

COUNCIL

A meeting of Council was held on Wednesday 18 September 2024.

Present: The Worshipful the Mayor (Cllr John Gardner), Cllr Jim Beall, Cllr Stefan Barnes, Cllr Pauline Beall, Cllr Michelle Bendelow, Cllr Clare Besford, Cllr Marc Besford, Cllr Carol Clark, Cllr Diane Clarke OBE, Cllr Nigel Cooke, Cllr Robert Cook, Cllr John Coulson, Cllr Ian Dalgarno, Cllr Richard Eglington, Cllr Lisa Evans, Cllr Kevin Faulks, Cllr Jason French, Cllr Nathan Gale, Cllr Ray Godwin, Cllr Lynn Hall, Cllr Elsi Hampton, Cllr Stefan Houghton, Cllr Shakeel Hussain, Cllr Barbara Inman, Cllr Niall Innes, Cllr Eileen Johnson, Cllr Mrs Ann McCoy, Cllr Sufi Mubeen, Cllr Steve Nelson, Cllr Ross Patterson, Cllr David Reynard, Cllr Stephen Richardson, Cllr Tony Riordan, Cllr Paul Rowling, Cllr Vanessa Sewell, Cllr Andrew Sherris, Cllr Norma Stephenson OBE, Cllr Mick Stoker, Cllr Hugo Stratton, Cllr Ted Strike, Cllr Marilyn Surtees, Cllr Emily Tate, Cllr Jim Taylor, Cllr Hilary Vickers, Cllr Marcus Vickers, Cllr Sylvia Walmsley, Cllr Alan Watson, Cllr Sally Ann Watson, Cllr Paul Weston, Cllr Katie Weston and Cllr Barry Woodhouse.

Officers: Mike Greene (CE), Garry Cummings (DoF,D&R&DCE), Reuben Kench (DoCS,E&C), Ged Morton (DoCS), Carolyn Nice (DoAH&W), Peter Bell, Julie Butcher, John Devine, Jonathan Nertney and Judy Trainer (DoCS).

Also in attendance: Members of the Public.

Apologies: Cllr Dan Fagan, Cllr Mick Moore and Cllr Laura Tunney.

COU/135/24 Welcome and Evacuation Procedure

The Worshipful the Mayor welcomed everyone to the meeting and outlined the arrangements for the meeting.

COU/136/24 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

COU/137/24 Minutes

Consideration was given to the minutes of the meeting held on 24 July 2024.

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 24 July 2024 be confirmed and signed as a correct record.

COU/138/24 Public Question Time

The Worshipful the Mayor informed the meeting that there were no Public Questions.

COU/139/24 The Council's Independent Remuneration Panel

Consideration was given to a report on the Council's Independent Remuneration Panel.

There was no specific appointments process prescribed in the Regulations or Guidance, save that the Council should appoint the Panel and consider the issues detailed at paragraphs 8 – 11 of the report.

The Regulations required a Panel of at least three members, however, the Council's Constitution stipulated that its Panel should comprise four members, with a quorum of 3. None of the Panel members must be serving elected Members of the authority in respect of which it makes recommendations, nor a member of a committee or sub-committee of such authority. Panel Members must also not be disqualified from being or becoming a member of an authority.

Guidance associated with the Regulations required appointing authorities to be satisfied that proposed Panel members would result in the Panel Membership being sufficiently independent and well qualified to discharge the Panel's functions, and representative of the diversity of communities in the Council's area.

The terms of office of Stockton's previous Independent Remuneration Panel expired on 31 May 2024. The Panel comprised the following non-elected members:

Tony Campbell
Kate Hoskin
Mark White
Terry Laing

Further details of the above non-elected members were attached to the report.

It was proposed that the previous members of the Panel, described above and attached to the report be reappointed.

The functions of the Panel were attached to the report. These were the functions prescribed by regulation and detailed in the Council's Constitution.

It was recommended that Council appoints a Chair. Tony Campbell was the Panel's previous Chair and had lots of experience in this role. It was recommended that he is appointed as the Chair of the Remuneration Panel.

