

POLICY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE

WEDNESDAY 3RD DECEMBER 2025

Minutes of the meeting of the **POLICY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE** held in the Council Chamber, Council Offices, School Aycliffe Lane, Newton Aycliffe on Wednesday 3rd December 2025 at 7.00pm.

PRESENT

Councillor Carl Robinson (Chairman),
Tunde Akinsanya, Martin Ashcroft, Jaci Beddard, Tony Beddard, Dorothy Bowman, Arun M. Chandran, Jordan Gill, George Gray, Phillip Hawkins, Andy Hill, Sandra Kirby, Jackie McFadden-Lewis, John Moore, Kyle Robinson, Ken Robson, Brian Sowerby, Michael Stead, Tracey Williams, Anne Woodward and John Woodward.

OFFICIALS

Mr. Dan Austin (Town Clerk)
Mrs. Tracey Woodhead (Finance Manager)
Mrs. Judith Thexton (Head of Leisure and Events)
Mr. Steve Cooper (Works and Environment Manager)
Ms. Amanda Donald (Corporate and Policy Officer)
Mrs. Sharna Stretch (Senior Administration Officer)

IN ATTENDANCE

Eight members of the public were in attendance.

73. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillors: Tony Armstrong, Lindsey Aston, Neil Collinson, Luke Ellis and Richard Hutchinson.

74. MEMBERS DISPENSATIONS

No dispensation requests had been received.

75. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of interest were received.

76. PUBLIC QUESTIONS

It was agreed to move this item to follow Agenda Item 9 – Santa Tours.

77. POLICY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE MINUTES

It was proposed by Councillor Andy Hill, and seconded by Councillor Tracey Williams and;

RESOLVED - that the minutes of the meeting of the Policy and Resources Committee, held on the 22nd October 2025, be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

78. PERSONNEL SUB COMMITTEE MINUTES

It was proposed by Councillor Martin Ashcroft, and seconded by Councillor Andy Hill and;

RESOLVED - that the minutes of the meeting of the Personnel Sub Committee, held on the 4th November 2025, be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman, and its recommendations and decisions be agreed.

79. ACCOUNT CONTROL SHEETS

Account Control Sheets for the period 26th September; 9th October, 24th October and 10th November and the General Bank Account for October 2025 were submitted for approval.

RESOLVED – that it be recommended that the Account Control Sheets for the 26th September; 9th October, 24th October and 10th November and the General Bank Account for October 2025 be received.

80. GRANTS AND DONATIONS

The Town Clerk submitted a report setting out for consideration the current position of the grants and donations budgets. It was reported that a total of £7,550 is currently available in the Grants and Donations Budget, £8,510 in the Community Benefit Fund and £1,899 in the Community Events Grants Budget.

It was noted that no requests for grants or donations had been received since the last meeting.

It was proposed by Councillor Tracey Williams, and seconded by Councillor Andy Hill, and

RESOLVED – that it be recommended that;

- i) The report be received.

81. SANTA TOURS – PROPOSED CHANGE TO THE FORMAT OF EVENT – OFFICER PRESENTATION

The Town Clerk gave an opening statement outlining the background to the proposed changes to the Santa Tours Event.

It was highlighted that the issue had been subject to a robust debate at the Recreation Committee Meeting on 26th November, discussing in detail the health and safety and insurance concerns, and operational problems associated with running the event in its current format, and why the event simply must be changed to address these concerns, whilst also presenting the officers proposals for a revised event, involving Santa stopping at dedicated locations and times, planned in a way whereby Santa would not be more than 500 metres away from any individual household.

It had been resolved at the Recreation Committee Meeting to defer the decision to this meeting in order to allow time for officers and councillors to meet informally, as soon as is practicable, to discuss all feedback from the public and councillors, and look at all options for the new format of the event.

The Town Clerk reported that officer and councillors have since given a lot of consideration to the comments, questions, concerns and ideas put forward by the public at the meeting last week, and had met informally to agree a way forward ahead of this meeting.

Officers and councillors were in full agreement on two issues:

- The event must change to address health and safety concerns highlighted in the event risk assessment and independently confirmed by the health and safety advisor and insurers.
- A full review of the event needs to take place early next year, and a Santa Tours Working Party established, including representation from volunteers and public to review the success of the event this year in whatever format is agreed, and how it can be further improved in future years.

