

Durham County Council

At an **Ordinary Meeting** of the County Council held in the **Council Chamber, County Hall, Durham** on **Wednesday 11 December 2024** at **10.00 a.m.**

Present:

Councillor J Nicholson in the Chair

Councillors M Abley, E Adam, R Adcock-Forster, V Anderson, V Andrews, J Atkinson, P Atkinson, A Batey, K Batey, A Bell, C 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, L Fenwick, C Fletcher, D Freeman, J Griffiths, O Gunn, C Hampson, D Haney, A Hanson, K Hawley, P Heaviside, T Henderson, S Henig, J Higgins, L A Holmes, C Hood, A Hopgood, L Hovvels, D Howarth, J Howey, C Hunt, G Hutchinson, M Johnson, N Jones, P Jopling (Vice-Chair), B Kellett, C Lines, L Maddison, R Manchester, C Marshall, C Martin, E Mavin, L Mavin, B McAloon, S McDonnell, D McKenna, I McLean, S McMahan, J Miller, P Molloy, D Mulholland, D Nicholls, D Oliver, R Ormerod, E Peeke, R Potts, P Pringle, J Purvis, J Quinn, S Quinn, A Reed, G Richardson, S Robinson, K Robson, K Rooney, J Rowlandson, E Scott, J Scurfield, P Sexton, K Shaw, A Shield, J Shuttleworth, G Smith, T Smith, M Stead, W Stelling, T Stubbs, A Surtees, D Sutton-Lloyd, P Taylor, F Tinsley, S Townsend, C Varty, M Walton, A Watson, J Watson, M Wilkes, M Wilson, S Wilson, D Wood, R Yorke and S Zair

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors G Binney, J Chaplow, A Savory, M Simmons and E Waldock

1 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 23 October 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 reported that she recently had the pleasure of inviting nine year old Roman Williams and his siblings to light up the Christmas tree at County

Hall and the nearby roundabout. Roman had been invited by the Chair to attend after she had heard about the tremendous courage he showed in coping with a chronic heart condition.

Roman, from Fishburn underwent a heart transplant in December 2015, but there were complications. The Chair explained that despite these challenges, Roman presented himself as a cheerful little boy with a cheeky sense of humour who loved his computer games, Lego and Newcastle United. Switching on the Christmas tree lights was a wonderful experience for him.

The Chair also thanked everyone who attended her Civic Dinner in November. Over £1000 had been raised towards the Chair's two chosen charities. The Chair placed on record her sincere thanks to everyone who had assisted in the organisation of the event.

The Chair also thanked everyone who attended the Christmas celebration in the Durham Room and witnessed an outstanding performance by the Durham Music Service. To see many young people come together and showcase their incredible musical talents to the Council, friends and colleagues from across the North East, was a very proud and special occasion.

The Chair reminded Members that Christmas Jumper Day was being held on 17 December. Monies raised would continue to support her two chosen charities Tiny Lives and Friends Together.

In closing 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.

4 Leader's Report

The Council noted a report from Councillor A Hopgood, Leader of the Council. In her report, Councillor Hopgood reflected upon what the council had achieved over the last 12 months as follows:

The devolution of power from Westminster to the North East in the spring was certainly a landmark moment. The trailblazing deal between the Government and the new North East Combined Authority had empowered the Council to go even further to deliver on our ambitions and to work with our communities on the things that mattered most to them.

Councillor Hopgood thanked everyone who had taken the bold decision for County Durham to be part of the wider North East Combined Authority, who saw this as an opportunity to deliver for residents and businesses on such a large scale. In the first six months alone, funding had been secured for the

County to the tune of tens of millions of pounds, and secured access to further funding unavailable through any other channel.

Councillor Hopgood went on to highlight that during the summer, the council celebrated the opening of The Story, our new culture, heritage and registration venue and New Hall, Locomotion's new exhibition space.

Staying with culture, Councillor Hopgood referenced the vibrant festival and events programme which had continued to delight residents and attract tens of thousands of visitors to the county. She also referenced the launch of a three-year programme 'Into the Light' which aimed to empower communities, inspire children and young people, and breakdown barriers to working in creative industries.

2024 was also an exciting year for NETPark, which celebrated its twentieth anniversary and saw the last piece of steelwork fitted as part of the £62 million phase three expansion.

Many other construction projects were completed during year, including a new roundabout at Seaton Lane, the expansion of Sniperley Park and Ride and the building of Springmoor Grange Primary School in Spennymoor and Belmont Secondary school.

