

Westmorland and Furness Council 7.3.23.

Report by Michael Hanley.

1. Tribute Speeches about Councillor Ann Thomson who died recently.

2. Leader's Announcements

Jonathan Brook (JB, Leader, LD): We will sign the Armed Forces Covenant, a promise that those who have served their country are treated fairly and make sure they are not disadvantaged. I propose we have an Armed Forces Champion for each locality. Special consideration will be made if any veterans apply for work with the council.

3. Council Tax Base

A Jarvis (AJ, LD): Discussed residents who can get reduction of council tax: care leavers up to the age of 25 get a 100% reduction. We do not want homes sitting empty. If a house is empty for more than five years then the council tax increases by 200%, if empty for more than 10 years by 300%.

Bill McEwan (BM, L): Welcomed the proposals, especially the rise in council tax on empty homes. We need to bring empty homes back into use.

4. Draft Revenue Budget

A Jarvis (AJ, LD): We have a sound financial future. At the moment we only have three employees so we haven't had the usual resources to create this budget. We have combined the budgets of the previous four authorities. Next year's budget will look very different. We are facing the highest inflation for 40 years, with an increase for the council of £20 million. Funding from central government falls well below what is needed. LGR will give us significant savings (in the long run). We will need to have the management team in place. £5 million will go to transformation. £6.5 million will support integration and improvement, especially in Housing, Waste and Planning. AJ discussed fees such as those for residential and care homes. There will be a 5% rise in these fees: residential care homes up to £656/week and nursing homes up to £741/week. Discussed Medium Term Financial Plan, the budget gap will reduce to £9.9 million and £3.7 million in 25/26. We are required to deliver a balanced budget. We have requested an overdraft facility from the government. We will be looking at Housing, Climate Change with investment in decarbonisation of the estate, solar farms, fleet replacement including waste collection. Discussed reserves. There will be a General Fund Balance of £19.8 million and earmarked reserves of £37.9 million.

JB: We are keen to deliver affordable housing and make this more available. I am happy to support these recommendations.

Derek Brook (DB, L): Thank you to the officers for the work they did with this budget. You have done the best we could have done. We are all in it together, the government forced us to do this (LGR). Next year things might be a bit different, thanks to the government for forcing us to do this very quickly without the money to do it. The Conservative councillors will criticise this but they forget that it was their party who instigated this.

H Carrick (HC, C): The business case is for £19-30 million in savings predicted. The key benefits are: greater efficiency and greater value for money. I am disappointed that no one can say how services will be delivered. Greater value for money will only be delivered well down the line. The cost of LGR is £20 million and there will be reserves of £58 million. Residents may question

whether this will give increased value for money. I will be voting against this budget.

P Thornton (PT, LD): Councillor Carrick talks about the savings we were promised, who promised this? This was a Conservative-led proposal and they decided to give us no money for this.

P Dew (PD, C): I want to focus on the increase in council tax by 4.99%. The results of the consultation have been ignored (49% against a council tax increase). £268 million will be raised from council tax. Why have we not been given more details? The paper is a concoction. PD questioned the need to increase council tax. The paper cannot be justified and doesn't bear scrutiny.

T Callister (TC, L): I wasn't going to say anything, but I have to. 18 months of hard work was spent on this budget and it brought many headaches for the Liberal Democrats. It's shocking to hear we have to use an overdraft facility....heavens....this was a Conservative idea. This Conservative government has practically put this country into bankruptcy. Thank you for a good budget. You have done everything you could.

M Brereton (MB, C): The budget is light on details and light on democracy. Highways Board changes will mean reduced representation from Locality Boards.

Neil Hughes (NH, LD): There has been an accusation of increased centralisation, then why will we have Locality Boards?

HC: I am aware of the need for the new authority to be legal from the first day. We will be empowering Local Boards to empower local people. The real problem is the paucity of funding from central government especially the funding of Childrens Services.

J Drake (JD, L): I want to acknowledge the funding of Ulverston Leisure Centre. This involves the former Glaxo site. It will involve health provision as well. On behalf of my constituents, I welcome the inclusion of this scheme.

N Phillips (NP, C): My main concern is the balance of reserves. It contains a high level of reserves, why so high when we are asking for a 4.99% rise in council tax? What was said, that the Liberal Democrats will work with the Labour, Greens and Independants. I think this is wrong. I would struggle to justify the 4.99% rise.