It was recommended that the terms of office of the Panel Members be up to 31 May 2028, unless they were removed, resign or otherwise leave office before then. This would enable preparations for a new Panel to be established (or for the incumbent panel to be re-appointed) during the first year of the new Council, after the 2027 elections.

Council had previously reserved the right to remove any one, or more, of the Panel Members at any time. This power should be retained.

It was proposed that the payments previously agreed for the Panel Members' work be retained. These were:-

Chair - £350 per day, subject to a maximum for each review of £1,750

Other Panel Members - £75 per day, subject to a maximum of £375 for each review; and All Panel Members – reasonable travel and subsistence expenses.

RESOLVED that:-

1. The previous members of the Council's Independent Remuneration Panel, as detailed in paragraph 4, and in Appendix 1 of the report, be reappointed, with their terms of office expiring on 31 May 2028.
2. The right be reserved to remove anyone, or more, of the Panel members at any time, as indicated in paragraph 10 of the report.
3. Tony Campbell be appointed as the Chair of the Panel.
4. The Panel's functions, as detailed in the Council's Constitution and Appendix 2 of the report, be noted.
5. The allowances for the Panel's work be as specified at paragraph 11 of the report be approved.

COU/140/24 Stockton-on-Tees Youth Justice Plan

Consideration was given to a report on the Stockton-on-Tees Youth Justice Plan.

Local authority partnerships had a statutory duty to submit a youth justice plan relating to their provision of youth justice services (YJSs). Section 40 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 sets out the youth justice partnerships responsibilities in producing a plan.

It stated that it was the duty of each local authority, in consultation with partner agencies, to formulate and implement an annual youth justice plan, setting out how YJSs in their area be provided and funded, how they would operate, and what functions would be carried out.

The Youth Justice Plan reports on the vision, strategy, governance, leadership and partnership arrangements. It reflected and built upon strong performance against key national performance measures. It documented key themes around child first principles, workforce development, diversion, exploitation and working with families.

The Youth Justice Plan was produced after consultation with partners. The Plan documents seven key strategic objective for the forthcoming year as follows:-

- 1) Help children stay out of the criminal justice system.
- 2) To reduce reoffending.
- 3) Reduce the use of custody and prioritise effective resettlement.
- 4) Strengthen our responses to Serious Youth Violence and Child Exploitation.
- 5) To reduce the number of school exclusions.
- 6) To refresh our practice in our work victims and restorative practice.
- 7) To develop a Participation model of practice.

A copy of the Stockton-on-Tees Youth Justice Plan was attached to the report.

RESOLVED that the Stockton-on-Tees Youth Justice Plan be approved.

COU/141/24 Motion to Council - Winter Fuel Allowance

The following motion had been submitted in accordance with Council Procedure Rule 3.40, moved by Cllr Tony Riordan, seconded by Cllr Niall Innes:-

“Winter Fuel Allowance

Stockton Borough Council notes the recent decision by the Labour led Government to end universal winter fuel payments for our pensioners and restrict eligibility to only those in receipt of Pension Credits and other benefits.

The additional strain this decision will place on vulnerable pensioners, many of whom do not claim Pension Credit despite being eligible, further exacerbating their financial hardship.

The decision to means-test Winter Fuel Payments, especially with such short notice and without adequate compensatory measures, is deeply unfair and will disproportionately affect the health and well-being of our poorest older residents.

The government’s approach fails to consider the administrative barriers and stigma that prevent our eligible pensioners from claiming Pension Credit, leaving many without the support they desperately need.

The significant role that Winter Fuel Payments play in helping our older residents of Stockton and across the UK afford heating during the coldest months, thereby preventing 'heat or eat' dilemmas and safeguarding health.

Council is deeply concerned that the vast majority of our pensioners who do not meet this threshold will now not receive the payments. Across England and Wales, the number of people eligible for winter fuel payments will fall by ten million (from 11.1million to only 1.2 million).

In Stockton Borough, the number of our pensioners affected by the change in eligibility criteria is 30,234. That means 87% of our pensioners currently eligible for winter fuel payments will no longer be able to claim the payment from this winter onwards. Only those receiving a pension of less than £218.15 a week (or £332.95 a week for couples) are eligible for pension credits. This is significantly lower than the living wage rate.