It was highlighted that the one issue that still needed to be agreed is how the event is changed this year to ensure that as much of the magic and tradition is retained, whilst ensuring that the event is run in a safe way, that addresses all of the high risks identified in the risk assessment, and is accessible to as many members of the community as possible.

The Council also needed to consider how to address the public concerns highlighted last week including addressing the risks of members of the public seeking to attend one of the fixed locations in their car or in greater numbers than anticipated, particularly at the smaller locations without parking, the need to consider those members of the community who may be housebound or unable to walk the distance to the nearest fixed stop and the need to try and incorporate as many elements of the traditional tour as possible, with Santa travelling around the streets as far as possible.

The Town Clerk reported that a number of options had been discussed at the meeting between councillors and officers:

1. The designated stops and times option, as per the report last week.
2. The option of touring as many streets as is safely possible, with Santa in the van waving at the public but not stopping.
3. Running the event over a number of evenings in the run up to Christmas Eve, with a greater number of volunteers to ensure public safety.
4. The option of one Santa Sleigh in a large central location with a large amount of space and car parking, or extending this to four or five Santa Sleighs in fixed locations, all with lots of space and car parking available.
5. A hybrid system, whereby each Santa would start and finish at fixed points for an extended period of time (five routes), with all locations including sufficient space and car parking, with Santa then touring that part of the town in between the start and end points, in the cab, without any stops, and covering as many streets as it deemed safe.

After extensive debate, officers and councillors had agreed that the following two proposals be presented for consideration and a decision at this meeting:

1. The designated stops and times option, as per the report last week.
2. The hybrid system of two fixed start and end locations with a limited tour of the streets in that area with Santa in the cab and not stopping.

It was further agreed that a full review of the Santa Tours will take place early in the new year, and that a Santa Tours Working Group will be established.

The Head of Leisure and Events then provided members and public with a detailed outline of how both options would be delivered demonstrating the changes on a map showing an example route plan and how an 'app' is being developed for the public to input their postcodes to find out the nearest Santa location.

The Town Clerk added that whichever option is chosen, all of the high and unmitigable risks and operational concerns can be mitigated to a reasonable level, and that there is enough time to make the revised plans and arrangements.

Once a decision has been made, officers will update the event risk assessment, seeks views on this from the Health and Safety Advisor, liaise with volunteers and finalise the volunteer and reserve list, and draw up the final plans and arrangements for the event and then publicise the new arrangements in good time for Christmas Eve.

Members were reminded that whilst it is appreciated that the tradition of Santa touring every street on Christmas Eve is highly valued by the community, unfortunately for the reasons outlined and discussed in detail last week, the Council simply has no choice but to adapt the event due to the unmitigable health and safety risks and the risks of insurance cover being invalidated.

It was highlighted that both options for changing the format of the event, whilst different from what has gone before, do bring with them some advantages and benefits, most importantly in mitigating all of the identified risks, but also in future proofing and maintaining this iconic and magic event, in a format that, for some people, will be more accessible, allowing the public to attend at a time and place that best suits them.

Members are asked to agree their preferred option and also confirm that a review of the Santa Tours takes place early in the new year, and that a Santa Tours Working Party is established with volunteer and public representation.

82. PUBLIC QUESTIONS

A member of the public asked when the maps for all five routes would be made public. The Head of Leisure and Events confirmed that they would be released as soon as they had been finalised by officers.

A member of the public asked why Santa has to be inside the vehicle, adding the police had previously confirmed that this was acceptable at low speeds, and that in his opinion this was not a high-risk activity.

The Head of Leisure and Events advised that there had been near misses in previous years whereby Santa volunteers had been on the back when the vehicle had braked sharply, adding that it was very difficult to maintain the 5mph speed, particularly on the main roads. The Town Clerk added that once the vehicles leave the depot, there is no control over the actions of the volunteers. He added that the risk assessment was not just the opinion of the officers but had been independently reviewed and it had been confirmed by the Council's health and safety advisor and insurers that the risks that the volunteers are being exposed to are too high.

83. SANTA TOURS – PROPOSED CHANGE TO THE FORMAT OF EVENT

Councillor Martin Ashcroft thanked the Head of Leisure and Events and the Town Clerk for the work that had gone into this issue.

