

Westmorland and Furness Council Meeting 22.2.24.

Report by Michael Hanley

1. Minutes of Previous Meeting

M Hanley (MH, L): Said he had asked a question at the previous meeting in November about the National Parks. He was told that he would receive a written answer but had not.

M Severn (MS, chair): We will look into that.

2. Announcements:

MS: Discussed Holocaust Memorial Day. Discussed the apprenticeship programme. The Dock Museum in Barrow has been nominated for several awards.

J Brook (JB, Leader, LD): We have had a solid start with our new authority. We have faced multiple challenges: weather events and economic pressures. The volume of work has been more than expected: Team Barrow, Levelling Up for Kendal and Penrith. We are in a sound financial position. We owe a debt of gratitude to all our staff.

S Sanderson (SS, Cabinet member, LD): Talked about Family Hubs and Childrens Services. We have opened the second Family Hub in Dalston. Family Hubs will become important centres. Discussed Sandgate School, Kendal which is for Special Needs Children (3-19 years). This has been expanded. Also, there is to be expansion of Beaconside Primary School in Penrith.

Discussed a recent film about foster care. The film is called "Hope" and is available to watch on the WAFC Youtube channel. She urged young people to stand for the UK Youth Parliament.

3. Cabinet Meetings

Questions: P Dew (PD, C): Referred to the consultation exercise (public survey) about the council tax. In the survey only 25% agreed with the 6.7% rise in council fees and charges. Was this a paper exercise?

A Jarvis (AJ, Finance Portfolio Holder, LD): We have a policy of increasing charges in line with inflation. We use the same method as the government. We think this is a fair system.

4. Members' Allowances

Paul Jones (PJ, Independent Review Panel) Discussed the report about members' allowances. We concluded that the amount paid to cabinet members didn't reflect the amount of work entailed. So we decided the Leader should get twice basic allowance instead of 1.8 times (in addition to basic allowance of £13,000 per annum), the Deputy Leader 1.2 basic allowance and members with special responsibility get an additional basic allowance.

Questions: B Shirley (BS, C): Asked about the questionnaire that was sent out to members just before the Christmas holidays (a lot of members did not notice this email so there was a poor response).

PJ: We did gather a lot of information but we could look again at the methods.

P Dixon (PD, LD): Noted the disparity with other unitary authorities (councillors are paid more). I noticed the amount that one south coast is paying their councils and he had thought of moving there.

B Morgan (BM, L): The policy should be fair but a lot of our councillors spend many hours per week in council business. I think the survey was missed by a lot of the councillors. We (Labour

group) are asking that all members' allowances (not just the leader etc) be reviewed and that the review be reported back to the council.

JB: Could you repeat that?

BM: We ask that all members' allowances be reviewed and the IRP report back to the council.

JB: We will need a 10 minute adjournment to discuss this.

Adjournment.

L Jones (LJ, Monitoring Officer): There will be a review of all members' allowances and there will be a report at the June meeting.

H Carrick (HC, C): The current recommendations solely look at cabinet allowances. Asked whether there would be a further survey.

LJ: The additional work would be to look at the Special Responsibility Allowance (for members with extra responsibilities) and the ordinary members allowances.

Vote: All in favour except 4 Conservative councillors.

5. Budget

AJ: This is our first budget, the next step to being financially stable. We have faced the highest inflation for forty years. Prices are 20% higher than two years ago. Also there is adverse demographics: increased number of elderly and children with problems. We have a broken funding model (40% reduction in central government support between 2010 and 2020). A recent House of Commons committee concluded that it is no surprise that there has been such great problems in Local Government (multiple councils declaring bankruptcy). Let me be clear, we are not one of these.

There are a few things we need to concentrate on:

(a) Continue the job of disaggregation (separation of services between WAFC and Cumberland Council). We have had to increase the budget for Children and Social Care. We have identified areas of under investment: school maintenance, playgrounds etc.

