

Westmorland and Furness Council (Shadow) 23.1.23.

Report by Michael Hanley.

Chair: M Severn.

### 1. Questions from the Public

There has been a big increase in the number of Air B and Bs (ABBs) and holiday lets in the area which has caused a drain on available housing. Landlords have been clearing rented accommodation to provide holiday lets. There are 102 ABBs in Ulverston alone. The victims are the young people in these towns. A local referendum has shown how angry local people are. Will Westmorland and Furness Council (WAFC) make the local area less attractive to ABB and holiday-let landlords?

Judith Derbyshire (JD, LD): WAFC is acutely aware of this. This causes a big impact on housing supply. To tackle the impact of second homes, we have asked the public about a 100% increase in council tax on these homes. This will provide funding to help the local people. 614 affordable homes to rent and more than 600 affordable homes to buy were provided last year. This work will continue under the WAFC. At present grants are available to housing trusts to build new affordable and rented homes. I became a councillor because of previous experience in trying to improve the housing situation.

### 2. Announcements

Jonathan Brook (JB, Leader, LD): It's 10 weeks to go (until the council goes live). We will notice a significant increase in workload.

A Jarvis (AJ, LD): Costs have been rising rapidly. The cost of delivering essential services will increase by £20 million. The central government funding will not cover this. The government expects us to increase council tax, which will have to go up by 4.99%, £1.60 per week for a band D house. This increase is well below inflation. As part of LGA rules we have to harmonise our rates across the previous district council areas (Barrow was higher than Eden). Also we are discussing a 100% rise in council tax on second homes. This does not include holiday lets. There are well over 5000 second homes in this area. In some parishes it is 20% of local homes. This will help us collect a significant increase in our income. These proposals will come to the budget meeting in March.

### 3. WAFC Constitution

Caroline Elwood (CE, Interim Monitoring Officer): This is a far more detailed document than the previous constitution. We need to be clear on the committee structures. We also need to train new members. The document contains sections on overview of WAFC, responsibilities and functions, procedures and rules of the council and committees, code of conduct and members' allowances. She discussed the three locality boards, all members of that area will be on the local board. It was decided that the chair and vice-chair will be elected by the local board. She discussed local planning committees. Eden's will have 8 members and there will be local task and finish groups.

Phil Dew (PD, C): I am glad you responded to the suggestion of locality boards. He asked about subsidising transport operators. Asked whether cabinet minutes would come to council meetings in the future.

JD: The Highways section will leave a possibility in the future open.

PD: About subsidising commercial transport providers?

JD: Yes.

CE: In the majority of councils, the minutes of the cabinet are not brought to the main council meeting. There are no definite numbers in the committees, we need to look at the balance. It was suggested 8-9 for each local planning committee.

Neil Hughes (NH, LD): Cumbria County Council already has the capacity to support public transport schemes.

V Taylor (VT, C): The constitution should help us get things done better, to help local business.

The authors do not seem to know where our major settlements are. Dalton isn't recognised as a major town, it now has 7000 residents.

M Severn (MS, Chair, LD): Do you wish to have Dalton included in the major towns?

VT: Yes.

B Shirley (BS, C): Would the rule that one member who votes against waiving of political balance could disrupt the locality board planning committees?

CE: This is there to protect minorities. If we didn't waive this rule, it would make the creation of small committees very difficult. It was said that it would be preferred to have local members on the small committees. We will try and achieve this.

JD: Councillor Shirley understands what we are trying to do.

M Robinson (MR, I): Asked about standing deputies.

A Connell (AC, LD): The constitution is not a public document, it is determined by the council. It is also a living thing, it may change.

Vote for constitution: unanimous in favour. Vote for waiving political balance: unanimous in favour.

#### 4. Council Tax Reduction Scheme

AJ: All councils are required to review this scheme annually. This was introduced in 2014. Only minor changes have been made since then. At that time there was central government support but this has disappeared into the general pot. A lot of other councils have abolished this, but we have

continued this despite it costing £15 million per year and it is one of the most generous in the country. A change is that anyone on Universal Credit can apply for this. Any cost of living payments will be ignored. We will not discriminate against working age residents as other councils have done.

PD: (Referring to a public survey on the scheme): 121 responses on the consultation, 39 of these were disqualified. Monumental indifference was shown. You treat council tax payers as cash machines.

P Dixon (P Di LD): We are seeking to make sure that the most vulnerable people are protected.

M Eyles (ME, LD): Single person occupants have a 25% reduction, will this continue.

AJ: Yes.

H Carrick (HC, C): Is this the most effective way of supporting our most vulnerable residents?

AJ: There has been some variation in means testing our residents. I would like to see harmonisation.

J Battye (JB, LD): We need to make it easy to apply for this. I welcome anyone on Universal Credit to be eligible.

A Burns (AB, L): I can't let PD get away with his comment. All councillors have a big responsibility not to put big tax bills out there. His government has ripped £280 million from this county council alone and he talks about a cash cow. There are services that people desperately need. I object to someone who describes this council as a cash cow.

M Brereton (MB, C): PD did not make that comment.

JB: It is important that we do the best to protect the most vulnerable in our community.

Vote: unanimous in favour.

## 5. Cumbria Pension Fund

P Thornton (PT, LD): There are now 160k people in the fund (teachers, fire-fighters etc). It is a joint fund with Lancashire. All costs are paid by the fund itself, no money comes from the council budget.

NH: This is a historic arrangement that has worked well in the past.

Votes: unanimous in favour.

## 6. Appointment of Independent Person for Standards Committee.

Mr David Tweddle has been appointed for two years.

## 7. Questions from Members

MB: Asked about an update on the new vessel for Windermere Ferry.

PT: The council is committed to continue the ferry service.

OD: Asked about the estimated £20 million deficit. Also the current council tax consultation and balancing the deficit.

MS: Please go to your question.

AJ: We are still looking at the budget. The Conservative government cut funding from year to year and we only have council tax to make up the gap.

BS: What would legally be defined as a second home? Will locality boards make this decision?

AJ: The Levelling Up Bill contains the definition of a second home. The numbers of second homes varies greatly across the area. It will not go to a locality board, although we are open to views.

N Phillips (NP, C): Referred to the Armed Forces Covenant and the council tax reduction scheme. Will the council appoint an Armed Forces Champion?

JD: We are happy to recognise the contribution of the armed forces.

AB: Asked about Looked After children, when they leave care, will they have access to the scheme?

Tony Callister (TC, L): Referred to the worry about the budget deficit. Conservative councillors should go back to their constituents and explain that they rob the poor to provide for the rich.

B Cooper: Referred to an increase in rural crime.

JB: Yes, we are mindful of this and will be working with police.

End of meeting.