

POLICY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE

WEDNESDAY 13TH SEPTEMBER 2023 AT 7pm

Minutes of the meeting of the **POLICY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE** held in the Council Chamber, Council Offices, School Aycliffe Lane, Newton Aycliffe on Wednesday 13th September 2023 at 7.00pm.

PRESENT

Councillor Arun M. Chandran (Chairman)

Tony Armstrong, Martin Ashcroft, Lindsey Aston, Jim Atkinson
Peter Bergg, Dorothy Bowman, John Clark, George Gray, Ian
Gray, Brian Haigh, Andy Hill, Jed Hillary, Sandra Kirby, John
Moore, Carl Robinson, Ken Robson, Michael Stead, Anne
Woodward and John Woodward.

OFFICERS

Mr. Dan Austin (Town Clerk)
Mrs. Tracey Woodhead (Finance Manager)
Mr. Steve Cooper (Works and Environment Manager)
Mrs. Sharna Stretch (Senior Administration Officer)

IN ATTENDANCE

Councillor Amanda Hopgood, Leader of Durham County Council
Mr Paul Darby, Director of Resources, Durham County Council
Councillor David Sutton Lloyd
Brian Riley, Great Aycliffe and Middridge Area Action Partnership
Plus 26 Members of the Public.

40. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillors: Eddy Adam, Sandra Haigh, Phillip Hawkins, Wendy Hillary, Simon Hocking, Joanne Jones, Neville Jones and Anita Sparrow.

41. MEMBERS DISPENSATIONS

No dispensation requests had been received.

42. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Declarations of interest relating to Agenda Item 9 on Grants and Donations were submitted by Councillors Lindsey Aston, Michael Stead, Anne Woodward and John Woodward as they are members of Community Spirit, Councillor George Gray as members of his family are members of the Acle Scout Group and Councillor Ian Gray as a member of Aycliffe Bus Preservation Society.

43. NEWTON AYCLIFFE SCOUT SUPPORTERS' ASSOCIATION – SCOUT HALL

The Chairman of the Policy and Resources Committee had requested that this subject be included on the agenda to allow the Council to discuss and debate public concerns, following the decision by the Newton Aycliffe Scout Supporters Association Committee to bar the Newton Aycliffe First Scout Group from using the Scout Hut.

The Town Clerk then gave a statement in which it was confirmed that meetings had been held with representatives of both parties and a compromise solution had been agreed that would see the First Newton Aycliffe Scout Group return to the Scout Hut, subject to a number of conditions.

It was reported that there are still a number of governance and financial management issues to resolve as well as the issue of whether the scouts groups should pay hall hire fees moving forward and a Special General Meeting is to be called by Members of the NASSA with a view to discussing and addressing some of these concerns.

The Town Council will continue to monitor the situation and have offered to place a non-voting representative onto the NASSA Committee to assist and provide advice on governance and financial management.

The Chairman wished to have it recorded in the minutes, his thanks to the Town Clerk for his brilliant work on this issue which had been time consuming and demanding as well as to the Corporate and Policy Officer for her assistance and Councillors John Woodward, Ken Robson, Neville Jones, and all members of the Council, for the strength through unity which had maximised the authority of this Council in the discussions with the Management Committee representatives.

Thanks were also given to Scout Leaders and nameless others, as well as the Chairman of the Management Committee, for the co-operation during the discussions.

Following a short debate, it was proposed by Councillor Arun Chandran, and seconded by Councillor Ken Robson and;

RESOLVED – that it be recommended that;

1. The policy of this Council is that at all times, the Scouts Groups must have free and unfettered access to the Scout Hall.
2. The Chairman of Policy and Resources Committee and Town Clerk are authorised to monitor the situation closely regarding compliance and represent the Council's interests at any Committee or other meetings if they are so invited.

44. PUBLIC QUESTIONS

A member of the public opened the questions with a background statement as to the history of the scout hut and that she had been a part of this for over 47 years, 42 of them working the bar. She stood down in 2022 as she disagrees with how the NASSA is being run and wants the current committee to step down.

Another voiced her concerns about governance and financial management and that the correct process regarding the constitution had not been followed, adding that she had not been privy to meetings that went ahead without all committee members having been notified. She also wanted it clarifying that the issue of implementing a hall hire charge was nothing to do with the decision to bar the scout group from using the building. She concluded by stating that she welcomed the support from the Town Council to get the 'house in order' and support the children.

