

COUNCIL

Wednesday, 24th February, 2021
Time of Commencement: 7.00 pm

Present: Mayor - Councillor John Cooper (Chair)

Councillors:	Kenneth Owen	Stephen Sweeney	Barry Panter
	Simon White	Simon Tagg	Ruth Wright
	June Walklate	Silvia Burgess	Gary White
	Ian Wilkes	Mike Stubbs	Jill Waring
	Gillian Williams	Amelia Rout	Andrew Fox-Hewitt
	John Williams	John Tagg	Brian Johnson
	Andrew Fear	Paul Northcott	Annabel Lawley
	Tony Kearon	Bert Proctor	Sue Moffat
	Paul Waring	Sylvia Dymond	Jennifer Cooper
	Mark Holland	Trevor Johnson	Gillian Burnett
	Julie Cooper	Andrew Parker	Helena Maxfield
	Marion Reddish	Sarah Pickup	Graham Hutton
	Kyle Robinson	Mark Olszewski	David Grocott
	Elizabeth Shenton	Dave Jones	
	Gill Heesom	Allison Gardner	

Officers:	David Adams	Executive Director Operational Services
	Geoff Durham	Mayor's Secretary / Member Support Officer
	Martin Hamilton	Chief Executive
	Simon McEneny	Executive Director - Commercial Development & Economic Growth
	Daniel Dickinson	Head of Legal & Governance /Monitoring Officer
	Sarah Wilkes	Head of Finance / S151 Officer
	Aaron Weller	Desktop Services Lead
	Jordan Ibinson	Apprentice - Infrastructure Technician

Note: In line with Government directions for the CV-19 pandemic, this meeting was conducted using a hybrid method through video conferencing and attendance in person, whilst observing social distancing - in accordance with the Local Authorities and Police and Crime Panels (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority Police and Crime Panel Meetings) (England and Wales) Regulations 2020.

1. **APOLOGIES**

There were no apologies.

2. **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest stated.

3. **MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING**

Resolved: That the Minutes of the meeting held on 16 December, 2020 be agreed as a correct record, subject to the following amendment being made:

Item 12: Motions of Members: paragraph 6

third line, to be amended to ...'every *report* brought to Council from 2021'...

4. **MAYOR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS**

The Mayor announced that the Mayoress, Mrs Angela Cooper was poorly and not taking part in any Mayoral duties / virtual engagements etc.

The Leader passed on best wishes, on behalf of the Council, to the Mayoress.

5. **REVENUE AND CAPITAL BUDGETS AND STRATEGIES 2021/22**

The Leader of the Council, Councillor Simon Tagg introduced the report and moved the recommendations which set out the recommendations of Cabinet for Revenue and Capital Budgets for 2021/22.

Cabinet proposed an increase in council tax for 2021/22 of between £3.89 and £4.44 per year from the 2020/21 amount. This represented an increase of less than ten pence per week for the vast majority of households. Detailed recommendations were set out in Appendix A of the report. Appendix B set out the proposed Revenue Budget for 2021/22. A summary of additional income, additional expenditure and loss of income and new pressures was given in the report.

In summary the Council's updated Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) indicated a forecast budget shortfall of £1.2754m for 2021/22. A summary of savings and funding strategies to bridge the £1.2754m gap had been identified and agreed with managers and these were shown at Appendices C and D.

The Council's S151 Officer had carried out a review of the Council's Balances and Reserves together with a risk assessment. Details were given in Appendix E. The MTFS and budget proposals had been scrutinised by the Finance, Assets and Performance Scrutiny Committee.

The Capital Programme for 2021/22 was given in Appendix F of the report.

The Leader stated that there was optimism that an end was in sight for the pandemic and lockdowns as the number of cases were falling and the number of people receiving the vaccine was increasing. This time last year, there had been an awareness that the pandemic was coming but there had been no understanding of the affect and disruption it would have on people's health and on the livelihoods of residents of the Borough. The Leader paid tribute to the communities, both young and old, doctors, nurses, carers, shop workers and volunteers for their work during this time. The Leader also thanked the Chief Executive all council staff for keeping services going during the pandemic.

