the scheme had been retained but the increasing financial pressures continued need to make savings meant that the scheme would need to be closely monitored going forward.

Councillor M Wilkes commented on the difficult financial circumstances being experienced but that it was important to protect the most vulnerable and still provide quality services. He urged the government to provide further funding for the scheme to continue.

Resolved:

That the recommendations in the report be approved.

9 Review of the Council's Statement of Licensing Policy

This item was deferred.

10 Zero-Tolerance to Abuse Policy

The Council considered a report of the Director of Legal and Democratic Services which presented a proposed Zero-Tolerance Approach to Abuse Policy (for copy see file of Minutes).

In Moving the report Councillor K Rooney said that the Council already had excellent arrangements in place to deal with abuse and intimidation towards Councillors effectively. The Standards Committee were pleased to note that the Council met four out of the five guiding principles set out in the Local Government Association's report "Debate not Hate: Ending abuse in public life for Councillors." Members would recall that the Council's arrangements, in particular the Social Media Toolkit, arrangements with the police and risk assessments in the event of incidents were highlighted by the LGA as best practice. The adoption of the Zero-Tolerance Approach to Abuse Policy would ensure that the Council's arrangements fully reflected the LGA's

recommended best practice. The Policy had been drafted so that it was consistent with the Council's existing policies and procedures such as the Member and Employee Codes of Conduct, the Corporate Complaints Policy and arrangements for dealing with habitual and vexatious complainants. The Policy set clear expectations of the standards of behaviour that were expected from interactions between members, officers and members of the public. It was unfortunate that the abuse and intimidation faced by Members and Officers continued to rise but the Standards Committee remained committed in ensuring the Council's arrangements for dealing with such incidents remained up to date and reflective of best practice. Councillor Rooney thanked the Monitoring Officer, her team and all of the Officers involved in preparing the policy as well as providing support to Councillors who experienced abuse and intimidation.

Councillor R Bell said that the Council already had arrangements in place for dealing with allegations of misconduct against Officers and Members, vexatious and habitual complainants and potentially violent persons. However, there was currently no document which set out the Council's zero-tolerance approach to abuse. This policy sought to address that gap and having signed up to the Debate not Hate statement in January 2023, it was important that the Council maintained its commitment to promote respectful debate and interactions between Members, Officers and the public and duly Seconded the report.

Resolved:

That the recommendations in the report be approved.

11 Overview and Scrutiny Annual Report 2023/24

The Council noted the Overview and Scrutiny Annual Report 2023/24 (for copy see file of Minutes).

Councillor R Crute, Chair of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Management Board presented the annual report set out some of the work undertaken in the past year.

Councillor Crute said that as Chair and alongside the Vice-Chair, Cllr Chris Lines they continued to implement the scrutiny process in accordance with the four principles of effective scrutiny:

- To provide a constructive critical friend challenge
- To amplify the voices and concerns of the public
- To be led by independent minded people who take responsibility for their role
- To drive improvement in public services

The annual report reflected these four principles which underpinned all the work we did. Councillor Crute gave some examples of the work covered.

The Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Management Board scrutinised the Cabinet's MTFP proposals and the Board's comments were included in the final budget report to Council. This was a significant role and responsibility for the Board.

Adults, Wellbeing and Health OSC, chaired by Councillor V Andrews, had engaged with NHS Colleagues in monitoring improvement actions as part of the CQC's Inspection process and had been involved in the preparation and oversight of the Council's Adult Social Care Assurance assessment framework by the CQC.

Children and Young People OSC, chaired by Councillor A Reed, had examined the demands placed upon Children's Social Care and the increased demand for mental health and wellbeing support for Children and Young People which had been evident since the COVID 19 Pandemic.

Economy and Enterprise OSC, chaired by Councillor B Moist had continued its oversight of the Inclusive Economic Strategy Delivery plan and demonstrated its policy formulation role in contributing to both the County Durham Housing Strategy and Homeless and Rough Sleeping Strategy.

Environment and Sustainable Communities OSC, chaired by Councillor B Coult had continued to examine the Council's performance in delivery key actions to address the Ecological Emergency declaration and the Climate Emergency Response Plan, the latest update of which was presented to Cabinet in September.