Councillor Hopgood went on to report that in July, the council adopted its third Climate Emergency Response Plan, which set out over 230 actions to help us become a net zero council by 2030 and a net zero county by 2045. Earlier this month the Council had retained its green accreditation for the third year in a row from Investors in the Environment. The Council were also awarded Best Carbon Reduction Award at their annual awards, with Jo Holmes, managing director of Genee Consulting Ltd, the North East hub for Investors in the Environment, saying: "We love working with Durham County Council through the Investors in the Environment programme – they are an excellent example of leadership from a local authority around this agenda. "The breadth of projects the council is involved in is to be commended and evidence that the team recognise that projects of all scales have value in addressing climate change.

"We're so pleased Durham County Council has been recognised for its hard work with the Best Carbon Reduction Award at this year's Investors in the Environment awards. It is a huge achievement and testament to their continued commitment to the environment."

Furthermore, she reported that the support we offer to children and vulnerable adults had also been recognised with the adult social care provision being rated as good by the Care Quality Commission, while our

specialist children's home was rated outstanding in all areas. Ofsted inspectors also praised the support we offer to care leavers.

In conclusion she added that the above provided a snapshot of an incredibly busy year, and she thanked all members, council staff, our partners and our communities for their hard work.

In closing, Councillor Hopgood wished everyone a wonderful Christmas and expressed that she was looking forward to continuing to work together in 2025 to build a brighter future for County Durham.

5 Questions from the Public

The Chair informed the Council that two questions had been received for the meeting from Mr M Clarke and Professor M Tallerman.

Mr M Clarke was unable to attend to put his question and the Chair therefore read his question as follows:

Meetings of the Durham County Council Cabinet sees the leader and cabinet portfolio holders rise within a structured agenda and read out pre-prepared statements. This has been standard practise for many years, not limited to the current administration and, just to reassure members this is not politically motivated, was certainly the method used by Labour when I sat on the council between 2017 and 2021.

The meetings currently mimic a read-through of a TV script and, whilst appreciating the need for preparation and that officers will almost always prepare a worded statement in advance, the meetings are over-staged.

All councillors should be concerned with connecting the public to politics. Cabinet meetings give important information but they are not meetings, they are read-throughs. Currently, everyone's time could be saved by simply collating the responses in a scripted format and publishing them on the councils website.

Can the cabinet meeting format be reviewed with consideration given on how a better balance can be struck so the meetings at least appear more organic and natural?

If any changes are implemented, I hope full council can agree to retain any improvements beyond the current council term.

Councillor Hopgood thanked Mr Clarke for his question and provided a response as follows:

Cabinet meetings operate in accordance with the Executive Procedure Rules as set out in the Council's Constitution and the format has remained unchanged for many years.

Given the proximity to the elections in May 2025, the Director of Legal and Democratic Services will review the format of Cabinet meetings with whoever is elected Leader of the Council at the annual meeting of Council on 21 May 2025 and a report will be presented to the first meeting of the Constitution Working Group in the new municipal year.

The second question was from Professor M Tallerman who was in attendance to ask her question as follows:

Since the Council last considered the issue of fluoridation, there have been three developments. A US Federal Court ruled that water fluoridation poses an unreasonable risk to the IQ of children, and the US National Toxicology Program found a large body of evidence to support this. In the UK, the Cochrane Report found that any reduction in tooth decay in fluoridated areas was so tiny – or possibly non-existent – that the continuation of fluoridation programs is of questionable clinical or public health value.

In light of these new findings, will Council reconsider its support for fluoridation, return the matter to the Scrutiny Committee and the Health and Wellbeing Board for debate, and allow representations to these committees from all viewpoints, including opponents of fluoridation?

Councillor Hood thanked Professor Tallerman for her question and provided the following response:

The Department for Health and Social Care (DHSC) consultation on the community water fluoridation expansion in the north east of England has been considered by the appropriate committees of the Council; the Health and Wellbeing Board and both the Children and Young People and Adults and Health Overview and Scrutiny Committees. We received several representations which were considered, and responses were provided.

The responses of both these committees to the consultation were submitted to the DHSC. The consultation closed on 31st July 2024.

Existing fluoridation schemes in the United Kingdom are the responsibility of the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care who is required by legislation to monitor the effects of water fluoridation schemes on health, and to produce reports at no greater than 4-yearly intervals.

