

MINUTES of a meeting of the COUNCIL held in the Forest Room, Stenson House, London Road, Coalville, LE67 3FN on TUESDAY, 5 NOVEMBER 2024

Present: Councillor K Horn (Chair)

Councillors R L Morris, M Ball, A Barker, C Beck, M Blair-Park, R Blunt, R Boam, M Burke, R Canny, D Cooper, D Everitt, T Eynon, M French, J Geary, T Gillard, R Johnson, P Lees, J Legrys, K Merrie MBE, A Morley, P Moulton, E Parle, G Rogers, N J Rushton, R Sutton, A C Saffell, C A Sewell, S Sheahan, J G Simmons, N Smith, A Wilson, J Windram, L Windram, A C Woodman and M B Wyatt

Officers: Mr J Arnold, Mr A Barton, Mrs C Hammond, Mr P Stone, Mrs A Thomas, Mrs R Wallace and Miss E Warhurst

45. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors D Bigby and S Lambeth.

46. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

In relation to item 16 – Recommendations of the Independent Remuneration Panel, in which decisions would be taken on the Members Allowance Scheme, The Chair noted that the Monitoring Officer had granted a dispensation to interests under the Code to enable Council to consider the report. The details and reasons for the dispensation were set out at section 5 of the report. As a dispensation had been granted for the item, Members did not need to declare an interest.

Councillor P Moulton declared a registerable interest in item 13 – Review of Gambling Act 2005 Statement of Licensing Policy, as a licence holder with the Gambling Commission.

Councillor A Woodman declared a registerable interest in item 13 - Review of Gambling Act 2005 Statement of Licensing Policy, as the director of a gambling consumer group. He declared that he would approach the item with an open mind.

47. CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chair thanked Members and officers for their support for his chosen charity 'Steps' as the current total raised to date was just over £11,500.

Nominations for the Legacy Awards as part of the NWLDC 50 year anniversary celebrations were still being received for the event in February. Members were informed that invitations to the event would be circulated in the coming weeks.

The Chair reported on the following recent events attended:

- A pilot heritage trail around Coalville was a success, at which the Chair learnt a lot of interesting history about the town. Another trail would be organised in the new year and Members were encouraged to attend.
- The Mother and Child Statue was unveiled in Coalville, at which the child of the artist was in attendance who the child in the artwork was modelled on.
- A small local medical business based in The Courtyard in Coalville 'The Simulator Company' held a launch event which was attended by several local members. It was interesting to see the work they were undertaking and understand the impact it had on the medical industry.

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The Chair reminded Members of the upcoming Remembrance events and encouraged attendance.

To conclude, the Chair announced that Elizabeth Warhurst, Head of Legal and Support Services, was due to leave the authority, and the Council meeting would be her last. He thanked Elizabeth for all her support since he was elected and became Chair. He then presented a bouquet of flowers in thanks. Several Members addressed the meeting giving thanks to the support they had received over the years and wished Elizabeth the best of look in her future role.

48. LEADER'S AND PORTFOLIO HOLDERS' ANNOUNCEMENTS

Further to the Chair's announcement regarding the unveiling of the mother and child statue in Coalville, the Leader also spoke on the success of the event and the symbol the statue represented of a thriving Coalville as it was when it was first erected in the 1970s.

The Leader announced the launch of a government consultation on enabling remote attendance and proxy voting at formal council meetings which was running until 19 December. It was acknowledged that there would be a mixture of views on the matter and Members were encouraged to respond to the consultation. It was noted that the Leader would be asking the Chair of Corporate Scrutiny Committee to debate the matter in December prior to Cabinet consideration and a formal response submitted.

The Community Services and Climate Change Portfolio Holder referred to a recent letter he had written to the Environment Secretary of State in relation to plans for the waste collection regimes, which had been circulated to Members at the meeting. He announced that he would provide an update as soon as more information was available as the lack of response to date was holding up the Council's waste review. A request had also been made to the Chief Executive to raise the matter with the local Members of Parliament. The Chair of Community Scrutiny Committee concurred and shared the frustrations due to the delay in the consideration of the waste review by scrutiny.

The Business and Regeneration Portfolio Holder referred to the work currently being undertaken this year on the district's visitor economy which included businesses in town and village centres, hospitality, accommodation, attraction providers, retail businesses and event festival organisations. He reported that a new website for tourism had been launched which showcased and promoted what the district had to offer for visitors and residents. It was also announced that 15 short films had been produced to promote the key town and village centres, attractions and experiences, food and drink offer, and larger events that attract visitors. A leaflet had also been produced to support the campaign. Members' attention was drawn to the banners on display in the room which promoted the website and branding. In conclusion, Members were informed of the next focus on sustainable tourism and the development of the social media marketing in readiness for Spring 2025. Several Members spoke in support of the initiative.

49. QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSION

There were no questions received.

50. QUESTIONS FROM COUNCILLORS

There were four questions asked which are set out below together with the responses. Each Member who asked a question was invited by the Chair to ask a supplementary question which is also set out together with the response.

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Question from Councillor J Windram

“Residents on Haslyn Walk are worried that the project to address the parking issues is still outstanding and that another potentially wet winter is going to continue to blight their daily lives.

Can the portfolio holder provide an update and a timeline on the Haslyn Walk improvement project which will when completed help to address the flooding and parking problem along with a particular stretch of road?”

Response from Councillor A Woodman

“Both I and the shadow portfolio holder have been kept updated by officers on this scheme. Having experienced delays initially with procuring suitable contractors for this carpark improvement scheme, which will also alleviate flooding in the area, I understand that we are currently awaiting approval from for Leicestershire County Council Highways department to enable the scheme to commence.

LCC has committed to proving us with a response this week. As soon as the appropriate permissions are in place, residents will be notified and work will start. We are very sorry for the delay.”

Councillor J Windram declined the opportunity to ask a supplementary question.

Question from Councillor R Sutton

“This Council refreshed its Empty Homes Policy in March 2022, including data showing 262 privately owned homes empty for a year or more at January 2022. Further, a consultation on Council Tax changes for Empty and Second Homes has just been launched that mentions 360 homes empty for a year or more, presumed to be based on Council Tax data and matching the 2023 figure published by 'Action Empty Homes.

I would like information on the number of empty homes for each year since 2021 (including percentage increases) along with the number and community locations of those which have been brought back into use with NWLDC support, having remained empty for six months or more. I would like to understand what the Council is doing about empty properties, including the details of any policy changes, other than Council Tax increases, being considered to deal with the blight, waste and community cost of empty homes and details of the use of powers and enforcement actions tabulated in Appendix 2 of the policy.

Could the Portfolio Holder please provide me with the above information?”

Response from Councillor M Wyatt

“The number of empty homes across North West Leicestershire is a figure that continually changes not just from year to year but also day to day. To allow an easier comparison, figures have been provided on the number of empty properties as at 1 October each year.

01/10/2021 – 432 empty properties

01/10/2022 – 465 empty properties

01/10/2023 – 510 empty properties

01/10/2024 – 582 empty properties

Attached is a document breaking these figures down in more detail and setting out the use of enforcement tools.

The Environmental Protection Team is notified about empty properties by the Council Tax Team. An initial assessment is undertaken based on the type of property, location and

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condition. This assessment determines the actions that the Council takes based on the Council's adopted Empty Homes Policy (2022).

The Council has a graduated approach to dealing with the properties. Initial contact is made with the owner via letter signposting the owner to the Empty Homes Officer for advice. If steps are not taken to deal with the issues identified, officers follow up with suggestions on how properties are brought back into use, or request plans for the property, or just initially a contact letter giving them the Empty Homes Officers details where appropriate. This can be followed by letters regarding possible issues, and asking for rectification of these, e.g. untidy land.

The Environmental Protection and Council Tax teams are currently working together on an additional process/policy that allows the Council to complete an Order for Sale, based on Council Tax Debt alone. This is different to an enforced sale. An enforced sale is another legal process that can be used to bring an empty property back into use by forcing the sale of the property and recovering any Council debt such as Council Tax Debt and Debts associated with any works undertaken by the Council on the empty property. An Order for Sale however, can only be used when there is only Council Tax debt on an empty property.”

Supplementary question and response

Councillor R Sutton thanked Councillor M Wyatt for the information provided in the additional papers and asked that as well as the measures described in the response, that officers look into the practices of Gedling Borough Council as they are performing well. Councillor M Wyatt made assurances that he would do what he could to make improvements as soon as possible and would be happy do as suggested.

Question from Councillor P Moulton

“I am interested in the issue of public health funerals, in terms of the overall trend, if there is a cost to the council and whether the authority recover the costs by civil debt proceedings.

Could the portfolio holder please provide me with this information?”

Response from Councillor M Wyatt

“Public health funerals are provided by local authorities for people who have passed away and have no next of kin, or who’s next of kin, relatives or friends are unable or unwilling to make the necessary arrangements for a funeral. They are designed to protect public health and are important in ensuring that all individuals are treated with dignity and respect, regardless of their circumstances.

The Public Health (Control of Disease) Act 1984 places a statutory duty on local authorities to arrange for a burial or cremation where no suitable alternative arrangements are being made. Where there is money in the estate, this is used to cover as much of the cost of the funeral as possible. This can be via money found at the property, selling assets or claiming money from bank accounts.