Another also thanked the Council for its support and provided some further background to the history of the scout hut adding further concerns about the way in which the NASSA is currently being run highlighting the lack of notice of meetings. He added that the decision to bar the scouts group was nothing to do with the children but was affecting them.

A Scout leader thanked the Council for their time and support, adding that she has been a Scout leader for 40 plus years and has been on lots of committees. She added that the NASSA constitution was in need of update.

Another said he was deeply concerned and that the NASSA constitution provides and maintains for a headquarters for all scout groups and that scouting activities must take priority over any other events. He urged people to join NASSA and to vote to remove non-Scout members from the Committee.

County Councillor David Sutton-Lloyd added that he had joined and wanted to get the children back into the Scout Hut as soon as possible.

There then followed a number of further comments and statements by other members of the public.

The Chairman gave a final statement adding that a Special General Meeting would be called of the NASSA Committee by Members and if the issues and concerns were not properly addressed and the meeting not properly observed, the Town Council would make a complaint to the Charity Commission to request an investigation.

The Chairman thanked everyone for attending and then closed the discussion.

It was proposed by Councillor Martin Ashcroft and seconded by Councillor Peter Bergg that the meeting be adjourned. The meeting was adjourned at 7.40pm.

It was proposed by Councillor Martin Ashcroft and seconded by Councillor Carl Robinson that the meeting be reconvened at 7.49pm.

45. GUEST SPEAKER

Councillor Amanda Hopgood, Leader of Durham County Council, and Mr. Paul Darby, Corporate Director of Resources for Durham County Council gave a presentation on the issue of the proposed reduction to the Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme (LCTRS) grant paid to town and parish councils in County Durham.

Paul Darby stated that this was as part of a consultation and that no final decisions have been made yet. He gave a presentation explaining the background to the issue and the options available.

Following the presentation members asked a number of questions which were duly answered by the speakers.

Councillor Jed Hillary left the meeting at this point.

It was proposed by Councillor Arun Chandran and seconded by Councillor Martin Ashcroft that the meeting be adjourned. The meeting was adjourned at 8.44pm.

It was proposed by Councillor Martin Ashcroft and seconded by Councillor Ken Robson that the meeting be reconvened at 8.46pm.

46. POLICY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE MEETING MINUTES

It was proposed by Councillor Ken Robson, seconded by Councillor Andy Hill and;

RESOLVED - that the minutes of the meeting of the Policy and Resources Committee, held on the 19th July 2023, be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

47. ACCOUNTS CONTROL SHEETS

Accounts Control Sheets for the period 13th – 28th July 2023 and 10th – 24th August 2023 and the General Bank Account for July 2023 were submitted for approval.

RESOLVED – that it be recommended that:

- i) the Account Control Sheets for the period 13th – 28th July and 10th – 24th August 2023 and the General Bank Account for July 2023 be received.

48. GRANTS AND DONATIONS

The Town Clerk submitted a report setting out the grant and donation requests which had been received since the last meeting.

It was reported that a total of £4,170 is currently available in the Donations Budget and £7,156 in the Community Benefit Fund.

The following donations requests were considered:

a) **Rachel Layfield-Carroll – 1st Newton Aycliffe Brownies**

A request was received from the Leader of the 1st Newton Aycliffe Brownies and resident of the town, who has been selected to represent girl guiding as part of a UK contingent at an international event; Roverway 2024.

It was proposed by Councillor George Gray, seconded by Councillor Peter Bergg, and;

RESOLVED – that it be recommended that;

- i) a donation of £200 be given to Rachel Layfield-Carroll towards the cost of the attending the Roverway 2024 international event.

b) Oak Leaf Badminton Club

A grant application form was received from Oak Leaf Badminton Club Juniors to assist with their set-up costs.

It was proposed by Councillor Carl Robinson, and seconded by Councillor George Gray, and;

RESOLVED – that it be recommended that;

- ii) a grant of £400 be given towards the set-up costs of the Oak Leaf Badminton Club Juniors.

c) Community Spirit

A donation request was received from Community Spirit for a donation towards the cost of running their annual Christmas Extravaganza.

Councillor Sandra Kirby proposed that the full amount requested be given, however this proposal was not seconded.