The lockdown had meant a significant reduction in the Council's income especially from J2 and car parking charges. There had also been extra expenditure supporting the homeless and also for Covid outbreak control.

Emergency government funding of £3.5m had been forthcoming and had helped the Council to deal with the financial impact and this had allowed a balanced budget position at the end of this current financial year. The Leader thanked local MP's Jonathan Gullis and Aaron Bell for lobbying on the Council's behalf.

The Leader stated that, despite the challenges the proposed budget continued to deliver the priorities set out in the Council Plan. A Recovery Board was convened in the summer involving Cabinet members and heads of service to secure necessary savings this year, totalling £1.275m. The saving had been achieved without affecting front line statutory services. Streetscene was protected and the new recycling service would be further improved over the coming year.

The workforce had continued to evolve and be built up, replacing key staff and a commitment to the recruiting of staff to deliver the Borough Local Plan. The One Council approach would ensure that the Council had the right people in key areas to help deliver local services that work for local people. Money was being put aside to help to build capacity to help to deliver the large government investment coming into the Borough by the Future High Streets Fund of £11.3m and the two Town Deal Funds for Newcastle and Kidsgrove.

Members' attention was drawn to Appendix C which outlined the efficiencies and good housekeeping as part of the budget. The Leader thanked the Council's Finance team and Cabinet members for their work on the savings plans. Members of the Finance, Assets and Performance Scrutiny Committee were also thanked for endorsing the budget's saving proposals on two separate occasions.

The proposals included provision for another boost in the Council's reserves and contingencies from £1.548m to £3m. In addition to the Income reserve of £0.100m

The Leader concluded that this budget was investing in the aspirations for the Borough and its future. The flexible use of the Capital Receipts Policy would be used again this year and a further £250,000 would go into the Borough Growth Fund as outlined in paragraphs 4.7 and 4.8 of the agenda report. This year's Fund would be used to address three challenges that this Council faced:

Recovering from the Covid lockdowns; technological transformation and maintaining sustainable local environment. With the One Council initiative the Council could continue to embed digitalisation. The Leader referred to the Capital Programme as outlined at paragraph 6 of the report.

The Portfolio Holder for Finance and Efficiency, Councillor Stephen Sweeney seconded the recommendations and thanked officers for their hard work in preparing the budget.

Councillor Sweeney drew Members attention to paragraph 2.1 of the report. Support from Central Government of £3.5m which was expected to be around £5m as there was support coming in for the first quarter of the 2021/22 financial year to help with the effects of the Coronavirus. Reference was made to paragraphs 3 and 4, outlining the savings to meet the shortfall.

The budget helped to make the Borough a better place for local residents. It was a robust, affordable and balanced budget.

Councillor Shenton stated that she would not be supporting the budget. Reference was made to Appendix E which showed the risk assessments for the strategies. Councillor Shenton said that the revenue budget sought to plug the gap with £50,000 from additional income generation although this was seen as high risk. The capital budget was predicted on capital receipts and yet, also not realised as high risk.

Councillor Shenton stated that she could not vote for a Council Tax increase in the current times. In addition, the One Council project appeared to be a strategic change for this Authority with a full review and overhaul to how Council services would be delivered, but there were no details on the plans.

Councillor Stubbs stated that he and his group welcomed the capital investment in Kidsgrove Sports Centre and the money set aside for Walley's Quarry was welcomed by residents across the Borough. It was also important that all key services continued to be fully funded and the Council's work in the community must be protected at all cost. Councillor Stubbs asked the Portfolio Holder why the budget consultation responses had fallen by 80% in one year. Residents were still providing comments but only 89 people from across Newcastle and 4 from outside of Newcastle had replied to the consultation.

Newcastle currently had just under 7,000 people furloughed. A further 3,600 people had received help from the income support scheme and 4,000 claiming out of work benefits. Councillor Stubbs asked if an assessment had been made on the impact of a rise in Council Tax on families. Councillor Stubbs asked if the Portfolio Holder had written to the Chancellor asking him to back local councils with the funding needed to prevent Council Tax rises. In addition, Councillor Stubbs asked the Leader if he could rule out a further Council Tax rise in 2022/23.

