

Westmoreland and Furness Council Meeting 23.11.23

Report by Michael Hanley

Chair: M Severn (MS, LD).

1. Public Participation.

Jonathan Davies (JD, Disruptor Davies, Leader of Cumbria First): One of the first actions of this council was to equalise council tax between the three former district council areas. This caused an increase in our area (Eden). Since then the south of the council has had an increase in funding. Local communities have missed out on hundreds of thousands of pounds. There is a clear disparity of policy for the north of the council area. Will this council commit to level up especially for communities in the north?

J Brook (JB, Leader, LD): We have discussed funding for development. This is based on the CIL (Community Infrastructure Levy: charge levied by local authorities on new development in their area) proposal for new developments. South Lakes District Council introduced CIL in 2015. 15% of income goes to parish councils. EDC and Barrow chose not to pursue it. In these areas income is from Section 106 contributions. This council will need to consider whether to widen CIL. The government wants to replace Section 106 and CIL.

2. Announcements

JB: There has been £25 million investment in our area and £13 million from the Levelling Up Fund. In the chancellors statement yesterday, we were mentioned twice. There is £17 million for the Penrith Hub. This will be key to drive economic growth in Eden and Penrith. There is much work to be done. The Borderlands Project will bring £3 million for Dalton and other towns.

A Jarvis (AJ): Discussed the pressure on the stability of local government (there are several bankrupt local authorities in the UK). I want to reassure you of our financial health. Since the first of April a huge amount of work has been done. We will have a £324k overspend, which is a tiny amount. We need to understand the drivers of the overspend. One is school transport. In the chancellor's Autumn Statement, there was no mention of extra funding for local government. We have an adequate level of reserves. We are in a much more secure position than a lot of other authorities. I will work on delivering a balanced budget next year.

J Derbyshire (JD, LD): We have 2,500 council houses in Barrow and some in Eden. In the past the properties were improved and in Barrow they have been insulated. There is some dampness and mould in some, but this is being dealt with. The Eden properties (about 80) are newer. We are also working to increase affordable housing. There is a housing equivalent of Ofsted which will be inspecting our houses in the next few years. We will be working with landlords and tenants in rural areas to improve the properties. The government will increase local housing allowance in April 24. A lot of residents don't know about the Council Tax Reduction Scheme.

N Hughes (NH, LD): Across the country, 750k responded to the Ticket Office Closure Consultation. The vast majority were against this. About 300 were in favour, the same as the number of Conservative MPs. Something has to change in the way this country is governed. I am delighted that the railway ticket offices will now not close.

3. Electoral Review of WAFC

Two members of the Boundary Commission gave a presentation to the council: Andrew Scallon (Deputy Chair, AS) and Nicola Holt (NH).

NH: We will look at the number of councillors, wards and the number of councillors per ward. We will check for poor electoral equality. Every local authority needs to be reviewed every 12-14 years. There is also a need for review after a structural change (like the recent changes to bring WAFC into being).

Progress:

Phase 1: Work out how many councillors are required to provide effective governance.

Phase 2: Look at ward arrangements, consult communities.

Phase 3: Go to parliament to make the changes.

Phase 4: Implementation.

We are now at phase 1. We will receive submissions from councillors. The deadline is July 24. We will look at decision making, scrutiny and partnerships (outside bodies) and representational requirements.

We then move to phase 2. March-May 24. Local communities have two opportunities to give their views. The findings will be discussed and the conclusions will be published. In September 24 the final proposals will be made public. The statutory criteria are: electoral equality: each councillor represents about the same number of residents, community identity and interests are taken into account and local government is effective.

Over the years the number of people in certain areas may increase or decrease greatly. Barrow is a likely area for growth. Community identity and interests are: shops, schools, sports facilities and places of worship. Parishes cannot abolish or amend boundaries. We cannot consider political consequences.

Phase 3: Recommendations go to parliament. This is a 40 day period and if there is no objection, the recommendations will become law. If this goes through, the changes will become law in 2027.

NH: Thanked the commission for confirming that the review will not affect the date of the next local authority elections in May 27.

AS: We have to decide how many councillors you need. It depends on the number of registered voters. Some parishes don't want to work with a neighbouring parish. We don't want to split communities. You can also ask for single member wards.

M Brereton (MB, C): Asked whether there could be 4 member wards.

AS: We find that 4 member wards do not work well. We would create two 2 member wards.

MB: Asked about 2700 residents per councillor.

AS: You start off with an average for the area. We decide on the number of residents per councillor depending on whether it is urban or rural. We go plus or minus 10% (sometimes 20%) depending on the rurality.

G Archibald (GA): This review could cause disruption to the area. I thought we had done a review.

AS: The current state is an interim arrangement.

B Cooper (BC, C): There are now 65 councillors and there are 2700 residents per councillor. Is this high or low?