Stockton Borough Council further notes that the Energy Price Cap is due to rise by 10% in October, which combined by the removal of Winter Fuel Payments will push thousands of our pensioners into fuel poverty.

Council resolves to:

- Instruct the Leader, Cllr Bob Cook to write to the Chancellor of the Exchequer calling for the policy on linking Winter Fuel Payments to Pension Credit receipt to be immediately reversed.
- Council further requests the Leader, Cllr Bob Cook write to the three Members of Parliament, Matt Vickers MP, Chris McDonald MP and Andy McDonald MP, who

represent our pensioners and their families in the Borough asking them to give their formal support to reversing the changes to the Winter Fuel Payment eligibility by writing to the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

- Request all group leaders within Stockton Borough Council sign a joint letter to the Chancellor of the Exchequer calling for the new Winter Fuel Payment policy to be reversed.”

Moved by Councillor Paul Rowling, seconded by Councillor Eileen Johnson that the substantive motion be amended as follows:-

Stockton Borough Council notes the recent decision by the Government to end universal Winter Fuel Allowance (WFA) payments for our pensioners and restrict eligibility to only those in receipt of Pension Credits and other benefits.

The additional strain this decision will place on vulnerable pensioners, many of whom do not claim Pension Credit despite being eligible, further exacerbating their financial hardship.

The decision to means-test WFA, especially with such short notice and without adequate compensatory measures, is deeply unfair and will disproportionately affect the health and well-being of our poorest older residents.

The government’s approach fails to consider the administrative barriers and stigma that prevent our eligible pensioners from claiming Pension Credit, leaving many without the support they desperately need.

The significant role that WFA plays in helping our older residents of Stockton and across the UK afford heating during the coldest months, thereby preventing 'heat or eat' dilemmas and safeguarding health.

Council is deeply concerned that the vast majority of our pensioners who do not meet this threshold will now not receive WFA payments. Across England and Wales, the number of people eligible for WFA payments will fall by ten million (from 11.1million to only 1.2 million).

In Stockton Borough, the number of our pensioners affected by the change in eligibility criteria is 30,234. That means 87% of our pensioners currently eligible for WFA payments will no longer be able to claim the payment from this winter onwards.

Only those receiving a pension of less than £218.15 a week (or £332.95 a week for couples) are eligible for pension credits. This is significantly lower than the living wage rate.

Stockton Borough Council further notes that the Energy Price Cap is due to rise by 10% in October, which combined by the removal of WFA Payments will push thousands of our pensioners into fuel poverty.

Council resolves to:

- Instruct the Leader, Cllr Bob Cook, to write to the Chancellor of the Exchequer calling for the policy on linking WFA Payments to Pension Credit receipt to be:

i. reversed for the whole of 2024-25 WFA.

ii. the options available to be reconsidered and a revised scheme developed based upon the amount of income received by pensioners including those whose income exceeds the level eligible to receive Pension Credit. The amount of WFA payable above the Pension Credit limit should be gradually reduced as the level of increases to a point where the WFA will cease to be paid. This will provide a scheme which is equitable, a key principle of any good taxation and benefits system, and fair to all.

iii. The Government bring a fully costed scheme to Parliament as part of the March 2025 Budget.

- Council further requests the Leader, Cllr Bob Cook, to write to the three Members of Parliament, Matt Vickers MP, Chris McDonald MP and Andy McDonald MP, who represent our pensioners and their families in the Borough asking them to give their formal support to reversing the changes to the Winter Fuel Payment eligibility above, by writing to the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

- Request all group leaders within Stockton Borough Council sign a joint letter to the Chancellor of the Exchequer calling for the new WFA policy to be reversed for 2024-25 and a new equitable WFA scheme to be developed and presented to Parliament as part of the budget in March 2025.

Councillor Tony Riordan raised a point of order that he felt that the amendment to the motion should not be allowed as in-line with the constitution paragraph 3.50 (a) the amendment negated the original motion.

The Worshipful the Mayor ruled that the amendment did negate the substantive motion and therefore the amendment was not allowed.

The substantive motion was then debated.