Safer and Stronger Communities OSC, chaired by Councillor P Heaviside had provided comment on the Safe Durham Partnership Plan Priorities refresh and County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Service's Community Risk Management Plan.

Councillor Crute went on to highlight the increasing work undertaken by the Council's Scrutiny representatives at a regional level in respect of Health services and also Combined Authority scrutiny. Members would be aware that in May 2024 a new regional Mayor Kim McGuinness was elected and a North East Combined Authority Cabinet and OSC appointed. Councillor Crute was keen to ensure that the Council had oversight of the role and functions of the NECA as a high priority moving forward.

Councillor Crute gave his thanks to the members of the overview and scrutiny committees, the chairs and vice-chairs, co-optees, and Council

officers and partners for their continued hard work and support throughout the year and asked members to accept the report.

Councillor C Lines, Vice Chair of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Management Board echoed Councillor Crute's comments and praised the complex and varied work programmes. He thanked the scrutiny officers, other officers and external organisations for their support and commended the members and co-opted members for the standards of discussion during the meetings, and commented that chairs and vice-chairs had worked well together regardless of their political party.

12 County Durham Youth Justice Service, Youth Justice Plan 2024 - 2025

The Council considered a report that presented the Youth Justice Plan 2024/25 and highlighted some achievements and issues during 2023/24, along with areas for improvement which the service would focus on during the next year (for copy see file of Minutes).

Councillor C Hood, Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Adults and Health Services welcomed the update and thanked the dedicated staff and volunteers. He was pleased to see that the plans for the year ahead contained improvements that we all wanted to see and was confident that these plans would produce positive outcomes. He supported the recommendations in the report.

Councillor S Deinali thanked the staff involved and the support they give the children involved. She said that the plan was very thorough and demonstrated how the service would address the challenges. Whilst visiting the team Councillor Deinali said she was amazed at the level of work carried out and the commitment from staff to support all children and how this was having a significant impact on those children. She added that some of these children who had offended were victims of crime themselves and that was an important point to take onboard. She went on to say that the service was starved of funding and required a review of the funding to achieve the best outcomes for our children and young people.

Resolved:

That the recommendations in the report be approved.

13 Request for Dispensation Under Section 85(1) of the Local Government Act 1972

The Council considered a report of the Director of Legal and Democratic Services asking for approval of a dispensation for Councillor G Binney who

was currently unable to attend any Council meetings due to ill-health (for copy see file of Minutes).

Moved by Councillor S Deinali, and **Seconded** by Councillor L Hovvels.

Resolved:

That the recommendations in the report be approved.

14 **Motions on Notice**

The Chair informed Council that there was one Motion for consideration, as Councillor Crute had withdrawn his Motion.

Moved by Councillor M Wilkes and **Seconded** by Councillor C Hood

Council notes and is deeply concerned by the Government's decision to end universal Winter Fuel Payment. Across County Durham, 89,275 pensioners will be financially worse off due to this change.

Council is concerned that around 37% of those eligible do not take up Pension Credit, which will now be required for entitlement to Winter Fuel Payment. This could potentially push thousands of County Durham pensioners into fuel poverty. Furthermore, many pensioners not entitled to pension credit but on low and middle incomes will also be affected.

Council resolves to:

- Request that the relevant portfolio holders write to the Chancellor of the Exchequer and County Durham's MPs, calling for the policy on linking Winter Fuel Payment to Pension Credit receipt, removing 89,275 County Durham pensioners from eligibility to be immediately scrapped.
- Request all Group Leaders within Durham County Council sign this letter to indicate their support.
- Urgently commence a significant awareness campaign to maximise uptake of Pension Credit.

An Amendment was **Moved** by Councillor F Tinsley, **Seconded** by Councillor R Crute, as follows:

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Council is concerned that around 37% of those eligible do not take up Pension Credit, which will now be required for entitlement to Winter Fuel

Payment. This could potentially push thousands of County Durham pensioners into fuel poverty. Furthermore, many pensioners not entitled to pension credit but on low and middle incomes will also be affected.

