

SCOTTISH BORDERS COUNCIL

MINUTE of MEETING of the SCOTTISH BORDERS COUNCIL held in Council Headquarters, Newtown St. Boswells and via Microsoft Teams on Thursday 25 January 2024 at 10.00 a.m.

Present:- Councillors W. McAteer (Convener), J. Anderson, D. Begg, C. Cochrane, J. Cox, L. Douglas, M. Douglas, J. Greenwell, C. Hamilton, S. Hamilton, E. Jardine, J. Linehan, N. MacKinnon, S. Marshall, D. Moffat, S. Mountford, D. Parker, J. PatonDay, J. Pirone, C. Ramage, N. Richards, E. Robson, M. Rowley, S. Scott, F. Sinclair, E. Small, A. Smart, H. Steel, R. Tatler, V. Thomson, E. Thornton-Nicol, T. Weatherston.

Apologies:- Councillor A. Orr.

In Attendance:- Chief Executive, Director Corporate Governance, Director Finance and Procurement, Director Infrastructure and Environment, Director People, Performance and Change, Director Education and Lifelong Learning, Director Resilient Communities, Director Strategic Commissioning and Partnerships, Democratic Services Team Leader

1. CONVENER'S REMARKS

- 1.1 The Convener expressed his congratulations to three people from the Scottish Borders who had been recognised in the New Year Honours List. Best wishes were expressed to Shirley Rogers, awarded a CBE for services to Scottish Community Healthcare, Sally-Ann Loudon, awarded an OBE for services to Local Government, and Stuart Hogg, awarded an MBE for services to Rugby.
- 1.2 The Convener thanked the NHS, Emergency Planning, Council Staff, and Resilient Groups who had been involved in the response to Storm Isha and Jocelyn which had struck the region recently.
- 1.3 The Convener highlighted the outstanding career of Julie Forrest, who had recently won the mixed pairs final of the World Indoor Bowls championship. Julie was also the runner-up in the World Indoor Bowls women's singles final.
- 1.4 The Convener congratulated the Director of Finance and Procurement on 25 years' service with the Council.

DECISION NOTED.

2. MINUTE

The Minute of the Meeting held on 14 December 2023 was considered.

DECISION AGREED that the Minute be approved and signed by the Convener.

3. COMMITTEE MINUTES

The Minutes of the following Committees had been circulated:-

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| (a) Teviot and Liddesdale Area Partnership | 7 November 2023 |
| (b) Selkirk Common Good | 13 November 2023 |
| (c) Jedburgh Common Good | 13 November 2023 |
| (d) Kelso Common Good | 14 November 2023 |
| (e) Eildon Area Partnership | 16 November 2023 |

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| (f) External Services-Providers Monitoring Group | 21 November 2023 |
| (g) Peebles Common Good | 22 November 2023 |
| (h) Cheviot Area Partnership | 22 November 2023 |
| (i) External Services-Providers Monitoring Group | 28 November 2023 |
| (j) Executive Committee | 5 December 2023 |
| (k) External Services-Providers Monitoring Group | 5 December 2023 |
| (l) Galashiels Common Good | 7 December 2023 |

DECISION

APPROVED the Minutes listed above.

4. SCOTTISH BORDERS BUS NETWORK REVIEW AND RECOMMENDATIONS

There had been circulated copies of a report by the Director – Infrastructure and Environment which provided an overview of the bus network review and proposed a number of recommendations to amend bus services across the network. The Scottish Borders had a large number of bus services, set over a wide geographic area with a dispersed population. The routes had remained largely unchanged for many years. Only a small number of the services operated commercially, and Scottish Borders Council invested significant revenue funding each year to keep 80% of the network operating. Scottish Borders Council had commissioned a full bus network review in 2022, with the support of the City Deal Workforce Mobility Project. It sought to assess the efficiency and effectiveness of the existing commercial and supported bus services, and make recommendations, where appropriate, that could improve the network in relation to better meeting potential outcomes and/or improving service efficiency. A wide scale community and business engagement exercise was undertaken to identify the needs of communities and to assess new travel demand that was not currently met by the existing public transport network. That information had been used to design a new network that was focused on key trip attractors, such as the Borders General Hospital, rather than servicing key road corridors across the region. The review found that overall, the majority of the network operated well and provided sufficient coverage but there were opportunities to increase the frequency of inter-town services and town services, whilst looking at improving the operational durations and the timing of services to key employment, education and healthcare sites. The review highlighted the opportunity for more demand responsive services to be introduced across the Scottish Borders to link remote rural communities into key towns. An economic assessment undertaken had identified that the bus network provided significant economic and social value to the region, and that SBC's support for non-commercial services provided a good rate of return. The recommendations in the report would be delivered as existing Service contracts expired. However, due to the return of some service contracts by operators in the last six months, the Passenger Transport team had already utilised the analysis and recommendations of the Bus Network Review to implement changes to mitigate the loss of services where possible and sustain the existing commercial network. Members welcomed the report and its recommendations, highlighted the considerable work which had been undertaken, and expressed thanks to the Principal Transport Officer, Mr Gordon Grant, for his efforts.