Councillor Hutton referred to paragraph 8.3 of the report, welcoming the increase in reserves which would help to preserve the long term resilience of the Council.

Councillor Proctor stated that the budget was a remarkable achievement in view of the awful year that this Borough and country had just endured. It would enable the Council to continue to provide vital services.

Councillor Holland stated that no alternative budget had been submitted by the Labour Group and no amendments had been proposed. Councillor Holland stated that this was an excellent budget and the best that could have been produced in a time of unprecedented difficulties. The Borough Growth Fund was a fantastic mechanism where money could be invested.

Councillor Fox-Hewitt recognised the difficult times that this and all Councils were currently experiencing. There were elements of the budget that he could support, such as the investment in facilities for Kidsgrove and the money set aside for Walley's Quarry. However, Councillor Fox-Hewitt stated that this money would not go far enough given the impact that the landfill appeared to have and it was a large concern for residents across the Borough.

The Town Centre investment was welcomed and the hard work of the Cabinet and officers in the bid preparation was recognised. Councillor Fox-Hewitt stated that he could not support the budget for two reasons - the increase in Council Tax and the lack of investment in Bradwell and Porthill. He asked that the budget be taken away with a fresh approach to the Borough's priorities with cross party contribution and consensus.

Councillor Parker praised the officers and the Cabinet for the speedy and effective distribution of over £29m in government grants to local businesses to help them keep going during the current pandemic.

Councillor Fear stated that his was an excellent budget which had not received any proposed amendments.

Councillor Jones felt that there were elements of the budget that he could support, welcoming the £50,000 investment with regard to investigating the source of the odours in the vicinity of Walley's Quarry. When it came to taxation, this was one of the most difficult decisions that Councillors had to make. However, he understood that the Council Tax rise, leading to £187,000 was minimal when the Council was increasing its reserves from £1.5m to £8.3m. Councillor Jones stated that he could not support the budget when the Council Tax increase could be found from efficiencies elsewhere.

Councillor Paul Waring stated that any increase in taxes was unfortunate but it was essential in order to protect the services going forward.

Councillor John Williams stated that he could not support the budget. Austerity and the pandemic had pushed the spending power of Borough residents to the limit. The Council Tax increase would add to the pressure on families budgets.

Councillors' Olszewski and Gardner also could not agree to an increase in Council Tax.

Councillor Moffat welcomed the Government's Covid recovery fund but wanted to see a budget that was optimistic and uplifting which built on the amazing contribution that local people had given to help overcome this pandemic. More detail was needed on the budget plus reassurance that the money being paid locally would benefit local people and spent locally.

Councillor Northcott stated that this was a 'steady as you go' budget. The highest Council Tax increase would be Band H which would be £10 per year and Band A was £3.33 per year. Services had to be paid and protected and contingency funds had to be there to manage the portfolio of properties that the Council managed It was a safe and well thought out budget.

Councillor Rout was pleased to see the investment for Walley's Quarry but could not agree to an increase in Council Tax, saying that any rise was a rise too far at this current time.

Councillor Maxfield supported the budget stating that it continued to support vulnerable people around the Borough.

Councillor Kearon acknowledged that there were some positive items in the budget, particularly the investment into investigating Walley's Quarry and the odour. However the budget showed no allocation of funding for Environmental Health until 2023/24.

Councillor Trevor Johnson was in support of the budget. Despite Covid, the Council had kept moving forward. The Guildhall was now opened up again at the heart of the community. The Markets had improved and more events around them had come into the town. Kidsgrove Sports Centre refurbishment was progressing and the new recycling system was a success.

Councillor Lawley Could not support the budget due to the Council Tax increase stating that the use of food banks in the area was on the increase and people could not afford it.

The Leader thanked members for the debate. In summing up, he confirmed that the budget had been scrutinised on two occasions by the Finance, Assets and Performance Scrutiny Committee. The odour coming from Walley's Quarry had been receiving complaints during the time of the previous administration but it was only now being acted upon, including meeting with the Environment Agency, whose job it would then be to take action. The One Council approach was discussed at Council last year and it had been to Scrutiny. The online consultation had not received as many responses as last year but if three years were taken in a row you get a view that reflects what people wanted.