(b) We will have to drive efficiency. This may mean a big change to the way we do things. It's not about cutting services.

(c) We need to deliver the Council Plan: protect the natural environment, spend £10 million on decarbonising. Continue with the Council Tax Reduction Scheme (for residents on low income). Budgets to Locality Boards. Several million to promote Affordable Housing (grants to Housing Associations).

We need to increase the Council Tax (CT) by 4.99%. This is in line with inflation and with what most other councils are doing and what the government expects us to do. Discussed the increase in CT

on second homes (twice) and empty homes (100% after one year being empty rising to 300% after 10 years, both measures are expected to provide an extra £10 million).

Council house rents (mostly in Barrow where there are still 2500 council houses) will increase by 5%.

At the December cabinet meeting a deficit of £5 million was identified.

Our reserves will be £12 million. In future years there will be a gap of up to £10 million.

Discussed increased spending on Highways (£2 million). Also improvement of Barrow and the building of solar farms.

JB: This is a budget about maintaining our front line services, a budget that will improve services for a number of years.

D Brook (DB, L): We (The Labour Group) do support this budget. It is a difficult time for Local Authorities. We have had cut after cut (government grants to local government), (WAFC expects to receive £30.4 million from central government in the coming year).

It's quite depressing. A Tory government makes cut after cut, hopefully with the incoming Labour government we will get a bit back. I was involved with the Dock Museum (Barrow). I always wondered why Conservative councillors bothered to stand for local government, when their party did so much to harm it. I hope that Councillor Jarvis' optimism is well placed.

HC: We should not be focusing on the politics but on those things that have most impact on our residents. The current focus of the council is on Climate Change. Should we be fanatically obsessed with achieving Net Zero by 2037 when the national target is 2050.

Can we afford to pay £10 million to decarbonise our fleet? (substitute diesel powered vehicles with electric ones). There has been a change in weather patterns (multiple storms) which has caused additional pressure on our roads. We need to invest in additional capacity to enable the Highways

Dept to respond to weather events. We need to mitigate against the actual that people have to contend with rather than theoretical risks.

P Dew (PD, C): There is a lot of good in this budget. I believe in investing (spending on infrastructure) to save. I would take money out of the Climate Change Budget. We have little control over Climate Change.

J Battye (JBa, LD): I am impressed by the calm prudent way that Councillor Jarvis has approached the budget. I think that we are running out of time on the climate. We have limited time to make sure we have a future. The funding for Climate Change is important. Locality Boards show enormous promise. I am pleased we are putting funding into Locality Boards. We are recruiting our own staff (as opposed to outside consultants, who tend to be very expensive).

N Phillips (NP, C): It's easy to say that the government isn't giving us enough money. Local Government Transformation started in 2022 (for this area). We have been very slow at looking at making savings. Discussed the rise in charges for residential care. People with dementia will face a 14.9% rise in care costs.

(Care costs for Elderly Care Homes: Residential: now: £688 (per week), proposed: £752, residential dementia: now: £821, proposed: £943.)

P Thornton (PT, LD): Drains and gullies, there is no finer investment for a council, when we are dealing with water on our highways. If a drain gets blocked and nothing happens, please contact me. With successful budgets we need clear vision, to avoid financial shocks, skilled officers and forward thinking. This budget is the product of the merger of 4 councils, Barrow which was Labour run, South Lakes, run by the Liberal Democrats as was Eden in a coalition with Independents, Labour and the Green Party and the County which was run by the Liberal Democrats and Labour. You may notice a missing party. Other Unitary Authorities have a problem (debt) because of poor decisions by previous councils.

N Hughes (NH, LD): This is a productive and well balanced budget. It will meet the needs of the vast proportion of our residents' demands. Councillor Archibald's passion is Net Zero. However he is not

here. The Prime Minister has pushed back on Net Zero, the government has reneged on it's commitments. If we don't tackle Climate Change there is not much point in doing anything else. Referred to the Bus Travel Bursary and bus subsidies. The support we get help bus services fluctuates wildly every year. This budget gives us headroom to do more.