DECISION

AGREED to:-

- (a) note the comprehensive assessment undertaken by the Bus Network review to identify changes that could deliver improved bus services for the communities and businesses of the Scottish Borders;**
- (b) approve the proposed service changes set out in the report;**
- (c) approve the proposed procurement approach set out in the report. Acknowledging the benefits that longer term contracts would bring for competition and enabling operators to invest in fleet and services, whilst committing Scottish Borders Council to longer term financial commitments; and**

- (d) **approve the need for a report to be brought back to Scottish Borders Council to outline options if the tender returns exceed the existing budget provision.**

5. **SCOTTISH BORDERS CONSULTATIVE DRAFT LOCAL HEAT AND ENERGY EFFICIENCY STRATEGY 2024-2029**

There had been circulated copies of a report by the Director Infrastructure and Environment which provided an update on the consultative draft Local Heat and Energy Efficiency Strategy (LHEES) and an overview of the consultation process. The Local Heat and Energy Efficiency Strategies (Scotland) Order 2022 placed a duty on Local Authorities to prepare, publish and update a Local Heat and Energy Efficiency Strategy (LHEES). The LHEES would be the core strategy and delivery programme for reducing energy demand and decarbonising heat supply. The proposed consultative draft LHEES had been prepared in accordance with Scottish Government Guidance which set out the drivers, scope and requirements of the strategy. The Chief Planning and Housing Officer, Mr Ian Aikman, presented a summary of the key points of the report and highlighted that deliverability formed one of the key themes of the LHEES, which was expected to be regularly updated and amended as changes took place over time. The Principal Heat and Energy Efficiency Strategy Officer, Mr Neil Robertson, provided a summary of the timeline for the LHEES, explaining that it had become a statutory duty for all Local Authorities in May 2022. The Council was required to publish its strategy and delivery plans. Both of those plans had to be renewed on a five-year cycle. Members welcomed the report but stressed that officers needed to work with urgency to ensure that the action which needed to be taken was progressed, particularly relating to those properties which were poorly insulated. In response to a question regarding a lack of Council involvement in tackling local labour issues, Mr Aikman outlined that a variety of initiatives involved in the LHEES which required work with third party organisations and groups and undertook to work to address the feedback received into the revised document. It was highlighted that a change to planning laws to provide authorities with the power to insist that new developments must include the most energy efficient systems would have a positive impact. In response to a question regarding whether work was ongoing with partners to try and promote the take-up of offers such as interest free loans to undertake home improvements related to energy efficiency, Mr Robertson explained that events were becoming more prevalent, and that work was required to ensure that homeowners were sufficiently informed of what was available and appropriate to their homes’.

DECISION

AGREED to:-

- (a) **note the draft Local Heat and Energy Efficiency Strategy;**
- (b) **note that the final Local Heat and Energy Efficiency Strategy would be presented to Council before the end of the financial year; and**
- (c) **approve the plans for formal consultation.**

6. **COUNCIL TAX – SECOND HOMES**

There had been circulated copies of a report by the Director – Resilient Communities which provided information on the discretion available to Local Authorities to charge up to 200% Council Tax on second homes from 1 April 2024 and recommended a change in policy with effect from 1 April 2024. Legislation which gave Local Authorities the power to double Council Tax on second homes was approved on 14 December 2023, and aimed to prioritise housing for living in and to bring the Second Homes Policy in line with Long Term Empty Council Tax Policy. There were currently approximately 1055 second homes within Scottish Borders Council which were charged 100% Council Tax. Introducing the policy could generate an additional annual income in the region of £1.5 million. Given the increased administrative burden, it had been suggested that some of the additional income be retained by Customer Advice & Support Service to allow the recruitment of one additional staff member.