No further amendments were moved.

At this point and in accordance with Council Procedure Rule 3.65 Councillor Niall Innes requested that a recorded vote be taken; which was supported by at least a quarter of the members present:-

Members in favour of the motion:-

Cllr Stefan Barnes, Cllr Jim Beall, Cllr Pauline Beall, Cllr Michelle Bendelow, Cllr Clare Besford, Cllr Marc Besford, Cllr Carol Clark, Cllr Diane Clarke OBE, Cllr Nigel Cooke, Cllr Robert Cook, Cllr John Coulson, Cllr Ian Dalgarno, Cllr Richard Eglinton, Cllr Lisa Evans, Cllr Kevin Faulks, Cllr Jason French, Cllr Nathan Gale, Cllr John Gardener, Cllr Ray Godwin, Cllr Lynn Hall, Cllr Elsi Hampton, Cllr Stefan Houghton, Cllr Shakeel Hussain, Cllr Barbara Inman, Cllr Niall Innes, Cllr Eileen Johnson, Cllr Mrs Ann McCoy, Cllr Sufi Mubeen, Cllr Steve Nelson, Cllr Ross Patterson, Cllr David Reynard, Cllr Stephen Richardson, Cllr Tony Riordan, Cllr Paul Rowling, Cllr Vanessa Sewell, Cllr Andrew Sherris, Cllr Norma Stephenson OBE, Cllr Mick Stoker, Cllr Hugo Stratton, Cllr Ted Strike, Cllr Marilyn Surtees, Cllr Emily Tate, Cllr Jim Taylor, Cllr Hilary Vickers, Cllr Marcus Vickers, Cllr Sylvia Walmsley, Cllr Alan Watson, Cllr Sally Ann Watson, Cllr Paul Weston, Cllr Katie Weston and Cllr Barry Woodhouse.

Members against the motion:- None

Abstentions:- None

The substantive motion was unanimously carried as follows:-

“Winter Fuel Allowance

Stockton Borough Council notes the recent decision by the Labour led Government to end universal winter fuel payments for our pensioners and restrict eligibility to only those in receipt of Pension Credits and other benefits.

The additional strain this decision will place on vulnerable pensioners, many of whom do not claim Pension Credit despite being eligible, further exacerbating their financial hardship.

The decision to means-test Winter Fuel Payments, especially with such short notice and without adequate compensatory measures, is deeply unfair and will disproportionately affect the health and well-being of our poorest older residents.

The government’s approach fails to consider the administrative barriers and stigma that prevent our eligible pensioners from claiming Pension Credit, leaving many without the support they desperately need.

The significant role that Winter Fuel Payments play in helping our older residents of Stockton and across the UK afford heating during the coldest months, thereby preventing 'heat or eat' dilemmas and safeguarding health.

Council is deeply concerned that the vast majority of our pensioners who do not meet this threshold will now not receive the payments. Across England and Wales, the number of people eligible for winter fuel payments will fall by ten million (from 11.1million to only 1.2 million).

In Stockton Borough, the number of our pensioners affected by the change in eligibility criteria is 30,234. That means 87% of our pensioners currently eligible for winter fuel payments will no longer be able to claim the payment from this winter onwards. Only those receiving a pension of less than £218.15 a week (or £332.95 a week for couples) are eligible for pension credits. This is significantly lower than the living wage rate.

Stockton Borough Council further notes that the Energy Price Cap is due to rise by 10% in October, which combined by the removal of Winter Fuel Payments will push thousands of our pensioners into fuel poverty.

Council resolves to:

- Instruct the Leader, Cllr Bob Cook to write to the Chancellor of the Exchequer calling for the policy on linking Winter Fuel Payments to Pension Credit receipt to be immediately reversed.
- Council further requests the Leader, Cllr Bob Cook write to the three Members of Parliament, Matt Vickers MP, Chris McDonald MP and Andy McDonald MP, who

represent our pensioners and their families in the Borough asking them to give their formal support to reversing the changes to the Winter Fuel Payment eligibility by writing to the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

- Request all group leaders within Stockton Borough Council sign a joint letter to the Chancellor of the Exchequer calling for the new Winter Fuel Payment policy to be reversed.”

