

Westmorland and Furness Council Meeting 26.9.24

Report by Michael Hanley

Temporary Chair: D. Rathbone (DR, LD)

1. Public Participation

Resident: Will WAFC listen to the people of Dalton and Ulverston regarding the local town library?

J Brook (JB, Leader, LD): We agreed that we would work with the people of Dalton to improve Ulverston Library. Councillor Virginia Taylor is eager to engage.

2. Announcements

JB: I would like to welcome Cllr Andy Connell back (was on sickness leave). I would also like to thank Cllrs Sue Sanderson and Phil Dew (both recently resigned) for their service over the years. Discussed S Sanderson's work with children. Cllr Dew was a valued member and also a Methodist minister prior to working as a district and county councillor. His decision to move on will be a loss. His passion was making sure young people had a good start in life.

Regarding Voreda House, lessons have been learned. A report was commissioned by Internal Audit. The problems were inflation, the pandemic and the war in the Ukraine which affected costs. We needed to improve governance and flow of information to our members. With Voreda House we have a state of the art hub with very high environmental standards.

Concerning devolution, in July local authorities were asked to submit expressions of interest by September. Devolution will be essential to unlocking new funding. An expression of interest does not commit us. We have decided to do this. We will explore our relationship with Cumberland Council. We share many services. We need to hear from the government as to how devolution works.

V Taylor (VT, LD): Discussed the WAFC Emergency Plan. We have had more than our fair share of emergencies over the last few years. Recently we have trained twice as many major incident centre workers.

N Hughes (NH, LD): Discussed encouraging less use of vehicles: "car-free days". It is essential for central government to provide enough money to improve public transport. We hope there will be increased support for buses from the incoming government. We want to have an excellent public transport system.

3. Cabinet Meeting 16.7.24

JB: We have been trying to have cabinet meetings in other venues.

A Burns (AB, L): Asked about the policy on HMOs (Housing with Multiple Occupancy). There has been an explosion of HMOs in Barrow. Can we have a policy on this?

J Derbyshire (JD, LD): I will look into this.

B McEwan (BME, L): Asked about funding for buses, particularly about the number 3 bus in Barrow.

V Hughes (VH, LD): Asked about school refusal in children.

J Batty (JBa, LD): Discussed different mechanisms: attendance officers, Early Help, etc.

B Shirley (BS, C): Asked about the bus service in his area. It is not on the list for funding.

M Hanley (MH, L): Delighted to see a proposal for a new twice weekly Alston to Penrith bus service. How likely is this to happen?

NH: The opportunity was there, there was a bid. When there are no bids (by private bus companies) officers try to get providers. We cannot provide the service in-house.

4. Question by Members

C Atkinson (CA, C): Asked about Voreda House. I have heard there are short comings with accommodation especially for planning committee members. The recent planning committee was very crowded with members of the public standing. Where will the alternative be and what unnecessary cost will it be? Tax payers have just forked out £8 million.

A Jarvis: I am not aware of this situation, I will look into it.

BS: Asked about missed waste collections in his area. Barrow is the second worst area for recycling in the country. When will our bins be collected?

G Archibald (GA, LD): We have allocated an additional half a million pounds to alleviate the situation. We have hired more staff and bought more vehicles. We are investigating sickness absence. We have a waste queries email address for any councillor. Also parish clerks can use this email address. I am not going to stand here and say the service is perfect. I have set up a cross party working group.

BS: Regarding the extra funding, are the vacancies live and are you recruiting?

GA: Its best to get the officers to give you a response.

4. Youth Justice Plan

JB: This is an important service for some of our more vulnerable residents. It is based in Barrow and is a multidisciplinary team. Child-centred principles are an essential part of this. A recent report showed a 11% reduction in youth re-offending. (Total cost of the service is £1.1 million).

S Evans (SE, LD): The people who are looking after these young people really care about them. They are very vulnerable young people and we need to keep them out of the criminal system and focus on employment skills and speech and language training.

AB: This is an excellent report. The list of priorities is good, early help to prevent these young people from re-offending.

J Drake (JD, L): Applauded the holistic approach. Discussed contributory factors: domestic abuse, parenting issues.

JB: Thank you for all your comments. Having a readable summary is good.

5. Capital and Assets Update

AJ: The budget is about £420 million. The total capital plan has increased by £30 million. Discussed assets surplus to needs (various buildings and land owned by the council including Mansion House in Penrith). There is no intention to dispose of these assets. We are not putting up a for-sale sign.

M Brereton (MB, C): I welcome the funding for the main road in my ward.

AB: Discussed worries about the assets being sold and previously promised money committed by the previous government (£200 million to Barrow area). This money was not in the budget.

P Thornton (PT, LD): It all rests on the autumn statement, members might want to contact the Barrow MP (Labour) and make sure we get this funding.

AB: Our MP is already knocking on doors to ensure this funding.

AJ: We have increased the maintenance of our assets by £5 million so they will be in better state than in the past.

6. Member Development Programme

JB: There is on-line training throughout the year. Some of this mandatory for certain councillors on certain committee. Examples of subjects: Cared for Children, Equality and Diversity, County Lines (Drug Dealing), Personal Safety of Councillors, Handling On-Line Abuse and Intimidation.
DB: Discussed the importance of the PDP.