**DECISION
AGREED:-**

- (a) to utilise the flexibility permitted to introduce a 200% Council Tax charge on second homes from 1 April 2024;**
- (b) that £30k of the additional income to be raised be used to fund an additional staff member to administer the new arrangements; and**
- (c) to note the further discretionary provision and not to extend the statutory 6 month relief timescale for properties undergoing repairs or renovations.**

7. NON-DOMESTIC RATES EMPTY PROPERTY RELIEF

There had been circulated copies of a report by the Director – Resilient Communities which provided an update on the review of the Non-Domestic Rates (NDR) Empty Property Relief Policy approved at Council on 16 February 2023, and which set out the recommendation for a revised policy to take effect from 1 April 2024. The Scottish Government had made an annual fixed sum available for the next three years to support the revised policy. Scottish Borders Council's allocation of the funding was £1.15m for 2023/24. Local Authorities could retain any income from business rates they charged on empty properties between 1 April 2023 and 31 March 2026. Across Scotland every Local Authority was looking at their own policy with the aim of bringing empty properties back into use, and a number were looking to reduce the relief they award on empty properties to support that aim. There were 627 empty properties receiving relief as of 6 December 2023, from the 9,368 entries on the Valuation Roll for the Scottish Borders Valuation Area. 74% of those empty properties were in towns.

**DECISION
AGREED:-**

- (a) to approve the amended Non-Domestic Rates Empty Property Relief Policy, which reflected the changes outlined in the report, to award 50% relief for 3 months, followed by 10% for a maximum of 9 months after which no relief was awarded; and**
- (b) that the amended policy be effective from 1 April 2024.**

8. COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS 2023 FEEDBACK

There had been circulated copies of a report by the Director – Resilient Communities which provided an update on the feedback gathered from the nine separate Community Conversations which took place during September 2023 with Elected Members, Senior Officers and members of the Public and to seek approval on the next steps. The feedback from the Community Conversations was contained in Appendix 1 to the report. The main issues raised from the feedback had been captured along with the proposed service response. The Conversations allowed the community members to share their thoughts about what really mattered to them and their community and they formed a key part of how the Council engaged with communities and developed its plans. A Community Engagement Strategy was being developed and would come to Council in due course for approval. In the meantime, planning was now underway for the Community Conversation programme for 2024, and it was proposed that this be developed with the input from Elected Members, Area Partnerships and other key stakeholders. Members welcomed the report and highlighted that the events had been a positive to attend, but required further works to improve their format and ability to engage with the general public. Members encouraged one another to hold surgeries at locations where the public were already in attendance such as farmers markets to enable them to interact with their constituents. The Director – Resilient Communities agreed that a range of different ways of engaging with the public needed to be utilised to ensure that as diverse a spectrum of views were heard. Mrs Craig confirmed that the data in the report had been amended to remove any personal references or items which could allow

individuals to be identified by their feedback. Common themes had been selected and presented. Work would take place on tailoring the feedback for presenting to stakeholders.

DECISION

AGREED:-

- (a) to note the feedback received from the Community Conversations contained in Appendix 1 to the report, which would be considered in the development of the 2024/25 Council Plan which would be considered alongside the 2024/25 budget;**
- (b) that the feedback be shared with each Area Partnerships Community Councils and with Schools;**
- (c) that different options be considered to develop the programme for 2024 along with input from Elected Members and Area Partnerships; and**
- (d) to build upon the successful youth engagement and to tie in with existing youth forums to continue conversations with young people.**

9. PLACE BASED INVESTMENT PROGRAMME

There had been circulated copies of a report by the Director – Resilient Communities which provided an update on the delivery of the Scottish Government Place Based Investment Programme which had allocated £23m of capital funding to Scottish Local Authorities, payable in the financial year 2023/24 to support town centre regeneration projects and community wealth building. Scottish Government and Council Leaders had agreed that Local Authorities would receive a share of funding to help support place-based investment over a five-year period, with the current financial year being the third year of the programme. The Scottish Borders had been allocated £550k based on a combination of total population and existing deprivation levels, which required to be financially committed by the end of the current financial year. Council Officers had identified four potential projects that £147k of funding could be allocated to within the current financial year. Those proposals had been recommended for approval by the Place Partnership which was an independent group of experienced partners from the public, private and third sectors. Details of the proposals were outlined in the report and Officers were working with a number of groups and organisations to try and bring forward additional projects to a Committee later in the year with a view to fully allocating the funding from Scottish Government during the current financial year. Members welcomed the report and the encouraging news, particularly highlighting the difficulty in delivering shovel-ready projects which could access funding. Local Members highlighted that the Linton Hotspur Community Football Club had delivered successful projects with a range of local groups.