BS: Discussed Team Barrow. We have heard a lot of government bashing. There had been a lot of

government cash. We need to make sure that Furness is not forgotten given the absence of Liberal Democrat members in the Barrow area. I had hoped to see more on the skills gap.

BM: Discussed and approved the budget.

A Burns (AB, L): I agree we are not on the brink of bankruptcy. We will not oppose this budget. We would like more devolved finance to Locality Boards. There are 130 councils on the brink of not being able to balance their budgets. Cuts have a big impact on our services. We have had

millions and millions of pounds taken from our budgets over the last 14 years. We have to be careful about maintaining our reserves. We have hundreds of thousands of children living in poverty, increased homelessness and reduced services for the elderly. This government has squandered millions. Look at the PPE contracts (during the pandemic). We need a government that understands what is going on in our communities.

M Brereton (MB, C): The budget is a good baseline starting point. Whether Keir Starmer will have any money to spend is debatable. I am concerned about the Empty Homes Surcharge. Some people who inherit their mother's house may have difficulty selling it within a year. One year may not be enough. There should be a way of making exceptions.

T Callister (TC, L): Referred to MB's comments. Keir Starmer will get into government and find the coffers empty due to Tory incompetence.

AJ: Discussed comments from other councillors. Referred to Somerset Council which was previously run by the Conservatives and is now in dire straits. Referred to the Empty Homes policy. The situation that MB was referring to are excluded. Rural authorities have been treated particularly badly. An equivalent urban local authority receives £30 million more than we do. We have stabilised our services in our first year. Councils have to play a part in achieving Net Zero. We will prioritise things that will save money: insulation, solar energy, electric vehicles. At the heart of the Conservative Party there are many who reject Climate Change. We are proud that we will play our part.

Vote: All Liberal Democrats and Labour members voted in favour, all Conservatives voted against the budget.

6. Treasury Management Update

This concerns management of cashflow, investments, borrowing etc.

Questions:

HC: We have an excellent treasury management team. This is an excellent performance.

D Rathbone (DR, LD): We are in control in a year where there may have been multiple traps. Our cash position is sufficient. It enables us to do what we want to do. We haven't had to increase the amount of our long-term loans.

Vote: Unanimous in favour.

7. Licencing Policy

NH: This is the first unified Licensing and Gambling Policy. It refers to retail sale of alcohol, supply of alcohol to club members, late night refreshment (food and alcohol served in premises or from food-stalls between 23.00 and 05.00 hours.

Gambling Policy also discussed.

NH: Adult Gaming Centres, Bingo, betting premises, tracks and casinos are covered.

Vote: Unanimous in favour.

8. Local Plan Governance

V Taylor (VT, LD): There are 4 legacy plans (from the the three previous district councils and the county council). We need to prepare a single local plan within five years. This should last for 15 years. We want to leave the place better than we found it. Huge changes of growth are imminent

in Barrow. In rural areas we have to attract investment. The Levelling Up Act of 2023 says we have 13 months to complete the plan. It is recommended that a Local Plan Members Steering Group be established.

MB: It doesn't seem that any of the Conservative Group will be on this group.

VT: I am conscious of that. The membership is intended to be as lean as possible.

LJ: There is no reason why we shouldn't have another member.

MH: If there is there to be a Conservative member of this group, there should be a Labour one as well.

LJ: There is a Labour representative in the group.

PT: Having Conservative members in the group and supporting the Local Plan would be unique.

G Simpkins (GS, LD): I am chair of Eden Planning Committee and I am not included. Having chairs of planning committees would be where you should start from.

JM: I am chair of Eden Locality Board and represent all councillors in Eden, so it is appropriate that I am in this group.

JB: We need to get started. We shouldn't delay starting. These groups should be SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, time-bound). It shouldn't be party political.

Vote: Unanimous in favour.