

Westmorland and Furness Full Council Meeting 27.2.25.

Report by Michael Hanley

1. Announcements

M Severn (Chair, MS, LD): Thank you to Pam Dukes, Director of Finance, who will be leaving in April. She has returned a balanced budget every year and has kept us in financial stability.

J Brook: WAFC has been shortlisted for 3 national awards (local government awards). This is quite an achievement as we are only approaching our 3rd year. The three areas are: Children's Services, Climate change (target for Net Zero by 2037) and Diversity and Inclusion (attracting more people into work). The winners will be announced on 11.6.25.

G Archibald (GA, LD): In January 99% of waste collections were collected on time.

J Battye (JB, LD): Discussed the provision of holiday activities . There are 3000 places for children. The scheme has been extended for another year. 12 schools will be providing breakfast clubs, ahead of a national rollout. Family Hubs were launched a few weeks ago.

H Chaffey (HC, LD): Sponsors receive £350 per month for hosting up Ukrainian guests plus a £150 top-up fee. The government will stopping this in April but WAFC will continue it.

J Murray (JM, LD): Discussed Active Travel funding (walking, cycling etc).

V Taylor (VT, LD): We have five local plans (from previous authorities). We have to make a single plan for WAFC. Discussed how the plan is being developed, guided by the Local Development Scheme.

2. Minutes of Cabinet Meetings (21.1.25 and 11.2.25)

H Irving (HI, C): Asked about the £2 million donation from GSK (pharmaceutical company with a factory in Ulverston) and the Ulverston library.

JB: Ulverston has received equal treatment (the library was transferred to the local theatre). As for the £2 million, the MP Michelle Scrogg is leading on this, consulting with the public about various projects.

N Phillips (NP, C): Asked about the Rural Services Delivery Grant (previously £6.3 million to WAFC, but recently abolished by the new government). Has the council considered legal challenge? North Yorkshire Council is currently making a legal challenge.

A Jarvis (AJ, LD): We haven't considered legal action but we have been working through our local MPs.

JB: I was at a meeting yesterday and we will be considering our position in the future.

M Brereton (MB,C): I welcome a housing strategy for our area. How will it be integral to the town centre renewal for Barrow?

J Derbyshire (JD, LD): We are starting with the tenement blocks on Barrow Island.

A Burns (AB, L): Children who grow up in poverty have four times the incidence of mental health problems by the age of 11. Our voluntary services are crumbling under the strain. Will the Cabinet pick this up and put the funding in?

JB: The Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee is investigating this. I agree that we need to urgently look at Mental Health Services for children and young people.

P Bell (PB, LD): Maybe Janet (JB) and I could work together to provide a briefing.

V Taylor: Through Community Power we will be using the United Nations guidance. Listen to the children and give them a voice.

T Callister (TC, L): Asked which member of the cabinet would be working with Team Barrow (the team who will be spending circa £200 million of central government money on improving Barrow). We feel disenfranchised.

JB: There will be an advisory board with members from the locality board.

Sam Plum (SP, Chief Executive): Discussed membership of the advisory board. We only have had two delivery board meetings. Dr Simon Case (chair of Team Barrow Delivery Board) wants to meet the Barrow Locality Board. The main fund is £200 million and a Social Impact Fund of £500k is available this year for Third Sector organisations, to help these become more resilient.

MB: Child poverty is not confined only to one part of the WAFC area.

3. Draft Budget

AJ: We are not yet two years old. A huge amount of progress has been made. We need to to continue LGR (Local Government Re-organisation) This year we have relied on a one-off from our reserves.

In September I was optimistic about the new government, but recently there has been a shift of resources from rural to urban areas. There are significant pockets of deprivation in our area. When the Rural Services Delivery Grant was abolished (recently) we lost 4% of our council tax income (£6.3 million). Rural areas pay 20% more than urban areas in council tax and get lower council services. Today I am asking for an increase in council tax of 4.99% (2.99% plus 2% for Adult Social Services). This is in line with government expectation. Virtually all other councils will be doing the same or more. We must ensure that the council is financially stable. We will not cut services. Our Council Tax Reduction Scheme is the most generous in the country (last year, 12,545 claimants costing £15 million). We will remove the charge to close roads for community events (in recognition of up and coming VE Day celebrations).

Pay increase awards to staff have cost £14 million. The rise in National Insurance contributions has cost £3.2 million. There has been an increased demand for adult social care which has increased by £1.65 million and we have increased funding for Waste Services by £1 million (waste services will also receive funding from the Extended Producer Responsibility for disposal of packaging which is funded by the producers of this waste such as food and drink producers and supermarkets. The fund starts this year).

There has also been increased savings of £10 million. Last year's increase by 100% of council tax on second homes has brought in £10 million. £5 million of this will go to: Affordable Homes,, Playgrounds, Parking, 20mph zones, Locality Boards (permanent funding), Tourist Area support, Environment, Culture Funding, Community Power, Bus Support, Rights of Way and Travel Bursary.