Council resolves to:

- ~~-Request that the relevant portfolio holders write to the Chancellor of the Exchequer and County Durham's MPs, calling for the policy on linking Winter Fuel Payment to Pension Credit receipt, removing 89,275 County Durham pensioners from eligibility to be immediately scrapped.~~
- ~~-Request all Group Leaders within Durham County Council sign this letter to indicate their support.~~
- ~~-Urgently commence a significant awareness campaign to maximise uptake of Pension Credit.~~
- Request Cabinet to immediately set up and fund a unit specifically to organise and run a Pension Credit awareness campaign in conjunction with relevant voluntary organisations in County Durham.

Councillors J Quinn, R Ormerod, A Shield spoke against the amendment.

Councillors L Hovvels, E Adam, O Gunn spoke for the amendment.

Councillor M Wilkes requested for a named vote which was supported.

For the Amendment

Councillors E Adam, R Adcock-Forster, V Anderson, V Andrews, J Atkinson, A Batey C Bihari, R Crute, S Deinali, K Earley, C Fletcher, J Griffiths, O Gunn, D Hall, C Hampson, A Hanson, L Hovvels, M Johnson, R Manchester, D McKenna, J Miller, D Nicholls, P Pringle, J Purvis, S Quinn, T Smith, P Taylor, F Tinsley, S Townsend, C Varty, E Waldock, J Watson, M Wilson, S Wilson.

Against the Amendment

Councillors A Bell, R Bell, J Blakey, D Brown, L Brown, J Cairns, J Charlton, I Cochrane, J Cosslett, B Coult, M Currah, T Duffy, J Elmer, K Fantarrow , D Freeman, K Hawley, P Heaviside, L Holmes, C Hood, A Hopgood, D Howarth, J Howey, C Hunt, G Hutchinson, N Jones, C Lines, E Mavin, L Mavin, B McAloon, M McGaun, P Molloy, J Nicholson, D Oliver, R Ormerod, E Peeke, R Potts, J Quinn, A Reed, G Richardson, K Robson, K Rooney, J Rowlandson, A Savory, E Scott, P Sexton, A Shield, J Shuttleworth, A Simpson, M Stead, W Stelling, A Sterling, D Stoker, T Stubbs, D Sutton-Lloyd, M Walton, A Watson and M Wilkes.

Abstentions to the Amendment

Councillors D Boyes, B Kellett, L Maddison and I McLean.

The Amendment was lost.

The Council then voted for the Original Substantive Motion as follows:

For the Original Substantive Motion

Councillors A Bell, R Bell, J Blakey, D Brown, L Brown, J Cairns, J Charlton, I Cochrane, J Cosslett, B Coult, M Currah, T Duffy, J Elmer, K Fantarrow , D Freeman, A Hanson, K Hawley, P Heaviside, L Holmes, C Hood, A Hopgood, D Howarth, J Howey, C Hunt, G Hutchinson, N Jones, C Lines, L Maddison, E Mavin, L Mavin, B McAloon, M McGaun, P Molloy, J Nicholson, D Oliver, R Ormerod, E Peeke, R Potts, J Quinn, A Reed, G Richardson, K Robson, K Rooney, J Rowlandson, A Savory, E Scott, P Sexton, A Shield, J Shuttleworth, A Simpson, M Stead, W Stelling, A Sterling, D Stoker, T Stubbs, D Sutton-Lloyd, M Walton, A Watson and M Wilkes.

Against the Original Substantive Motion

Councillors V Anderson, D Boyes, C Hampson, B Kellett, D McKenna, I McLean, T Smith and C Varty.

Abstentions

Councillors E Adam, R Adcock-Forster, V Andrews, J Atkinson, A Batey, C Bihari, R Crute, S Deinali, K Earley, C Fletcher, J Griffiths, O Gunn, D Hall, L Hovvels, M Johnson, R Manchester, J Miller, D Nicholls, P Pringle, J Purvis, S Quinn, P Taylor, F Tinsley, S Townsend, E Waldock, J Watson, M Wilson and S Wilson.

The Substantive Motion was **Carried**.

15 Questions from Members

There were no questions from Members.