DECISION

AGREED to:-

- (a) note the progress made to deliver the Scottish Government's Place Based Investment Programme which was intended to provide funding for Scottish Local Authorities over a five-year period;**
- (b) commit £147k from the allocation in the current financial year to four projects throughout the Scottish Borders as detailed in the report;**
- (c) delegate authority to the Director of Resilient Communities and Director of Finance and Procurement, in consultation with the Economic Development Elected Members Reference Group, the Convenor of the Council, and the Leader of the Independent Group to approve local projects as required, taking account of the recommendations from the Place Partnership; and**

- (d) **note that further papers would be brought back to an appropriate Committee at a suitable time which would provide further detail on proposed place-based projects and future delivery.**

10. **PENSION FUND EMPLOYERS (SCOTTISH BORDERS COUNCIL) CONTRIBUTION RATE**

There had been circulated copies of a report by the Director – Finance and Procurement which informed Scottish Borders Council of a decision taken by Scottish Borders Pension Fund Committee and Board setting the Scottish Borders Council employers contribution rate from 2024/25 onwards. The decision was taken on the 17th of January 2024 and the report supporting the decision was contained in Appendix 1 to the report. The report contained in the Appendix explained that, following the most recent triennial actuarial revaluation of the fund, it was assessed that the Fund was 134% funded and recommended that the Scottish Borders Council contribution rate move to 17% from 2024/25 through to 2027/28. That recommendation – and all of the other recommendations in the Report were agreed by the Pension Fund Committee and Board. The Director – Finance and Procurement presented the report and the Chairman of the Pension Fund Committee outlined that the decision made on the 17 January 2024 had been taken solely with the management and security of the Fund in mind.

DECISION

AGREED to note the content of the report contained in Appendix 1 to the report and that the recommendations in the report were agreed by the Pension Fund Committee and Board on 17 January 2024.

11. **PUBLIC SPACE CCTV AND TOWN CENTRE CONNECTIVITY**

With reference to paragraph 8 of the Minute of the meeting held on 28 September 2023, there had been circulated copies of a report by the Director – Strategic Commissioning and Partnerships which provided an update on progress made on developing the CCTV proposal and an overview on the next steps for Borders wide connectivity including town centres, and the timeline for a full business case being brought back to Council for approval in February 2024. The previous report had set out the potential options, benefits and future opportunities available to Scottish Borders for investment in Public Space CCTV and Town Centre Wi-Fi and gained agreement to proceed with a scheme for seven Borders towns for CCTV. The report outlined the current provision of CCTV and detailed the benefits and other considerations for potential investment. Taking into account that many of the CCTV systems were approaching a point of disrepair and current analogue systems would become obsolete as of 2025, the benefits included public safety and detection of crime; the ability to collect meaningful data, for both Police Scotland and the Council; and using the investment in CCTV to scope out further use cases for the technology and better understand the market, looking at solutions such as cloud-based CCTV and 5G connectivity. Considerations included the options submitted by CGI, including the outline financial implications; a move to a principle of investment and modernisation to reflect community priorities; development of a fully defined proposal and costed business case with funding arrangements coming back to a subsequent Council meeting for final approval; Consultation be undertaken with other towns and communities to determine views, practicalities and priorities for potential future CCTV and Town Centre Wi-Fi investment opportunities. In response to a question regarding whether the new CCTV systems would be wireless or wired, the Portfolio Manager, Ms Naomi Sweeney advised that after exploring the latest technology, and taking account of security concerns, a decision had been made to progress with wired cameras. Regarding engagement with the Hawick Town Team, Ms Sweeney explained that conversations had been ongoing and that she was content to explore further meeting dates with them. In response to a question regarding the proposed timescales involved with the business case, Ms Sweeney provided assurance that due to ongoing consultation and discussions a business case could be progressed quickly. Members welcomed the report and expressed their hopes that the business case would be ready for Council in February.