The Leader stated that the budget on the table was the best budget for the Council, it had a low Council Tax increase of less than 10p per week for average households and for the services being delivered and the improvements being made. The Leader stated that he was pleased to recommend the budget to Council.

A named vote was then taken in respect of the proposed budget:

BURGESS	N	JONES	N	SHENTON	N
BURNETT	Y	KEARON	N	STUBBS	N
COOPER. Jenny	Y	LAWLEY	N	SWEENEY	Y
COOPER John	Y	MAXFIELD	Y	TAGG J	Y
COOPER Julie	Y	MOFFAT	N	TAGG S	Y
DYMOND	N	NORTHCOTT	Y	WALKLATE	Y
FEAR	Y	OLSZEWSKI	N	WARING J	Y
FOX-HEWITT	N	OWEN	Y	WARING P	Y
GARDNER	N	PANTER	Y	WHITE G	Y
GROCOTT	N	PARKER	Y	WHITE S	Y
HEESOM	Y	PICKUP	N	WILKES	Y
HOLLAND	Y	PROCTOR	Y	WILLIAMS G	N
HUTTON	Y	REDDISH	Y	WILLIAMS J	N
JOHNSON B	N	ROBINSON	N	WRIGHT	N
JOHNSON T	Y	ROUT	N		

In Favour (Y)- 25

Against (N)- 19

Abstain – 0

Resolved: That recommendations a to o, as set out in Appendix 'A' of the agenda report be approved.

6. PUBLICATION OF A PAY POLICY STATEMENT FOR 2021/22

The Leader introduced a report seeking Council's approval of the Pay Policy Statement for 2021/22.

This was an annual requirement of the Localism Act, 2011 setting out the remuneration of chief officers and the lowest paid employees and the changes in roles and titles of senior officers.

Resolved: That the Pay Policy Statement, as attached at Appendix A to the report, be approved.

7. QUESTIONS TO THE MAYOR, CABINET MEMBERS AND COMMITTEE CHAIRS

Councillor Stubbs asked the Leader for an update on the resolution made at the Council meeting held in December regarding Sustainable Development Goals.

The Leader stated that a report was being prepared which addressed the Motion, setting out how it would be progressed. It was a standing agenda item on the Sustainable Environment Steering Group. The report would include the mapping for which of the sustainable goals and targets were most relevant to the Council. The work would require resourcing from the policy perspective and the One Council programme would see the formation of a corporate policy capacity at the centre of the organisation which would take on that work and be updated as it moved forward.

Councillor Stubbs stated that there had been a request at the previous meeting that all reports coming to Full Council be marked appropriately, according to the sustainable development goals but the two reports at this meeting did not have those markings. Could it be ensured that the reports at the next meeting would have the markings as requested and passed by the Motion.

The Leader assured that this would happen and stated that, although the reports at this meeting did not have the mark on them, the first report definitely had an indication to the sustainable goals. The Borough Growth Fund showed £100,000 for environmental sustainability, £50,000 for the unpleasant odour, £70,000 for town centre recovery, £100,000 for the One Council programme. The Capital Programme had solar panels, subways improvement, pest control vehicles and electric charging points which were all part of this.

Councillor Fear asked the Leader for an outline of the threats posed by a Clean Air Zone (CAZ) for residents and businesses in the Borough.

The Leader stated that the CAZ's were essentially where the most polluted vehicles of certain type and age paid a daily charge to enter a particular geographical area. CAZ's had two potential impacts. It could mean a significant economic blow for the area. The CAZ assumes a daily charge on older vehicles ranging from £5 for a car, £9 for LGV's and up to £35 for HGV's. A report showed that the fleet of private vehicles in both Newcastle and Stoke on Trent were relatively old and around 20% of them would be non-compliant vehicles. This figure was above the national average. Imposing those charges would impact upon those least able to pay such daily charges. In addition, A CAZ would need a larger area to cover it rather than the bus gate. Displacement of the vehicles avoiding the CAZ would lead to exceedencies elsewhere.