COU/142/24 Members' Question Time

The following Member Question had been submitted by Cllr Ted Strike for response by the Cabinet Member for Health, Leisure and Culture (Cllr Steve Nelson):-

“During the last two winters Stockton Council have supported the use of "Warm Spaces" with financial grants due to the high cost of fuel.

With Ofgen announcing an increase of 10% on gas and electric and the withdrawal of the Winter Fuel Allowance for the vast majority of pensioners "Will Stockton Borough Council be providing this facility again this winter?"

The Cabinet Member for Health, Leisure and Culture responded with:-

“The Warm Spaces scheme was introduced in October 2022 in response to the cost of living crisis and the huge increase in utility charges and I’d like to take this opportunity to thank the Fairer Stockton on Tees team for their crucial involvement in the scheme.

In 2023 Warm Spaces were rebranded as Community Spaces with an all year round offer for residents. Social isolation is a silent killer and Community Spaces play a major role in the borough in bringing people together in a warm and welcoming environment.

The scheme has been a major success and an excellent example of partnership working. A report on the scheme is going to the next Cabinet so I won’t go into further details here.

To answer your specific question yes public health funding was provided for the scheme for both 2023/24 and 2024/25. Considering the increasing financial pressures on local authorities and the Council’s Powering Our Future transformation programme, it is imperative that Community Spaces venues are empowered to achieve long-term sustainability by accessing wider funding and are supported with funding bid applications.”

Member Question submitted by Cllr Niall Innes for response by the Leader of the Council (Cllr Bob Cook):-

“Can the Leader of the Council inform me of the total amount this Council has spent on Interim staff from January 2023 to date?”

The Leader of the Council responded with:-

“Can I start by saying that spending on interim staff is a necessary cost. Interim staff can be crucial to keeping our services running effectively whether that’s filling roles during recruitment, covering absences, or bringing in specialist skills when needed.

In terms of spend on interim staff, this is ordinarily funded through existing staffing budgets, so there's no additional cost to the council over and above what we would ordinarily pay.

More exceptionally, when specialist expertise or additional capacity is required, any extra costs are carefully looked at and fully funded. Any decision to bring in interim staff must be justified and managed within our financial controls.

We manage our budgets on an annual cycle aligned with the financial year, not from arbitrary points like January 2023. We don't operate a separate budget for interim staff, as I have already said interim staff are ordinarily funded through existing staffing budgets. Our annual staffing budget is £120 million and if we include our Xentrall shared service £126 million, approximately half our total budget.

Interim staffing is a normal aspect of managing our workforce, allowing us to be flexible and responsive. While we aim to fill permanent roles whenever possible, interim staff ensure that critical roles are filled when needed, keeping our services running smoothly."

Councillor Niall Innes asked the following supplementary question:-

"Does the Leader of the Council believe that it is right that £200k paid per week on interims in the Children and Young People department with consultants on the same amount, considering we find ourselves in a £3.6 million black hole under his leadership?"

The Leader of the Council responded with:-

"I think you'll find that within Children's Services there is a statutory role for the Director of Children's Services. We had to get someone in until we could recruited to the post. If we didn't do that it would have been illegal not to have that statutory Director within the Council."

Member Question submitted by Cllr Niall Innes for response by the Leader of the Council (Cllr Bob Cook):-

"Considering all Councillors receive a generous basic allowance plus special responsibility allowance where applicable, does the Leader of the Council believe it is right Councillors can claim additional expenses that are not in the interest of local residents?"

The Leader of the Council responded with:-

"Thank you for your question, Councillor Innes. The setting of allowances and the policy on expenses are decisions made collectively by this full Council, it is a decision involving all political groups. The basic allowance, set at £9,300, has been frozen for several years, despite recommendations from our independent remuneration panel suggesting otherwise. The decision on allowances and expenses that may be claimed has been agreed upon by all members, from all groups.

Councillors particularly those in leading roles attend conferences, training sessions, and award ceremonies like the MJ Awards not for personal interest but to fulfil their roles, often as a requirement of their responsibilities, and to celebrate the achievements of local government. These events are essential for recognising the hard work of our teams, gaining valuable insights, and bringing back knowledge that directly benefits our residents.