AS: We weren't involved in the current arrangements. We have to find out if you have the right number. We don't know yet.

J Fillmore (JF, G): Asked about the planning committees as she thinks they are too small (with 8 members).

AS: We are not involved at this level.

AJ: What is your perspective of lakes and rivers.

AS: We wouldn't always say that a lake or mountain was a dividing feature. We would ask local community opinion.

T Callister (TC, L): If we need six more councillors, what do you do?

AS: There are already some imbalances at 65 (members). You may need 71. If you said you needed 100 we would say hold on.

TC: If we needed more councillors, what would your paymasters say?

AS: We get our funding from the Speaker's Committee, which is as independent as possible. The speaker is our paymaster. The budget is £2.5 million per year. Once the decision is made it goes to parliament. We have never had a query about the changes in the number of councillors.

D Rathbone (DR, LD): How are you looking at the dynamics of future growth.

AS: We will look at your local plan.

S Pender (SP, LD): There is no public transport in my area and a lot don't have a car. How do my residents get to talk to you?

AS: Discussed rurality problems.

A Connell (AC, LD): How will the council's opinion about the number of councillors affect your decision?

AS: When we get the figures, we might increase the numbers by one or two. The council has requested that we come back for another review.

P Thornton (PT, LD): Asked whether Cumberland Council will have a similar review.

AS: They are several months out of sync with this one.

4. Cabinet Minutes 17.10.23 and 14.11.23.

J Murray (JM, LD): Thanked the cabinet for the work on Voreda House (new Eden council headquarters). It is being referred to locally as HS2.

AJ: All projects are facing similar problems of overspend. Our council is not immune to inflation. Most of the overspend is due to increased costs of construction. It was the best option, to complete the building. We are delivering an excellent new hub for Penrith which will have very low running costs.

J Drake (JD, L): Asked about the temporary closure of Ulverston Library. The library supports the deprived and is a warm hub. It supports mental health and wellbeing. People in Ulverston are disappointed. The closure is having a negative impact. When will it reopen?

JB: Library services in Ulverston are not under threat. We will deliver library services in Ulverston. We will consult with community on future provision.

P Dew (PD, C): Said he was concerned that the status of CALC (Cumbria Association of Local Councils) in relation to WAFC will be elevated. (Minutes of cabinet meeting: "One of the key aspirations of WAFC is to work closely with the community...The implementation of unitary status means that the parish and town councils are now the next level of local government and many are aspiring to do more than they have undertaken in the past including asset transfer, service provision and active consultation. We anticipate this will require additional and specialised support from CALC alongside the welcomed Thriving Communities...96% of TC and PCs are members of CALC).

JB: Discussed the situation with CALC.

M Hanley (MH, L): (Referring to core funding of the two AONBs (Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty) in this area): Why is North Pennines AONB only getting £20k and Arnsdale and Silverdale getting £32k. Alston is at the centre of North Pennines AONB. North Pennines AONB is, by my rough estimate, about 60 miles in diameter whereas Arnsdale and Silverdale is only about five miles wide.

GA: I will send you a written answer.

H Irving (HI, C): Asked about Coronation Hall in Ulverston (in need of renovation).

PT: The hall was built between 1914 and 1918. The council at that time got into severe debt. It is

an essential building for Ulverston. The council has too many buildings. The plan is to restore the building.

V Taylor (VT, LD): Discussed the importance of this type of building for art and culture. We will do as much as we can.

A Burns (AB, L): Asked about the Shared Prosperity Fund. We thought we would have an input. We were taken aback when the schemes were chosen and our views were not taken into consideration. Some of the schemes were county wide. We understand that the Liberal Democrats are in charge.

JB: The process was not ours, we were given it by the government. I am not aware of the details (of decision making).

PT: It would take £300 million to put Cumbria's roads right. We could then resurface rather than patch. We have a lot of drains that don't cope with the climate conditions. The experience of the last four years of Johnson's government leaves me to doubt. We have had a reduction of £2.4 million per year (for roads). The government is writing cheques for the next one (in the Autumn Statement). Some say they are laying traps for the next Labour government. The promised £156 million over 11 years would be a reduction in funding. We cannot pay our contractors with promises.

W McEwan: Asked about the four days notice for questions to the cabinet (during WAFC meetings).

MS: That's for Questions on Notice. These are given priority and taken first and because of this, the portfolio holder councillor is able to give a more complete answer.

A Connell (AC, LD): Any member can ask any question they like.

B Cooper (BC, C): Discussed a local village where the footpaths are in a poor state. can you please repair them?

PT: We have 2500 miles of road and 2600 miles of footpath. The maintenance depends on who owns the land. The Rights of Way team was part of the county council. We intend to increase their budget by four times. There should be room on a footpath for people to pass each other going opposite ways.