7. Member Code of Conduct Complaints.

A Connell (AC, LD): Discussed the new guidelines for investigation of complaints.

8. Health and Wellbeing Board Terms of Reference.

JB: Discussed the work of the HWB.

Chair DR: Also there is an amendment to appoint Councillor Hanley to the board.

9. Annual Review of the Constitution

AC: There are changes to make it easier for members to ask questions (in meetings).

10. Armed Forces Update

WAFC are ahead of other councils. Our Armed Forces Champion represents the council on many Armed Forces events. Housing teams give specialist support to veterans.

JB: Discussed support given to veterans and Armed Forces families by WAFC.

B McEwan (BME, L): Discussed his experience as a champion.

BS: Discussed remembrance parades, suggests WAFC scrap the fee to close roads on Remembrance Day (for parades).

N Phillips (NP, Champion, C): I am looking to year two of delivery. Discussed the cadets at Barrow.

T. Callister (TC, L): I would like to compliment the policy on the Armed Forces. I would also like to support Councillor Shirley and support scrapping the fee.

11. Notices of Motion:

Conservative Motion (abbreviated):

The Labour Government's recent decision to restrict Winter Fuel Payment to only those pensioners in receipt of means-tested benefits like Pension Credit, will mean that in excess of 40,000 pensioners in Westmorland and Furness who badly need the money to stay warm this winter will not receive it.

.....this council resolves to:

Condemn the proposalrecognising the disproportionate impact this will have on our most vulnerable residents, particularly those in rural communities.

Request that the leader writes to the Chancellor of the Exchequer urging a review

Encourage local efforts to promote Pension Credit uptake through our council services....

H Carrick (HC, C) to move : Changes to the Winter Fuel Allowance (WFA)

HC: The move is a cruel stunt by the new government against pensioners. Fuel poverty in Cumbria exceeds the national average. This heartless government may feel that our old age pensioners are expendable.

AJ: I support the principal of the motion. I am aware there are many wealthy pensioners who

don't need support. Any pensioners who receive more than £220 per week will not be eligible. There are many older people who don't receive the pension. We are a bit riled by the source of this motion, the Conservatives. This is the party of the poll tax, the party who cut benefits to families with more than two children. Is this motion being driven by concern or politics? I propose an amendment.

TC: AJ has put it very well. It is not a great move by the Labour Party. But this blue team (the Conservative group) are way off the mark.

NH: Discussed the black hole of about £20 billion left by the previous government, the outgoing government crashed the economy. No government should be punishing those in need. I do agree that this is a political motion. The Liberal Democrats have a strong record on supporting pensioners,

HC: I find it a bit rich, what is the problem with saying it's the Labour Government. I fail to see the significance of the amendment. There is universal agreement on the action of the motion.

Motion voted on: All LDs and L members voted against the Conservative motion.

B Morgan (BM, L): The new government has significant challenges after 14 years of financial mismanagement. The withdrawal of the Winter Fuel Payment causes concerns. Some wealthier pensioners might not need it, but the criteria on pension credits will exclude many who need it. It will cause an increased strain on the NHS and have consequences for health and well-being. The government will increase pensions in the next year. The Labour amendment is to seek additional information from the government about the broader plans to end pensioner poverty and WAFC to make firm commitment to older adults.

BS: The previous government made some monumental mistakes. I am surprised at the games that this administration (?WAFC) is playing. Let's get back to what the motion is about.

AJ: I fully accept the Labour amendment.

AB: It's OK to say we shouldn't dwell on the past. What was decided in the past has an effect on the present. It is hypocritical of the Conservatives to put this motion. We know that Home Care and Residential Care faced shortfalls every year (during the last 14 years). More and more people were put into poverty. The last government spent money that wasn't there, even spending the reserves.

MB: To say that our motion was a political stunt is totally untrue. My concerns with this government is that it was brought in so quickly (changes to WFP). We should put politics aside.

TC: As a Labour group here, we're just as cheated off as anyone else.

AC: The amendment names no political party.

D Cassidy (DC, L): This is not a political decision. Think of the money wasted in Covid tracing and PPE during the pandemic.

AJ: I am happy to accept the Labour Party amendment. ooi

Vote on LP amendment: Unanimous in favour.

Liberal Democrat Amendment:

The government's recent decision....will mean that thousands of pensioners in WAF who badly need the money to stay warm this winter will not receive it.... some...may not require it, many thousands sit just above the cut-off for Pension Credit and will lose their allowance.

Council resolves to: condemn the proposal to remove WFP, requests the Leader to write to the Chancellor of the Exchequer...to review the decision....Encourage local efforts to promote Pension Credit....

NP: I am embarrassed by the behaviour of some of the members. I have wondered whether I am

in the right party in the past.

G Archibald (GA, LD): I address Councillor Carrick. You used the words “thuggery” and “heartless” with regard to the national government. I want to dissociate myself from those words.

C Atkinson (CA, C): I am embarrassed, a game of political ping-pong. Many will die. Let’s hope it’s not our Mums and Dads.

BM: If we look at the original motion and the two amendments, we are united.

Vote: Unanimous in favour.

End of meeting.