If we cast doubt on expenses that are legitimately claimed in accordance with the policies that we have all agreed upon only serves to undermine us all. If any member believes an expense has been claimed wrongly, the proper action is to refer it to the Monitoring Officer for investigation.

We have this evening approved the appointment of an independent remuneration panel, which will review our allowances and expenses. If changes are needed, should properly be addressed through these processes.”

Councillor Niall Innes asked the following supplementary question:-

“We have already had a motion tonight regarding Labour government removing £300 per year from some of the most vulnerable. We have seen that the Labour Councillors are claiming from the tax payer over £40 for steak and chips and a portion of mussels, £7.29 on a salad box, £7.50 on a cray fish sandwich and a bottle of diet coke. How can the Leader justify his own Councillors lavishly feeding themselves at the tax-payers expense given the discussion here this evening and the continued financial blackhole this Council finds itself in?”

The Leader of the Council responded with:-

“I’m not sure where you got that information from. Obviously they are expenses and Councillors are allowed to claim. There is a lot that we don’t claim. I travel up and down the country and don’t claim what I’m allowed.”

Member Question submitted by Cllr Tony Riordan for response by the Leader of the Council (Cllr Bob Cook):-

“A recent press article following a briefing to a journalist, that you were present at, regarding the vision and regeneration for Stockton Town Centre and the Teesdale area, disclosed to members and the council taxpayers in the Borough, that this Council had purchased the previous Debenhams department store on Stockton High Street.

As the Leader of Stockton Borough Council do you think it is appropriate that members should discover about such a significant purchase via the press, and that the decision to do so was not recorded on the Council's register, which is open to the public?”

The Leader of the Council responded with:-

I’d like to provide some background to the Council’s decision to acquire the former Debenhams site. Members will recall that the Council already owned part of the Debenhams building through our purchase of Wellington Square. The rear section of the building, which faces Wellington Square, was an extension to the original

Debenhams store and was part of our existing property. However, the front part of the traditional Debenhams building facing the High Street was on a separate property title.

This division was not an issue when Debenhams was operating as a single store, but when Debenhams went into administration, the building effectively became split in two with no internal wall separating the units.

Members will recall shopping in Debenhams but may not have realised that the services supporting the rear extension, such as utilities and infrastructure, were all contained in the older part of the building. Separating these two parts into distinct units would have involved considerable cost and disruption.

Bringing both parts of the building back into single ownership was critical to ensuring the site could be brought back into productive use a key objective for the regeneration of our town centre. When we learned that the front part of the building, owned by a property company, was due to go to public auction, this presented a significant risk. Losing control of the front section, while owning the rear, would have created a barrier to revitalising the entire site and potentially led to blight.

Through direct discussions with the owners' agents, we had the opportunity to remove the building from auction and secure it through a private sale. This required swift action, as the auction date was approaching. We secured an independent valuation to ensure the price was fair, and a delegated decision was made by officers, which was properly recorded but not published at the time due to its exempt status.

Exempt information is used to protect sensitive details that could, if disclosed prematurely, compromise the Council's negotiating position or financial interests. In this case, keeping the information confidential was crucial to avoiding competition that could have driven up the purchase price. Both members and officers have a duty to respect these confidentiality boundaries under our codes of conduct.

Exempt information is vital in many scenarios commercial deals, staff matters, and safeguarding vulnerable individuals. Both members and officers must respect these confidentiality boundaries. We will work on making the process more systematic when exempt information no longer needs to be confidential, and I've asked the officers to look into this, particularly as we continue using and expanding the new ModGov system.

Since taking control of the whole building, we have been able to have more productive discussions with potential tenants. I am pleased to report that we have strong interest and we are discussing terms with a potential tenant. While further work is needed to reach a final agreement, this progress would not have been possible without securing overall control of the site.

In summary, the decision was properly recorded, appropriately confidential, and in the public interest. I would ask all members to respect the need for confidentiality in such matters."