P Dixon (PD, L): One of the main concerns of residents is the number of second homes. I am so grateful to Councillor Jarvis who is going to increase council tax on second homes. Some young people refer to it as « The Lakeland Clearances ». The 100% premium is entirely appropriate. One of the problems of this country is the reluctance of the people to pay tax. We need to tax assets. People with second homes have broader shoulders.

D Edwards (DE, C): In one of my villages half of the residents in the Barrow part pay for their bins and the Lakeland part they don't. This is causing confusion.

A Burns (AB, L):: I want to agree with Councillor Thornton about who is responsible for all of this. It is going to be very challenging. We (Labour) know we wouldn't have been able to do much different. We understand what a challenge this is. We have this cost of living crisis, that is going to be a massive challenge in areas such as Childrens Services. We live in a very diverse community. Some are doing okay but some are living in crisis from day to day. In the next year we will probably challenge aspects of the budget. We would like to have aspirations such as providing free school meals. Councillor Dew talks about the increase in council tax but doesn't talk about the reduction of central government funding which started with Eric Pickles more than ten years ago and it has got worse.

G Archibald (GA, LD): I am very glad to hear the comments of the (Labour) opposition. I am surprised by the negativity of the Conservatives. Where is your alternative budget? You had the opportunity to create one. We have some big challenges and this budget addresses them. We will deliver our statutory obligations. Also we have to address climate change. We have areas where the life expectancy is only 70 and in other areas it is over 80. Some areas have high suicide rates. There has been a huge increase in people attending foodbanks. We will do all we can to help the vulnerable. The Arctic ice is receding, the coral reefs are dying, people are dying

because of climate change. We can contribute towards the solutions. Also there has been huge biodiversity loss. We are looking at a possible mass extinction. Within this budget there is a plan to address this.

K Hamilton (KH, L): Discussed Barrow Housing. In the last five years we actually reduced rents by 5%. All the profit we make goes back into repair and maintenance of the properties. In 1949 40% of the population lived in council homes, its down to 3% now. We are proud of our housing stock (two and a half thousand properties). We have the lowest rents in Northern England.

J Murray (JM, LD): This budget is underpinned by the values in the plan, collaborative and being ecologically aware.

A Connell (AC, LD): The increase in council tax was inevitable due to the reduced funding from central government. LGR costs have also contributed. Robert Jenrick (the conservative minister who initiated the Cumbrian LGR) said there was limited (financial) support for the present authority.

B Cooper (BC, C): Asked about the large reserve.

AJ: This is a message to the Conservative group: welcome to the real world. The reserve of £19 million, that was decided by the Conservative administration. Phil Dew is wrong, we have significant inflation and services pressure. He is saying if the Conservatives were in power they wouldn't increase the council tax. They would have to make big cuts to services, something we will not do. There was an assumption from the government that we would increase council tax. Councillors Phillips and Cooper ask about the reserves. We will reviewing these but we have had flooding in the past and we need these for unforeseen events. Councillor Edwards raised the issue of harmonisation of services. Different areas will want different things so we need to consult our residents. Coucillor Burns, with regard to free school meals, we need to recognise the poverty in certain areas but I can't make unfunded committments. It's a disgrace that in the 21st century, in a rich country, we have such poverty. Councillor Hamilton, I recognise the work in Barrow. Good work has been done in all three areas.

Vote: For: 50, against: 11. All Conservative councillors voted against, all of the other councillors voted in favour of the budget.

5. Calculating and Setting the Council Tax.

AJ: Discussed this.

PD: AJ says there is no alternative. The reason why we oppose the increase is we don't think it is necessary. We should have given ourselves the 12 month period to realise the savings. Some have talked about the lack of central government. relief but that would be tax by other means such as income tax.

Pam Dukes (Financial Officer): There is no statutory ability to influence the Police, Fire Services and Parish Council precepts.

AJ: Councillor Dew is clearly oblivious to the inflation this country is undergoing and we should not meet our obligations by borrowing.

PD: The council should look to savings expected from LGR in the next year.

Vote: For : 48, Abstain: 11. All of the Conservative councillors abstained.

6. Constitution Update

Linda Jones (LJ, Monitoring Officer): Discussed Scrutiny Committees. It was decided, after representations from the Labour Group, that the chairs should be from a minority group. A Members Development Group will set up for training etc.

AC: Scrutiny should not be guided by the ruling administration (LDs). That is not it's function.

PD: Will the constitution be able to be amended with regard to the Locality Boards?
LJ: Yes, the Locality Boards will be kept under review.

Vote: Unanimous in favour.

AGM: 20.4.23.