He highlighted the importance of following the health and safety advice and staying within the law and adhering to insurance advice.

Councillor Ashcroft proposed that the hybrid option be agreed, to consist of five routes, using Town Council vehicles, with each route having a support vehicle, and each route having a fixed start, end or mid-point, with suitable car parking available so that residents can meet and greet Santa for a period of 45 to 60 minutes. Santa would tour that part of the town, in between the fixed meeting points, in the cab, without any stops, and covering as many streets as deemed safe by the officers. It was further proposed that officers investigate the feasibility of incorporating visits to care homes.

He further proposed that the Council sets up a Santa Tours Working Party in the new year with member, volunteer and public representation, and that this is placed on the agenda of the January Recreation Committee Meeting for agreement.

This proposal was seconded by Councillor Phillip Hawkins.

Councillor Arun Chandran proposed an amendment that a review of the Santa Tours is undertaken by the Service Review Sub Committee early in the new year, which would be open to the press and public to attend.

Councillors Ashcroft and Hawkins agreed to incorporate Councillor Chandran's amendment into their proposal.

Councillor Michael Stead thanked everyone involved in the development of the new format adding that the proposed hybrid option keeps Santa on the roads and that the Council has listened to the community and is looking forward to this year's event and hopes it is a great success.

The proposal was voted upon and agreed unanimously.

The Chairman thanked the Councillors for not being political on the issue and for being unanimous in their decision.

It was proposed by Councillor Martin Ashcroft, and seconded by Councillor Phillip Hawkins, and

RESOLVED – that it be recommended that;

- i) The report be received.
- ii) The hybrid option be agreed, to consist of five routes, using Town Council vehicles, with each route having a support vehicle, and each route having a fixed start, end or mid-point, with suitable car parking available so that residents can meet and greet Santa for a period of 45 to 60 minutes, and Santa touring that part of the town, in between the fixed meeting points, in the vehicle, without any stops, and covering as many streets as deemed safe by the officers.
- iii) Officers investigate the feasibility of incorporating visits to care homes.

- iv) A review of the Santa Tours is undertaken by the Service Review Sub Committee early in the new year.
- v) The Council sets up a Santa Tours Working Party in the new year with member, volunteer and public representation, and that this is placed on the agenda of the January Recreation Committee Meeting for agreement

84. LOCAL COUNCIL TAX REDUCTION SCHEME GRANT WITHDRAWAL

The Finance Manager submitted a briefing note regarding the full withdrawal of the Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme Grant by Durham County Council and asked that members to provide guidance and feedback to officers on their preferred approach to funding this significant and unforeseen additional revenue budget pressure, to inform the setting of the final 2026/27 Revenue Budget in January.

The Finance Manager added that she would not recommend using balances and reserves to temporarily offset the additional costs, as this would not be a sustainable solution, and would merely put off the problem resulting in higher increases in Council Tax in subsequent years.

It was highlighted that without the identification of additional savings or income generation, the withdrawal of the grant would result in an increase in Town Council Tax of 6.92%, compared to the 2.8% increase agreed in the approval of the draft 2026/27 Revenue Budget.

Councillor Arun Chandran stated that he has a Notice of Motion on the Full Council Agenda proposing that the Council fully offsets the removal of the grant via the Precept, resulting in a forecast increase next year of 6.92%.

Councillor Chandran proposed that this course of action be agreed. This was seconded by Councillor Phillip Hawkins.

Councillor Tony Beddard wished to have it recorded in the minutes that the actions of Durham County Council in removing the grant were disgraceful and badly implemented, having been pitched as a cost saving when in reality it is removing funding, and pushing up the Town Council Tax.

Councillor John Moore added that there may be a public perception that this is a decision by the Town Council and that it needs to be clearly publicised in any press releases and the budget consultation where the fault lies i.e. Durham County Council.

It was proposed by Councillor Arun Chandran and seconded by Councillor Phillip Hawkins, and

RESOLVED – that it be recommended that:

- i) The briefing note be received.
- ii) The Council agreed to fully offset the removal of the Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme Grant by Durham County Council, via the Precept, resulting in a forecast increase in the Town Council Tax next year of 6.92%.

Chairman