Councillor Tony Riordan asked the following supplementary question:-

"I note the Leaders point about confidential information but that public interest has now lapsed and the decision has been made. Will there be an agreement that following the decision to purchase the Debenhams store in October 2023 £500k plus stamp duty for

land tax and associated fees together with a failure to commission a detailed survey to identify any potential issues with the building structure or systems. A failure to identify repairs and maintenance and a failure to identify a tenant for the on-going revenue costs of £370k per year has created a significant risk to the Council taxpayers of this Borough and can he outline any other decisions that have not been recorded on the public register?"

The Leader of the Council responded with:-

"As far as I know it is now on the public register as it is not confidential anymore. We have got an independent valuation on the building and it would have been complicated if we hadn't bought the site as we own part of it. Detailed talks are on-going with someone to potentially move onto the site."

Member Question submitted by Cllr Tony Riordan for response by the Leader of the Council (Cllr Bob Cook):-

"Despite this council agreeing on the 24th of January 2024 to request Stockton Hotels Company Ltd to publish their Profit and Loss Accounts and Directors Statements, and further questions raised by myself in this chamber on the 29th of May and the 24th of July regarding the publication, these have still not been published on the Council Website (7th September).

Will the Leader agree with me, despite the Council's wishes and the reassurances he has given to these questions, particularly on the 29th of May, when he said "This work has now been completed, and the additional documentation is available on the council's website" (which was clearly incorrect) the lack of publication is indefensible and raises questions as to why there appears to be a reluctance to publish the documents?"

The Leader of the Council responded with:-

"Thank you, Councillor Riordan, for asking this question, as it gives me the opportunity to celebrate a homegrown success. Stockton Hotels Company Ltd is an excellent example of our commitment to regenerating our town.

This hotel stands on the former derelict Kwik Fit site, which once offered nothing to our community. Now, it's a thriving, award-winning business with a 79.2% occupancy rate at the end of August, delivering hundreds of thousands of pounds back to the council, creating 30 directly employed jobs, and supporting many more in our local economy.

This project was always about more than profit; it was about breathing new life into a neglected site and creating opportunities for Stockton.

The success of this hotel is something we should all be proud of proof of what we can achieve when we invest in our community. Would we rather see the site left to decay or celebrate its transformation into a thriving business that benefits Stockton. The answer is clear.

On the publication of documents, let me be clear: we have nothing to hide. The latest Profit and Loss Accounts and Directors' Statements are already on the council's website, and we are working on making earlier shareholder documents accessible, as

required under the Equality Act. This process takes time as it involves adapting documents that weren't originally designed for web use into formats accessible to everyone.

Much of this information is also available on Companies House, and members have always been able to view the documents upon request. This isn't about hiding anything; it's about ensuring accessibility and sharing our achievements properly.

Thank you for asking this question and allowing me the opportunity to celebrate this homegrown success. This isn't just a council success; it's a success for Stockton. We can be proud of what's been achieved."

Councillor Tony Riordan asked the following supplementary question:-

"Will the Leader agree with me that the unpublished Profit and Loss Statements, the Directors Statements, together with the Annual Accounts, which he and I have read, show that the Hotel Company has not paid out one single penny in dividend to the shareholders (the Council Taxpayers of this Borough) despite this Council writing off its ongoing losses and providing a cash injection totalling £465k, together with the ongoing Business Rates Relief scheme set up by the last Government, totalling over £300k for the Hotel, thereby suggesting his previous public statements regarding an annual profit generated by the hotel of £250k going back into the local coffers are incorrect?"

The Leader of the Council responded with:-

"I will need to look into that and I will speak to officers. As far as I'm concerned the accounts that are on the website should show the accounts that companies house would have."

Member Question submitted by Cllr Sufi Mubeen for response by the Cabinet Member for Access, Communities and Community Safety (Councillor Norma Stephenson):-

"Can the Cabinet Member for Access, Communities and Community Safety outline in detail, what action has to been taken to address the sex workers plying their trade on the streets of the Ropner and Town Centre wards?"