The figures for the last four years are:

Year	Number of funerals	Total cost	Total amount recovered
2021	5	£6612.00	£4,290.34
2022	5	£7309.00	£4,449.75
2023	6	£5862.00	£2,931.00

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2024 – to date	5	£5750.00	£1,450.00
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Councillor P Moulton declined the opportunity to ask a supplementary question.

Question from Councillor A Morley

“Given the government’s plans to introduce legislation to reset the audit backlog, could the Portfolio Holder please explain how the Council is positioned to meet the backlog date for the financial year 2023-2024?”

Response from Councillor N Rushton

“The revised backstop date for the 2023/24 Statement of Accounts is now 28 February 2025. Prior to the statement on 30 July 2024 by the Minister for Local Government and English Devolution, the backstop date for the 2023/24 financial year was 31 May 2025. The Council had intended to publish the unaudited Statement of Accounts by this initial backstop date. Consequently, preliminary discussions were held with the external auditor, Azets, to outline a high-level timetable.

However, due to the Government’s decision to advance the deadline, the Council is unable to meet the revised backstop date. This is because the requirement to set a balanced budget for 2025/26 coincides with the period for preparing the Statement of Accounts. Given the significance of this task, it is not feasible for the same group of staff to manage both tasks simultaneously.

Following discussions with our new external auditor, Azets, the Council’s S151 Officer has written to inform the Government of this issue, as requested in the letter from Catherine Frances, Director General for Local Government and Public Services dated 20 September 2024.

The Council aims to publish the unaudited Statement of Accounts 2024/25 in May 2025 and has discussed the practicalities of this timeline with Azets. The Council is currently awaiting further guidance from the Government regarding the next steps.”

Supplementary question and response

Councillor A Morley asked that given the risks identified, what the main risks were besides reputational damage. Councillor N Rushton responded that the fault of the backlog was combination of government, external auditors and the Council, and referred to the risks as identified in the report on the matter to be considered later in the meeting.

51. MOTIONS

No motions were received.

52. PETITIONS

No petitions were received.

53. MINUTES

Consideration was given to the minutes of the meeting held on 10 September 2024

It was moved by Councillor K Horn, seconded by Councillor R Morris and

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RESOLVED THAT:

The minutes of the meeting held on 10 September 2024 be approved and signed by the Chair as a correct record.

54. LOCAL GOVERNMENT BOUNDARY REVIEW – RESPONSE TO LOCAL GOVERNMENT BOUNDARY COMMISSION FOR ENGLAND’S DRAFT RECOMMENDATIONS

Councillor K Merrie, as Infrastructure Portfolio Holder, presented the report to Members and moved the recommendations. It was seconded by Councillor M Ball.

During discussion, Members thanked the Democratic Services Team Manager, the consultant and the members of the working group for the work undertaken which was not always an easy task on such an emotive and political matter.

Several Members spoke on the effect the review has had on their wards, and it was acknowledged that the process was a learning curve for the authority that had resulted in a reasonable outcome.

RESOLVED THAT:

- 1) The submission of the Council’s response to the draft recommendations of the Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE) for North West Leicestershire be approved and agreed.
- 2) The submission of the North West Leicestershire District Council’s response to the draft recommendations of the Local Government Boundary Commission for England to the LGBCE, be delegated to the Chief Executive.
- 3) It be noted that the proposals on the draft recommendations may also be provided to the LGBCE by any member of the public, external body, group or organisation wishing to make recommendations by the close of the consultation on 11 November 2024.

55. STATEMENT OF ACCOUNTS UPDATE

Councillor N Rushton, as Corporate Portfolio Holder, presented the report to Members and moved the recommendations. It was seconded by Councillor A Woodman.

Several Members raised concerns about the potential risks to the Council due to the backlog and the potential for intervention from regulatory bodies. The impact of the abolishment of the audit commission was acknowledged, as well as the other contributing factors.

Due to the concerns, the Director of Resources was asked to address the meeting. He assured Members that the underlying finances of the authority was sound and the publishing of the accounts from previous years was a high priority of his and the Chief Executive. It was acknowledged that repercussions of the delays were not yet clear, but that Members would be kept updated.

RESOLVED THAT:

The Government’s revised timetables for addressing the audit backlog in the sector be noted.

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56. TREASURY MANAGEMENT STEWARDSHIP REPORT 2023/24

Councillor N Rushton, as Corporate Portfolio Holder, presented the report to Members and moved the recommendations. It was seconded by Councillor R Blunt.

RESOLVED THAT:

- 1) The Council's approach to Treasury Management in 2024/25 be endorsed.
- 2) A future report be requested covering activities in 2024/25.