DECISION

NOTED:-

- (a) **progress made in developing proposals with CGI and the receipt of comparative costs for CCTV for the Scottish Borders;**
- (b) **progress on bench marking and understanding of the market, carried out with partner organisations, specialist advisors and other local authorities;**
- (c) **engagement with community owned CCTV models in the Borders and proposals developed by Hawick Community Council; and**
- (d) **development of the CCTV proposals to further Scottish Borders Council's aspirations as a "Smart, connected rural region" and considering Town Centre Wi-fi in a future connectivity plan to complement future investment opportunities in connectivity and technology offered through the Borderlands Inclusive Growth Deal.**

12. **REPROVISIONING OF NIGHT SUPPORT SERVICE**

There had been circulated copies of a report by the Director – Strategic Commissioning and Partnerships which explained that further to the Night Support Service pathfinders in Tweeddale and Berwickshire and subsequent public consultation, proposed a reduction in the number of Night Support Service teams and also the introduction of dawn/twilight shifts. The report also proposed that these teams would provide a rapid response service for any TEC activations in addition to providing planned care for those with complex and critical care needs. Given the outcome of both pathfinders it was evident that a night support service continued to be required, but given the alternative means of providing this service, it was proposed a reduction from five Night Support teams to two. The proposal was described fully within the IJB paper contained in Appendix 1 to the report. Those two teams would continue to provide planned, critical overnight support to individuals with complex health needs, whilst also providing a Rapid Response service to TEC activations. It was also proposed to introduce a strict eligibility criterion for critical overnight support together with Dawn (6am-noon) and Twilight (6pm-midnight) shifts. The Director – Strategic Commissioning and Partnerships presented the report and highlighted that the recommendations followed on from 2 pilots. Members welcomed the report and agreed that its recommendations were carefully considered with the interests of patients and staff taken into account.

DECISION

AGREED to note the contents of the Integrated Joint Board paper contained in Appendix 1 to the report.

13. **ANTI SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR**

With reference to paragraph 8 of the Minute of the meeting held on 26 October 2023, there had been circulated copies of a report by the Chief Executive which provided a summary of what was being done to prevent, and where necessary, address antisocial behaviour among young people. The report was presented in response to a motion by Councillor Pirone agreed by Council on 26 October 2023 whereby members recognised the importance of addressing anti-social behaviour among young people in our communities, valued positive youth engagement and acknowledged the need for a safe environment that promoted the growth of our young residents. In approving the motion Members sought information as to what the Council was currently doing to address anti-social behaviour among young people and whether there was more that could be done within the Scottish Borders in partnership with others. Antisocial behaviour involving young people recorded by Police Scotland was expected to account for fewer than 13% of total calls during 2023/24. Youth warning letters issued by the council funded police Community Action Team (CAT) had been on a downward trend, and the Council's Antisocial Behaviour Unit have had very few referrals involving young people. Members welcomed the report and acknowledged that the report set out the Council's response well. It was agreed that an extra recommendation be included which would set up a Member/Officer Working Group to identify further solutions assessing what more could be done to tackle anti-social behaviour in the communities of the Scottish Borders. That Working Group would be expected to take advice from young people and

external experts. It was highlighted that anti-social behaviour was not solely an issue caused by younger people.

**DECISION
AGREED to:-**

- (a) **note the content of the report;**
- (b) **endorse the suggested enhancements and improvements across engagements with young people to expand diversionary activities within communities; and**
- (c) **set up a Member/Officer Working Group to identify further solutions to tackle anti-social behaviour in our communities, including taking advice from young people and external experts.**

14. DRAFT CALENDAR OF MEETINGS FOR AUGUST 2024 – JULY 2025

There had been circulated copies of the draft calendar of meetings covering the period of 1 August 2024 to 31 July 2025. In response to a question regarding whether it would be possible to amend the meeting dates for the Police Community Action Team Member/Officer Strategic Oversight Group so that they were held on Monday, the Democratic Services Team Leader undertook to investigate whether such a change was possible.

**DECISION
AGREED to approve the draft Calendar of Meetings for the period of 1 August 2024 to 31 July 2025.**

15. MOTION BY COUNCILLOR ANDERSON

Councillor Anderson, seconded by Councillor Tatler moved approval of the following Motion as detailed on the agenda:

“The Scottish Borders Council recognizes the ongoing transition towards a cashless society, primarily driven by Central Bank Digital Currencies (CBDCs). This motion aims to address the social and financial implications associated with this transition. One major concern is the potential exacerbation of revenue inequality and the digital divide. It is crucial to ensure that vulnerable populations have equal access to digital financial services to prevent marginalization. Therefore, the Scottish Borders Council urges the UK Government to take necessary measures to mitigate these concerns and ensure a fair and inclusive transition to digital currency with the retention of cash based finances.