Six other councils are raising their council tax by much more (Bradford:9.99%, Newham and Windsor: 8.99%, Birmingham, Somerset and Trafford: 7.49% in April 25 without a referendum). 34 councils have been given extra money (an increase of £4.3 billion for 2025-26, Cumberland Council will receive an extra £23 million).

(The total that WAFC spends on services per annum such as waste collection, recycling, social care, education, roads, planning etc is about £650 million.)

Debate

PB: Discussed the 2% increase in Adult Social Care (ASC). We have an ageing population, by 2040 there will be 79,000 over 65 year old residents. ASC employs more than 1000 people, about one third of all staff. We spend £61 million annually on ASC and support more than 4000 elderly and more than 2000 carers.

(Independent Sector Residential Care Fee Rates: Residential: £752 per week, increased to £801, Nursing Home: £850 to £905, Dementia: £943 to £1004.)

B Morgan (BM, L): Discussed £300k from the £5 million Second Homes pot going to Leisure Activities Fund. Asked for increased funding to groups of people from deprived backgrounds.

H Carrick (HC, Leader C): Discussed the public consultation about the council tax rise. Most

respondents were opposed. The council has disregarded this. This makes a complete mockery of the consultation. Savings of £19-30 million were identified prior to LGR (as a result of unification of four councils) but these were not achieved. WAFC advertises itself as an ambitious new council. There have been conflicting priorities, such as Waste Services and Climate Change, which have hampered its ability. This council is judged by the quality of the services it delivers. The use of reserves makes the council more vulnerable. £200 million of rural grants has been directed to urban areas (Rural Services Delivery Grant). This is the budget of a precocious infantile authority who are trying to run before it walks.

A Waite (AW, LD): Discussed the under-funding of local government by previous Conservative governments. Most other authorities are in a much worse position. The Labour government said they wanted to redistribute money to the areas of highest need. We got no share of the Recovery Grant, which has gone to deprived areas, even though we have an area of very high deprivation in Barrow.

AB: There are things we want to tweek but we understand how difficult it is to balance the budget. The financial disaster of the last 14 years hasn't helped. Remember Eric Pickles, who took millions out of local government finances. We don't need a lesson from the Tories. We need the government to look at local government finances. Hilary (HC) doesn't want to admit that her government made a mess of this.

MB: I must congratulate Councillor Jarvis on a clear presentation of the budget. Many aspirations are a long way away. An additional £1 million to Waste Services when the service is worse. We have got to realise any benefits from LGR. Where are the efficiencies? There has been a litany of missed opportunities.

N Phillips (NP, C): Discussed waste of money including 20mph zones where there were no applications for this in his area (Barrow):

GA: Councillor Carrick, I was saddened by your comments. They don't appear to bear any resemblance to the facts. You made derogatory remarks about the waste staff when there was a 99.9% rate for collection. You said that we should have made £19 million in savings (as a result of LGR). That was from the Tory government and we never agreed to that. Councillor Brereton, where have you been? Did you not notice the changes? 20 mph limits and all the work on climate change. I don't recognise the comments you made.

P Thornton (PT, LD): You can't write the speech the night before. You need to make comments on the day. You talked about politics, but no one mentioned it until you did. This is a great budget, we are here because of the skill of our officer and the inheritance of the previous councils: two Liberal Democrat and one Labour (good financial management). If you look at the other councils, a lot of their problems are due to previous poor judgement by previous Conservative councils.

D Taylor (DT, I): Asked about increased investment in leisure services especially in Dalton.

JB: Discussed leisure services. I am really pleased at the way that locality boards are working. We are struggling with our special education services (SEND), there simply isn't enough money.

L Hall (LH, C): Over recent years there has been increasing dissatisfaction with residents. Basic public services have been inadequate.

M Hanley (MH, L): Commented on what NP said about 20 mph zones. These have been very popular in the Eden area with many towns and villages applying for 20 mph speed limits.

Vote: All LD, L and I councillors voted in favour. All C councillors voted against,

4, Council Tax Setting

Proposed 4.99% increase.

Vote: For: All LD, L and I. Against: none. Abstained: All C councillors.

5. Devolution

JB: The government has confirmed that we will be accepted into the preparatory phase for devolution. The government has started a consultation. We have until the 13th of April to submit documents. The public consultation results will be published in early summer.

(The other devolving councils are: Cheshire and Warrington, Norfolk and Suffolk, Greater Essex, Sussex and Brighton, Hampshire and the Solent, Cumberland. At the top will be a mayor (of the Combined Mayoral Authority) with four constituent members, two from each council. The mayor will appoint a deputy mayor and one political advisor. Each constituent member will be able to appoint a maximum of four associate members to help with delivery of the work programme. The five members of the Combined Authority will have a single vote each. Devolved funding will concentrate on: housing and regeneration, local growth, adult skills and local transport. There will be funding to support housing on brownfield sites, Adult Skills fund for education and training of adults over 19, funding for local transport, support for maintaining and improving highways and to support bus services and keep fares down (including publicly owned bus services.)

6. Election Review

This only affects the timing of town, parish and council elections, to bring them into line. This will reduce cost.

Vote: Unanimous in favour.