It was proposed by Councillor Peter Bergg, seconded by Councillor Carl Robinson, and;

RESOLVED – that it be recommended that;

- iii) a donation of £300 be given towards the cost of running the Community Spirit Christmas Extravaganza.

d) Acle Scouts

Acle Scouts had submitted a grant application form towards the cost of supporting the scouts on various activities in the lead up to Christmas.

It was proposed by Councillor Andy Hill, and seconded by Councillor Ken Robson, and;

RESOLVED – that it be recommended that;

- iv) a grant of £400 be given towards the cost of supporting the scouts travel costs.

e) Aycliffe and District Bus Preservation Society

A donation request was received from Aycliffe and District Bus Preservation Society for £279 towards the cost of purchasing two 'A' frame boards for use at society events.

It was proposed by Councillor Carl Robinson, and seconded by Councillor Jim Atkinson and;

RESOLVED – that it be recommended that;

- v) a donation of £279 be given towards the cost of to purchase 2 'A' frame boards.

f) Letter of Thanks

A letter of thanks was received from the Heel and Toe Children's Charity for the donation of a raffle prize.

RESOLVED – that it be recommended that:

- vi) the letter of thanks be received.

49. 2024/25 REVENUE AND CAPITAL BUDGET SETTING FRAMEWORK AND TIMETABLE

The Finance Manager submitted a report to seek Member's approval of the proposed framework and timetable for the setting of the Council's 2024/25 Revenue and Capital Programme Budgets.

It was proposed by Councillor Jim Atkinson, and seconded by Councillor John Clark, and;

RESOLVED – that it be recommended that:

- i) the budget framework and timetable for the setting of the Council's 2024/25 Revenue and Capital Budgets be approved;
- ii) in person budget consultation meetings are not held as part of the 2024/25 budget process.

50. 2023/24 TO 2027/28 MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL PLAN

The Finance Manager submitted a report to members summarising the key messages and conclusions from the Medium-Term Financial Plan which covers the five-year period 2022/23 to 2027/28.

It was strongly emphasised that there is limited scope for savings and if the reduction to the LCTRS grant goes through that the Council would need to look to increase the Council Tax by more than originally indicated to offset this.

The LCTRS grant cut had resulted in the forecast council tax increase for 2024/25 increasing from 2.99% to 6.5%.

The risks of and implications of implementing a lower increase or a council tax freeze were highlighted.

Councillor Michael Stead thanked the Finance Manager for the work undertaken in preparing the plan and questioned why some of the items in the Capital Programme Budget have not progressed and he asked why the budgeted capital spend on St. Oswald's Pre-School was so high.

The Finance Manager explained the budget planning process with regards to the capital budgets and the distinction between revenue and capital budgets, stressing that members should not confuse capital and revenue budgets and that savings are identified by checking each budget line by line.

The Town Clerk added that the capital budget is fluid and includes a number of provisional sums and is reviewed regularly by the Asset Management Working Group. He also highlighted the importance of taking a long-term view of the

Council's finances and that the capital budgets, whilst a consideration in the level of precept, did not directly influence the levels of increase indicated in the plan, which were more influenced by pay awards, inflation and the LCTRS grant cut.

It was proposed by Councillor Jim Atkinson, and seconded by Councillor John Clark, and;

RESOLVED – that it be recommended that:

- i) the 2023/24 to 2027/28 Medium Term Financial Plan be approved.

Councillor Tony Armstrong left the meeting at this point.

51. NOTICE OF MOTION

The following notice of motion had been submitted by Councillor Michael Stead, and seconded by Councillor Lindsey Aston:

“This Council agrees to freeze the council tax for the financial year 2024/25 and asks our multi-skilled managers to present innovative ideas to raise capital and look further into possible options to find savings required, including fees and income, service delivery, efficiencies and external grant funding to help prevent such a large suggested increase this year following last year’s already hefty increase.

We are constantly informed that the Council has healthy reserves balances of £1.6 million and requesting another huge increase of 7.5 % in the precept in the next financial year, with no improvements to / or additional services is simply not acceptable to all of our residents of Newton Aycliffe.”

Councillor Michael Stead withdrew this Notice of Motion as it was his view that notice of the motion had not been kept confidential.

The Chairman stated that anyone can see the Motion Book and that the Chairman of each of the committees are informed of items which are to be placed on the agendas which are then sent out in advance.