County Durham has an oral health promotion strategy which includes a range of interventions to improve oral health and reduce dental decay,

including fluoridation and supervised toothbrushing schemes. An update on this strategy, including any new evidence, will be provided to the Adults Health and Wellbeing Overview and Scrutiny Committee in January 2025.

This will also include an update on the outcome of the DHSC consultation on the expansion of community water fluoridation in the north east if available. Members of the public will be able to attend the Scrutiny Committee in the usual way.

The Chair announced that the questions and responses would be posted on the Council's website following the meeting.

6 Petitions

The Council received a petition from Mrs Sheryl Elliott local resident regarding Station Hotel, South Hetton repurposing / demolition.

The Chair thanked Mrs Elliott for presenting the petition which would be forwarded to the appropriate service for a response as part of the 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 meetings held on 16 October and 13 November 2024 (for copy see file of Minutes).

8 Care Experience as a Protected Characteristic

The item was deferred to a later meeting.

9 Mid-Year Review Report on Treasury Management for the period to 30 September 2024

The Council noted a report of the Corporate Director of Resources which provided information on the treasury management mid-year position for 2024/25, a summary of the Council's treasury position, borrowing activity, investment activity, treasury management and prudential indicators at 30 September 2024 and an overview of activity during the first six months of 2024/25 (for copy see file of Minutes).

Councillor R Bell, Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Finance thanked the Corporate Director and his team for the comprehensive update on the Council's treasury management activity during the first half of the financial

year. He further thanked the Audit Committee and added that it was pleasing to note that the Council had continued to fully comply with all the requirements of the treasury management policy and strategy.

Moved by Councillor R Bell, **Seconded** by Councillor A Watson and

Resolved:

That the Council:

(a) Note the Treasury Management position as at 30 September 2024, the treasury management activity during the first half of the financial year and compliance with the Treasury Management Strategy 2024/25;

(b) Note the update on implementation of changes in accounting for leases that came into effect from 1 April 2024;

(c) Approve the changes to accounting arrangements for Minimum Revenue Provision (MRP), applicable from 1 April 2024, and note the financial implications of this policy change, which will deliver MTFP savings in 2025/26; and

(d) Approve the changes to monetary counterparty limits from 11 December 2024 in response to the reduction in cash investment balances held.

10 Review of Local Pension Board

The Council considered a report of the Corporate Director of Resources which provided an overview of the Local Pension Board and set out proposals to expand the Board from 6 to 8 members (for copy see file of Minutes).

Moved by Councillor Hopgood, **Seconded** by Councillor Crute and

Resolved:

That the Council agree to the expansion of the Local Pension Board from 6 to 8 members.

11 Director of Public Health Annual Report 2024

The Council received the 2024 Annual Report of the Director of Public Health for County Durham (for copy of report and slides of presentation see file of Minutes).

The County Durham Director of Public Health focused on the following areas:

- The Health of our people
- The Future Health of our people

- Health and Social Care
- Healthy behaviours
- Wider determinants of health
- Recommendations and Conclusion.

Councillor C Hood, Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Adult and Health Services welcomed the independent annual report from the Director of Public Health and thanked the Director and her team for its production.

Councillor Hood stated that this year's report 'Unfair and Avoidable, Looking Ahead to Health in 2040' had a focus on the future health of County Durham residents and was great to see the recommendations that are highlighted within the report build on existing work and identified new opportunities. Councillor Hood would look forward to future annual reports which would report on progress being made to ensure that the projections set out in this report did not become a reality.

12 Review of the Council's Statement of Gambling Principles (Gambling Policy)

The Council considered a report of the Corporate Director of Neighbourhoods and Climate Change which presented for adoption the revised Statement of Gambling Principles (Gambling Policy) (for copy see file of Minutes).

Moved by Councillor D Brown, **Seconded** by Councillor J Shuttleworth and

Resolved:

That the Council agree and adopt the revised Gambling Policy, attached as Appendix 2 to the report.

13 Protocol on Members Use of Resources

The Council considered a report of the Director of Legal and Democratic Services which presented Council with a draft Protocol on Members Use of Council Resources (for copy see file of Minutes).

Moved by Councillor R Bell, **Seconded** by Councillor T Stubbs and

Resolved:

That the Council adopt the Protocol on Members Use of Council Resources.

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

Moved by Councillor A Hopgood, and **Seconded** by Councillor E Scott.

Resolved:

That the Council approve the request for dispensation under section 85(1) of the Local Government Act 1972.

