

Westmorland and Furness Full Council Meeting 23.1.25.

1. Public Participation

Question from Jonathan Davies (not present): In a written note, asked about the relocation of the Clifton polling station to Lowther Parish Hall, which is 2 miles from Clifton. This will disenfranchise many people in Clifton who do not have cars. Could the Clifton Primary School not be used?

A Jarvis (AJ, LD): Clifton Primary School has informed us that they would not want to be used as a polling station. When we consulted the public, we did not receive any representations. There is an appeals process.

2. Leaders' Announcements.

J Brook (JB, Leader, LD): Discussed the tragic fire at Kirkby Lonsdale on the 8th of December. There was a first class emergency response. WAFC has provided support and services to the local people.

J Battye (Children and Families Portfolio, JBat, LD): Discussed the Family Help Service. This was launched last Friday. The service is to help families get help they may need. There is to be an inspection of the SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disability) services. The visit will start in two weeks.

J Murray (JM, Transport Portfolio, LD): I was recently diagnosed with early cancer of the prostate. This was because of a PSA (Prostate Specific Antigen) test. I would encourage all men of my age to have this test.

P Bell (PB, Health and Adult Services Portfolio, LD): Discussed the proposed CQC (Care Quality Commission) visit to inspect Adult Services. This will occur in the next few months (no date yet). We have started the preparation and will need to submit the forms and papers in the next 1-2 weeks.

V Taylor (VT, Communities Portfolio, LD): Discussed the Forum in Barrow. This is a true community space. The Forum building will need to close so that the asbestos can be removed at the end of March. The plan is to relocate a lot of the facilities to Barrow Town Hall.

3. Minute of Cabinet meetings (5.11.24 and 17.12.24):

Questions:

M Hanley (MH, L): Alston Moor is the most northerly and isolated part of Westmorland and Furness Council area. There is no bus service connecting the area with the council area. I refer to the minutes where it says that £1.7 million of council funding (Bus Service Improvement Plan) would see 20 new and enhanced bus routes on Westmorland and Furness roads next year (2025). One of the proposed bus routes connected Alston to Penrith. We, in Alston Moor, were very disappointed that we were not going to get this service. Can I ask the Portfolio Holder for Transport, are there plans to rectify this situation?

JM: The tender we received was considered not to be value for money. There will be more money coming to this in the next financial year and we will look at it again. I will send you a written response.

L Hall (LH, C): Asked about the asbestos in the buildings in Barrow.

AJ: The contract for removal is being tendered. The problem is far worse than was imagined. It may cost £6 million.

4. Question from Members

E Hennessy(EH, LD): Asked about the implementation of the biodiversity strategy (Local Nature Recovery Strategy).

G Archibald (GA, Climate and Biodiversity Portfolio, LD): There is no indication as to how the strategy will be implemented. This authority is determined to implement the LNRS. There was a meeting of all concerned last week. There is a consultation which will run for six weeks.

D Rathbone (DR, LD): Asked about the council's finances.

AJ: We have seen a dramatic shift (nationally) of funding to urban areas. We have significant pockets of rural deprivation. The Rural Services Delivery Grant was transferred to another grant (that favours urban areas). As a result of this, we will lose £6.4 million (about 4% of council tax income). In contrast urban areas such as Southampton will have an 8.5% increase in income and Manchester 9%. Spending in urban areas will be 40% higher than rural areas. Urban areas have significantly lower levels of council tax. We need the government to recognise rural deprivation.

H Carrick (HC, C): Asked about the cost to the council of increases in National Insurance contributions.

AJ: I have not got the figures to hand. I will send you a written answer.

M Brereton (MB, C): Talked about the inconsistent collection of waste and recycling in his area.

GA: Residents can contact the council via the website about missed collections. The weather has been a major factor over the holiday period.

A Coles (AC, L): Asked about fly-tipping prevention. Three staff have been reduced to one.

GA: There hasn't been a reduction of staff.

A Burns (AB, L): Litter in our area is off the scale. I have nothing but praise for the officers concerned with this. Residents in back-to-back houses (Barrow) have nowhere to store waste.

H Hodgson (HH, LD): Talked about the public transport for Sedburgh. Previously there has been a bus service but this has been changed to a minibus.

JM: There was a bus-route from Kirkby Stephen to Kendal which went through Sedburgh. This service was not good value for money. There will be a 6 day per week service between Sedburgh and Kendal, though on smaller buses.

5. Devolution.

JB: We decided to join the preparatory programme for devolution. We recognise the risks as well as the opportunities. We had reservations. On balance the benefits for us are considerable. We are still awaiting a decision whether we will be accepted. If accepted, there will be a public consultation which will run for 6 weeks.

6. Council Tax Reduction Scheme.

AJ: We remain one of the few councils who offer the extent of this council tax reduction scheme. We had 12,545 claims last year (7598 working age, 4947 working age) at a cost of £15,327,502.)

J Derbyshire (JD, LD): So many households are struggling due to the cost of living crisis.

A Waite (AW, LD): This scheme protects those who are least able to pay council tax. I am very pleased that we are able to continue with this scheme. 2/3 of councils do not provide this support to their less well off residents.

HC: This scheme was inherited and is the most generous in the country. Is it the most effective way of supporting our vulnerable residents?

AJ: If we didn't have this there would be a much higher rate of defaulting on council tax payment.

Vote: All in favour except one abstention (C).

7. Mid Year Treasury Report

AJ: We will have spent just under £100 million by the end of the financial year which is an underspend of £5 million. An extra £6 million is needed to tackle the asbestos at the Barrow Market (including the Forum) scheme. There will be extra borrowing for this. Long term borrowing is at £183 million.

Vote: Unanimous in favour.

8. Notice on Motion.

Fossil Fuels

Proposed by J Filmore (JF, G) and seconded by M Rudhall (MR, LD).

WAFC wants to be at the forefront of tackling climate change. The transition to renewable sources of energy is taking place. Investors could decide not to invest in fossil fuels because they are part of a dying technology. If the Cumbria Pensions Committee still holds such assets (estimated at £60 million) they could become worthless. Continuing to invest in fossil fuels is a financial risk. As part of the fiduciary responsibilities of the Pensions Committee, it should begin to divest away from fossil fuels.

LH: Suggested an amendment: to have an annual review looking at risk (of devaluation of fossil fuels) and take appropriate action.

JF: Refused to accept this amendment (as did several LD councillors).

C Atkinson (CA, C): Made comments about the appropriateness of the seconder Cllr M Rudhall who works as a gas installer, gas being a fossil fuel.

M Severn (MS, Chair, LD): Considered this a totally inappropriate remark and asked for it to be withdrawn.

M Rudhall: I retired from that job at the end of December.

MB: Suggested removing a sentence and then he would support the motion (" Therefore, asking the Pensions Committee to begin to divest from fossil fuels is in alignment with and support of that declaration").

JF: I agree that that sentence can be removed.

(The final sentence remains: "...request that the Pensions Committee consider the possibility to divest the fossil fuel holdings in Cumbria Pensions Fund unless the fossil fuel companies can show unequivocally that they are now or soon will be aligned with the Paris Accord."

Vote: All votes in favour except about five abstentions (members of the Pensions Committee). There might have 1 or 2 against.