Councillor Fear stated that this was very concerning and asked the Leader for assurance that he would continue to campaign and lobby against the imposition of a CAZ in the Borough.

The Leader confirmed this stating that he would be writing to the local MP's and the Leader of Stoke on Trent City Council outlining the concerns and hoped that he had the support of Council in doing so.

Councillor Fox-Hewitt asked the Leader to advise what robust processes were in place to ensure that Council policies around ethical tendering were adhered to when contacting services on behalf of the Council.

The Leader stated that there was cross-party support for the procurement measures referred to and contracting processes which were designed to ensure, as far as possible, that a full range of ethical considerations were required of its suppliers. As part of the contract management process, officers were doing their best to test a sample of contracts for compliance but it was not always possible to check compliance on every term of every contract that the Council had let. If any instances were discovered where the Council's agreed procurement of contract requirements were not met, the situation would be considered carefully and appropriate action would be taken.

Councillor Fox-Hewitt asked the Leader if he was aware of any complaints or challenges that Council was not adhering to the extant policies of the Council.

The Leader stated that there was something that Councillor Fox-Hewitt and other Members were involved in but it should not be discussed at a Council meeting. There was a meeting on this tomorrow where it would be looked into as part of a disciplinary hearing.

Councillor Paul Waring asked the Portfolio Holder for Finance and Efficiency to list any capital projects between 2012 and 2017 which specifically focussed on Kidsgrove.

Councillor Sweeney stated that the only capital project that he had found specifically for Kildsgrove was in 2016-17 when £15,000 was given for the ski centre.

Councillor Paul Waring asked for assurance that the people of Kildsgrove were now getting a fair share of the capital expenditure of the Borough Council.

Councillor Sweeney confirmed that this was the case.

Councillor Stubbs asked the Leader for an update on the progress being made for the May elections in terms of the nomination process, staffing and setting up of polling stations. In addition, Councillor Stubbs asked for an update on the number of volunteers who had confirmed their availability and for confirmation that there would be no reduction in the number of polling stations.

The Leader advised that a briefing note had been circulated to Members this evening. Informal Cabinet had previously had a briefing on this as had group leaders. Measures were in place to deal with the effect of Covid. The elections would be completely different this year for a lot of people, there would also be more postal votes and the Council needed to ensure that there would be extra capacity on the telephones as a lot more of the Council's business was being done over the phone or on the internet so it was important to have more capacity as more people would want postal votes and there would be more queries regarding voting this time.

Councillor Stubbs asked if postal vote applications could be sent out with every Council Tax bill.

The Leader stated that the availability of postal votes was being promoted and it would also be up to the political parties to promote them.

Councillor Moffat asked the Portfolio Holder for Environment and Recycling what plans there were to progress the resolution, passed in April, 2019 to aim to make Newcastle a carbon neutral Borough by 2030.

Councillor Trevor Johnson stated that at the Cabinet meeting last December, a report was considered on the Sustainable Environment Strategy and Action Plan for the Council and Borough. At that meeting, Councillor Johnson had referred to the 2019 resolution declaring a climate emergency and the commitment of Cabinet to deliver a Sustainable Environment Strategy. The Leader had reported how the work would be ongoing and would include partners - Keele University and Staffordshire County Council. The work to progress the Carbon Capture agenda, especially in urban areas had been particularly highlighted. Cabinet had endorsed the work to tackle environmental issues and agreed to seek views and support for the Strategy and Action Plan from key local partners and the Economy, Environment and Place Scrutiny Committee would be reviewing this at their meeting in March.

Councillor Moffat asked that it be considered to take a citizens assembly approach in order to co-design or form a smart strategy to achieve a low or zero carbon future for Newcastle.

Councillor Trevor Johnson took this on board and agreed to contact Councillor Moffat after the meeting to discuss this further.

8. DISCLOSURE OF EXEMPT INFORMATION

There were no confidential items for consideration.

9. STANDING ORDER 18 - URGENT BUSINESS

There was no urgent business.

COUNCILLOR JOHN COOPER
Chair

Meeting concluded at 8.50 pm