Councillor Stead replied that the following Notice of Motion was more of a statement whereas an amendment would have been made, he further suggested that the Standing Orders and Officers’ Code of Conduct had been breached.

Councillor Jim Atkinson then suggested that members move progress on this item which was seconded by Councillor Martin Ashcroft.

Councillor Michael Stead left the meeting at this point.

52. NOTICE OF MOTION

The following notice of motion was submitted from Councillor Arun Chandran, seconded by Councillor Ken Robson:

“Taking the MTFP into account this Council was looking to increase Council Tax by 2.99% for 2024/25 and less thereafter. It is the view of the Independent Group that the Council must not confuse capital expenditure with revenue expenditure. If the LCTRS grant is reduced by Durham County Council, then it is our view that the Town Council Precept should be raised by that amount, thus Durham County Council will be directly responsible for an increase of 2.99% becoming 7%. This Council will not create a black hole in its finances by falsely running down capital

reserves to support revenue expenditure, nor will we cut and slash services, events and facilities and cripple the Council's finances for future generations to have to deal with. We believe that the Liberal Democrat proposal which would create a black hole in the Council's finances of approximately £123,000 in year one and then compounded each year thereafter which is an unacceptable course of action and could bankrupt the Council in 5 to 6 years”.

Councillor Martin Ashcroft proposed an amendment and was seconded by Councillor Carl Robinson that the motion should read ‘the council’ in place of the ‘Independent Group’.

A vote took place on the amendment and passed by a majority decision.

Councillor Lindsey Aston left the meeting at this point.

A vote then took place on the substantive motion which also passed by a majority decision.

RESOLVED – that it be recommended that the following motion be agreed;

“Taking the MTFP into account this Council was looking to increase Council Tax by 2.99% for 2024/25 and less thereafter. The Council must not confuse capital expenditure with revenue expenditure. If the LCTRS grant is reduced by Durham County Council, then it is the view of the Council that the Town Council Precept should be raised by that amount, thus Durham County Council will be directly responsible for an increase of 2.99% becoming 7%.

This Council will not create a black hole in its finances by falsely running down capital reserves to support revenue expenditure, nor will we cut and slash services, events and facilities and cripple the Council's finances for future generations to have to deal with. We believe that the Liberal Democrat proposal, which would create a black hole in the Council's finances of approximately £123,000 in year one and then compounded each year thereafter, is an unacceptable course of action and could bankrupt the Council in 5 to 6 years”.

53. INTERNAL AUDIT UPDATE

The Finance Manager submitted a report to update Members on the Council's Internal Audit provision.

RESOLVED – that it be recommended that the report be received.

54. USE OF VAT WINDFALL RESOURCES

The Finance Manager had submitted a report requesting Members' consideration of the options identified by officers in relation to the use of the backdated VAT windfall resources.

The Finance Manager gave a brief verbal update to advise members that the full amount requested from HMRC had been received. It was further advised that the proposed purchase of inflatable marquees which had been initially suggested in the report had been discounted due to insurance concerns, and that it was now recommended that the older marquee was instead replaced with a like for like replacement.

It was proposed by Councillor Peter Bergg, and seconded by Councillor Ken Robson and;

RESOLVED – that it be recommended that:

- i) the report be received.
- ii) the approach recommended by officers for the use of the windfall VAT resources be approved.
- iii) the options set out in the report for targeted investments in the Oak Leaf Sports Complex, Golf Complex, community events, allotments and cemeteries be approved, subject to the purchase of inflatable marquees being removed and that the older existing marquee is instead replaced with a like for like replacement.

55. EV CHARGING POINTS

A report was submitted by the Works and Environment Manager with updated information regarding the potential of installing electric vehicle (EV) charge points at the Oakleaf Sports Complex.

The Works and Environment Manager provided a verbal update on the report and answered a number of questions from Members.

Councillor Ken Robson suggested that EVC charging points should be investigated by officers in due course for the works depot.

It was proposed by Councillor Carl Robinson, and seconded by Councillor Peter Bergg and

RESOLVED – that it be recommended that:

- i) the report be received; and
- ii) officers pursue the installation of EV charging points at the Oak Leaf Sports and Golf Complex in partnership with Durham County Council, subject to this being at no cost to the Council and a further report to the Policy and Resources Committee with full details of the proposal and the proposed licence agreement.

CHAIRMAN.