M Brereton (MB, C): The Furness village is going to be a key driver of economic growth. The A595 (Dalton to Grizebeck road) has problems with the drains and there is often standing water which is dangerous.

PT: We are getting less money this year, so we can do less. We will have to do £10k less in your ward unless you can persuade your party in government to give us more money.

6. Council Tax Reduction Scheme

The Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme replaced the Council Tax Benefit Scheme in 2013. This gives up to 100% reduction to certain residents of working or pensionable age. In 2023 there were 5917 of pensionable age who claimed reduction amounting to £6 million and 7,391 of working age amounting to almost £10 million. There is no legal obligation on the council to offer a council tax reduction. Most other councils have reduced the amount of reduction by between 10 and 30%.

AJ: Discussed the scheme. There is a reduction of the tax for residents on pensions and on benefits of up to 100%. We are one of the few councils who do this and it costs about £16 million. I am asking that we keep the scheme unchanged. Also £400k goes to residents for a Discretionary Housing Fund to keep those who are in danger of becoming homeless in their homes.

JD: Discussed the increased difficulty of people paying rent and mortgages. A lot of people don't know about the scheme. Please can members spread the word.

GA: I am proud to be part of a council who can do this.
Vote: unanimous in favour.

7. Capital Programme Update Report

Capital Programme for 2023-2028: £304 million.

Some of the schemes:

Extension of Green Homes Grant: £10.8 million.

Additional Pothole Funding: £3 million.

Windermere Ferry (convert to electric): £1.16 million

Highways and Transport: £1.6 million.

Strategic Highways: £1.75 million.

Cumbria Coastal Community: £936k

Voreda House (virement): £3.2 million.

Barrow Market: £2.185 million

Grange Lido: £1.1 million.

Solar Farm Programme: £2.78 million

Affordable Housing: £4.8 million.

Beaconside Primary School (Penrith) Extension: £2.6 million (Section 106 funding).

Money will be spent to change the councils vehicles to transition to Net Zero.

There is a forecast spend of £14.6 million on Adult Social Care and £34.7 million on Children's Services. Also £63 million on the Thriving Communities scheme and £129 million on the Thriving Places scheme.

AJ: Discussed the above figures. It is a hugely ambitious programme: Voreda House, a large solar farm, main road improvements and work on Barrow Town centre.

PD: Asked about Voreda House. We were assured it would not cost more than £4.56 million. It is now £8.3 million. This is due to the incompetence of EDC officers and councillors. I have asked over and over again for an update on this project. I had to read about it in the Cumberland and Westmoreland Herald. We had to learn about this in the local press.

AJ: I made my comments. We made clear decisions. I am limited in what I can say.

NH: I think its disgraceful that a member should criticise officers from a former district council who cannot respond. One of the reasons for the increased cost was to remove the unforeseen asbestos from the building. Is he suggesting we should have left this in the building?

PD: NH was not a member of EDC. To equate the problem with Brexit and Covid is not true.

MB: Asked about the A595 Improvement Scheme. Asked about increased costs. He said consultation with local members is very important.

PT: The problems with the A595 were unforeseen. Members do deserve an explanation about Voreda House but that is difficult when we are in the middle of building and contracts.

Vote: Passed, 1 abstention.

8. Report on Treasury Management of Previous Councils (district and county)

AJ: There was no new significant borrowing by the old councils.

GA: There is a £20 million loan which will have to be repaid. EDC, how did you manage to run a council with so little borrowing?

Vote: unanimous (to receive).

9. Remote Licensing Hearings

Due to the Covid pandemic, other councils have been having virtual licensing hearings via the internet.

H Ladhams (HL, LD): Discussed changes in London councils to bring in remote hearings.

L Hall (LH, C): I was at the meeting about this. There was no consensus.

HL: As far as I know there was consensus.

AJ: Read from the minutes of the meeting. A vote was taken. The monitoring officer said that this council is sovereign regarding this decision.

Vote: 1 abstention, 1 against, all others in favour.

10. Constitutional Update

AC: The constitution requires changes from time to time. These changes are to do with council procedural rules. One change is that Locality Board decisions can be called in.

Vote: unanimous in favour.

11. Notice of Motion

M Rudhall (MR, LD): The DVLA has announced the end of their contract with the Post Office. This will end at the end of March 24. The only option for dealing with the DVLA will be on-line. This will be detrimental to the elderly and those living in rural areas. The DVLA business contributes £2.3 million to the Post Office. This will be a big loss for the Post Office.

We need to challenge this. This the second time the Secretary of State for Transport has targeted these people. A many councils as possible should write in protest to the minister.

J Battye (JB, LD): We showed our feelings regarding the closure of the railway ticket offices and got that decision reversed.

Vote: unanimous in support.

Next meeting: 18.1.24.