15 Motions on Notice

The Chair informed Council that there were two Motions for consideration.

Moved by Councillor L Hovvels, **Seconded** by Councillor J Miller

The former Bluebell Primary School site in Trimdon Grange has been empty for some time, becoming a blight on our community, and a hotspot of ASB and other crime, including arson. This has resulted in damage to a Council building which would cost around £1 million to repair, with current ongoing costs of paying for 24/7 security.

This is because the Council does not have an empty buildings strategy.

Therefore, this Council calls on the relevant Portfolio Holder to establish a cross-party working group to create an Empty Buildings Strategy, to prevent issues, such as this in Trimdon, happening across our county.

Councillors L Maddison, R Bell, M Wilkes, J Rowlandson and A Hopgood spoke against the Motion.

Councillors F Tinsley, C Marshall, A Surtees and O Gunn spoke in support of the Motion.

Councillor L Hovvels requested a named vote which was supported.

For the Motion

Councillors E Adam, R Adcock-Forster, V Anderson, V Andrews, J Atkinson, P Atkinson, A Batey, K Batey, C Bihari, D Boyes, I Cochrane, R Crute, S Deinali, L Fenwick, C Fletcher, J Griffiths, O Gunn, C Hampson, A Hanson, S Henig, J Higgins, L Hovvels, M Johnson, L Maddison, R Manchester, C Marshall, B McAloon, D McKenna, I McLean, S McMahon, J Miller, P Molloy, D Mulholland, D Nicholls, P Pringle, J Purvis, S Quinn, J Scurfield, P Sexton, K Shaw, G Smith, T Smith, A Surtees, P Taylor, F Tinsley, S Townsend, A Watson, J Watson, M Wilson, D Wood and R Yorke.

Against the Motion

Councillors M Abley, R Bell, D Brown, J Cosslett, M Currah, D Freeman, L Holmes, J Howey, C Hunt, N Jones, P Jopling, D Oliver, E Peeke, R Potts, J Quinn, G Richardson, K Robson, J Rowlandson, E Scott, D Sutton-Lloyd and M Walton.

Abstentions

Councillors A Bell, C Bell, J Blakey, L Brown, J Cairns, J Charlton, B Coult, T Duffy, D Haney, P Heaviside, T Henderson, C Hood, A Hopgood, G Hutchinson, C Lines, C Martin, E Mavin, L Mavin, S McDonnell, J Nicholson, R Ormerod, A Reed, S Robinson, K Rooney, A Shield, J Shuttleworth, M Stead, W Stelling, T Stubbs, M Wilkes and S Zair.

The Motion was **Carried**.

In accordance with the Council Procedure Rules, the Chair announced that the time for consideration of Motions had lapsed and announced that the motion from Councillor R Crute would be deferred until the next meeting.

16 Questions from Members

Councillor K Shaw asked the following question:

What financial impact has there been for each of the daytime businesses in Seaham which are located in the adjacent areas where car parking charges have been introduced?

Councillor E Scott, Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Economy and Partnerships thanked Councillor Shaw for his question and provided the following response:

Like other councils, and as a Council with 15,000 businesses we do not and should not track the individual financial performance of every business, however we use other data to provide us with a measure of the performance and vitality of our main centres. This includes both measures of property vacancy across the town and an assessment of footfall. The most recent vacancy figure for Seaham measured in summer 2024 shows 92.8% occupancy – which is the highest occupancy in the County. This compares to a national high street average occupancy rate which remains around 86%.

- Earlier this year you will have seen the highly positive press around The Seaham Marina, with both the berths and the associated units being fully occupied and helping contribute to the diverse offer of the town.

- Having provided long term investment to reposition Seaham's economy we continue to provide support to businesses, implementing the Townscape Heritage Programme, providing business advice, and financial support to new or diversifying businesses through our UK Shared Prosperity programme, including three new businesses in Seaham recently receiving support.
- In the year to date we have progressed 10 business enquiries for the town. We have continued to support events in the town including the recent Food Festival, which attracts over 20,000 visitors.
- We routinely assess all available data for Seaham (and our other towns) to ensure we can support policy and programme development and to assist our centres to be effective retail / leisure destinations. We will continue to provide support and assistance to new businesses and those seeking to diversify.

We remain committed to providing support to Businesses and our town centre including thriving centres such as Seaham and will continue to work with businesses and residents as we develop our new Strategic Place Plans to identify future priorities and opportunities within towns across county Durham.