The Cabinet Member for Access, Communities and Community Safety responded with:-

"We are aware of the challenges associated with sex workers in the Ropner ward and over the past year we have been working in close partnership with our community, all our partner agencies and local Councillors to come up with a longer-term solution to what is a very complex matter. Members will recall that twelve months ago, we successfully bid for Safer Streets 5 funding for Ropner ward.

This fund provided much needed funding to support the inception of Operation Nightfall. While at that point in time, issues associated with sex work were under reported to both the Council and Cleveland Police, attendance at Ropner Ward surgeries and the subsequent conversations with both Councillors and residents revealed the true extent of the long-standing problem in the area.

As a result of listening to community concerns, Cleveland Police began dedicated patrols in the area and have successfully intervened in situations where women have been in danger.

Alongside this our CCTV operators have also alerted police to potential offenders and a significant amount of intelligence has been gathered. As part of this initiative we also funded the charity A Way Out to support sex workers and attached an officer from our community safety team to work alongside them in problem solving interventions with women at risk of exploitation in this area.

This work continues and CCTV operations have been key to identifying a potential suspect in the recent sexual assaults within this ward resulting in a charge and remand of the alleged suspect.

Following further problem-solving work around this issue, six months ago we were successful in applying for funding from CURV (OPCC) to conduct research with residents, sex workers and local businesses to understand the impact of sex work in Ropner.

It is important to consider that sex workers are often victims of much wider exploitation and are also members of our community which we owe an equal duty of care. From this research it is clear that addiction is an issue, and that many are involved in sex work to fund addiction and are living in hunger and poverty. Some are homeless or living out of inadequate housing. The full report has been shared with police and partners including local Councillors via the Clear Hold Build pilot, Project Harmony. An action plan has been created and a new Problem Solving and Partnership Officer post established through joint partnership funding, which will be leading on the continued work to tackle issues important to the community.

There is no quick solution to this, but we do now have a sound evidence base from the multi-agency intelligence gathering which has taken place and the research conducted, whereas before, the issues were under reported and police had very little information on sex work in Ropner. We will continue our regular engagement and updates to Ward Councillors alongside our continued engagement with the community through both ward surgeries and the established monthly 'drop in' sessions at the Family Hub."

Councillor Sufi Mubeen asked the following supplementary question:-

"Would you agree with me that despite everything that you have outlined the horrendous situation that these wards have to suffer on a daily basis, whether that is being propositioned by sex workers, used condoms on the pavements, having to explain to children what a sex worker is, food and drinks are given to the sex workers outside of peoples homes, sex predators are coming into the area. The situation has not improved and is getting worse. We now need a change of strategy to provide a safe community for residents?"

The Cabinet Member for Access, Communities and Community Safety responded with:-

"I agree this is a problem but I also agreed with you when this first started that this is a pen not a magic wand. We can't change this overnight and I can understand how

residents feel and what has happened over the last week or so has upset a lot of people. We need to work with the sex workers and provide them with an exit strategy.”

As 30 minutes had passed for Members Question Time and in-line with the Council constitution paragraph 3.39 the Worshipful the Mayor closed this item. The remaining Member Questions would be put forward for consideration at the next meeting of Council.

COU/143/24 Forward Plan and Leader’s Statement

The Leader of the Council gave his Forward Plan and Leaders Statement.

Council last met on 24 July 2024. Cabinet last met on 12 September 2024 and considered the following matters:

- 2024/25 Quarter 1, Financial Update and Medium Term Financial Plan
- Central Stockton and North Thornaby Blueprint Delivery
- Accelerating affordable housing delivery (A quality home for all)
- Enhanced Mainstream Schools Consultation
- Stockton-on-Tees Youth Justice Plan and the Council's Independent Remuneration Panel

Cabinet would next meet on the 17 October 2024 and then the 14 November before the next meeting of Council. The following items were scheduled for October Cabinet:

- Powering our Futures / Transformation
- Council Plan
- Annual Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman
- Childcare Sufficiency Assessment

The Leader of the Council reminded Members of the Festival of Thrift taking place at John Whitehead Park in Billingham. There was also the by-election for the Fairfield ward. There was also libraries week taking place from 7 October, a chance to experience what the Council great libraries have to offer. Then many Members will be attending remembrance events across the Borough on remembrance Sunday.