57. REVIEW OF GAMBLING ACT 2005 STATEMENT OF LICENSING POLICY

Councillor M Wyatt, as Community and Climate Change Portfolio Holder, presented the report to Members and moved the recommendations. It was seconded by Councillor N Smith.

During discussion, in relation to fixed betting terminals, a Member asked for further information on the inspections of licensed premises. It was agreed to provide the information outside of the meeting.

RESOLVED THAT:

- 1) The proposed Gambling Act 2005 Statement of Licensing Policy be approved.
- 2) The continuation of the delegation to the Head of Community Services in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for the updating of the Local Area Profile be approved.

58. REVIEW OF THE COUNCIL'S ARRANGEMENTS FOR DEALING WITH COMPLAINTS ABOUT COUNCILLORS

Councillor K Merrie, as Infrastructure Portfolio Holder, presented the report to Members and moved the recommendations. It was seconded by Councillor J Simmons.

A discussion was had on the proposed changes currently being considered nationally in relation to the Code of Conduct and it was confirmed that should legislation change then the Council would review the arrangements for dealing with complaints accordingly.

RESOLVED THAT:

- 1) The work of the Cross Party Working Group in conducting the review of the arrangements for dealing with complaints about Councillors be noted.
- 2) The proposed amendments to the arrangements summarised within appendix A and illustrated at appendix B be adopted.
- 3) The proposed changes to the flowchart at appendix C be adopted with effect from 6 November 2024.
- 4) The Monitoring Officer be authorised to update the Council's Constitution to give effect to the amendments required as a consequence of reviewing the arrangements as set out in appendix D, with effect from 6 November 2024.

59. REVIEW OF POLLING DISTRICTS AND POLLING PLACES

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Councillor K Merrie, as Infrastructure Portfolio Holder, presented the report to Members and moved the recommendations. It was seconded by Councillor A Woodman.

RESOLVED THAT:

- 1) The final proposals in respect of the review as set out in appendix A to the report be approved.
- 2) Authority be delegated to the Returning Officer to make, where necessary, alterations to the designation of any polling station prior to the next full review in consultation with the Ward Members and Group Leaders.

60. RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE INDEPENDENT REMUNERATION PANEL

Councillor K Merrie, as Infrastructure Portfolio Holder, presented the report to Members and moved the recommendations. It was seconded by Councillor R Blunt.

RESOLVED THAT:

- 1) With effect from 6 November 2024, an annual allowance of £800 be paid to each of the two positions of co-opted Independent Member of the Audit and Governance Committee.
- 2) The changes listed in bold at section 4.0 of the report take effect from 1 April 2025.
- 3) That authority be delegated to Monitoring Officer to amend the scheme of allowances in the Council's Constitution in accordance with the changes shown at appendix A.

61. LOCAL GOVERNMENT ASSOCIATION - DEBATE NOT HATE

Councillor K Merrie, as Infrastructure Portfolio Holder, presented the report to Members, then proposed and moved that work be carried out on the 'Debate not Hate Toolkit' and a working group be established to carry out the work. It was seconded by Councillor P Lees.

Several Members spoke in support of the proposals and referred to personal experiences of hate that they had encountered during their terms of office which could deter people from becoming local politicians. During discussion it was suggested that social media be considered as part of the work.

During the speech of a member, points of order were raised. The Chair reminded the member firstly, that their speech should be directed to the item and shortly after, that the member should draw their speech to a close as they were running out of time.

During discussion of the item Councillors A Barker, T Eynon and C Sewell left for the remainder of the meeting.

RESOLVED THAT:

- 1) Work be carried out on the Local Government Association's 'Debate not Hate Toolkit'.
- 2) A Cross Party Working Group be established to carry out the work.

62. APPOINTMENT TO THE INDEPENDENT REMUNERATION PANEL

Councillor K Merrie, as Infrastructure Portfolio Holder, presented the report to Members and moved the recommendations. It was seconded by Councillor R Blunt.

RESOLVED THAT:

- 1) The appointments to the Independent Remuneration Panel as detailed at paragraph 2.5 of the report be approved.
- 2) A letter be sent to the retiring members of the Independent Remuneration Panel on behalf of the Chair of the Council to thank them for their service on the panel.

63. URGENT DECISIONS TAKEN BY CABINET

Councillor R Blunt, as Leader of the Council, presented the report to Members and moved the recommendations. It was seconded by Councillor M Wyatt.

RESOLVED THAT:

The report be noted.

Councillors A Barker, T Eynon and C Sewell left the meeting at 7.59pm.

The meeting commenced at 6.30 pm

The Chairman closed the meeting at 8.07 pm