1. Acknowledging the Transition: The Scottish Borders Council acknowledges the ongoing transition towards a cashless society, primarily driven by the introduction of Central Bank Digital Currencies (CBDCs). SBC acknowledges the removal of cash will have a detrimental effect on our rural population.

2. Social and Financial Implications: Recognizing that the transition towards a cashless society has social and financial implications, including concerns related to revenue inequality and the digital divide.

3. Exacerbation of Revenue Inequality: The Council expresses concern that the transition towards a cashless society may exacerbate revenue inequality, as vulnerable populations may face difficulties in accessing and utilizing digital financial services. Which shows a need for cash based finances in rural areas.

4. Digital Divide: The Council acknowledges the potential for a digital divide to widen as a result of the transition towards a cashless society. It emphasizes the importance of ensuring equal access to digital monetary services for all individuals, regardless of their socioeconomic status.

5. Preventing Marginalization: The Council emphasizes the need to prevent the marginalization of vulnerable populations during the transition towards a cashless society. It highlights the importance of providing adequate support and resources to ensure equal access and inclusion. The CBDC must be an addition to cash not a replacement to prevent marginalisation.

6. UK Government Action: The Scottish Borders Council urges the UK Government to take necessary measures to address the social and financial implications associated with the transition towards a cashless society. This includes implementing policies and initiatives that promote equal access to digital financial services and mitigate the potential exacerbation of revenue inequality and the digital divide.

7. Collaboration and Consultation: The Council encourages the UK Government to collaborate with relevant stakeholders, including local authorities, financial institutions, and community organizations, to ensure a comprehensive and inclusive approach to the transition to a cash and CBDC society.

8. Reporting and Monitoring: The Council requests that the UK Government provide regular updates and reports on the progress made in addressing the social and financial implications of the transition towards a cash and CDDB society. This will enable transparency and accountability in the decision- making process.

9. Dissemination of Information: The Council emphasizes the importance of raising awareness among the public about the transition towards a cashless society and its potential Negative impact. It encourages the UK Government to engage in public participation events to ensure that individuals are given the chance to have their say and prepared for the changes ahead.

10. Adoption and Implementation: The Scottish Borders Council calls upon all relevant authorities and stakeholders to adopt and implement the necessary measures to address the social and financial implications of the transition towards a cashless society, in line with the principles of equality, inclusivity, and social justice. By passing this motion, the Scottish Borders Council aims to contribute to a fair and inclusive transition towards a cash and digital currency-based society, ensuring that vulnerable populations are not marginalized and that equal access to digital financial services is guaranteed.”

Councillors Anderson and Tatler spoke in favour of the Motion which was unanimously approved.

DECISION

AGREED to approve the Motion as detailed above.

16. OPEN QUESTIONS

The questions submitted by Councillors Thomson, Begg and Anderson were answered.

DECISION

NOTED the replies as detailed in Appendix I to this Minute.

17. URGENT BUSINESS

Under Section 50B(4)(b) of the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973, the Convenor was of the opinion that the item dealt with in the following paragraphs should be considered at the meeting as a matter of urgency. The Motion was accepted as an urgent

18. URGENT MOTION BY COUNCILLOR LEAGH DOUGLAS

Councillor Leigh Douglas, seconded by Councillor Carol Hamilton moved approval of the following Motion as detailed on the agenda:

“Acknowledging Finance Secretary Shona Robison's announcement of a 1,200 funded university places cut in Scotland due to financial constraints, the council expresses deep concern about the potential £28.5m reduction's impact on higher education stability and opportunities for our young population.

Recognising the need for clarity, especially for students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, this council urgently asks the leader to write to the Depute First Minister.

We emphasise that this communication articulates the council's concerns and underscores the critical importance of understanding how these fiscal adjustments will affect the educational prospects of young people in the Scottish Borders.”

Councillors Douglas and Hamilton spoke in support of the Motion.

Councillor Sinclair, seconded by Councillor Smart proposed an amendment that the following be inserted prior to the original Motion:-

“SBC recognises the benefits of free education and notes that 690,000 students have benefitted from free tuition fees at university since 2007.

SBC notes that 1,200 additional funded university places were introduced as a temporary response to the pandemic and SQA grading during that period, and the change announced as part of the draft 2024-25 budget brings numbers back to pre-Covid levels and still allocates nearly £2 billion to universities and colleges in Scotland....”

Councillor Sinclair and Smart spoke in favour of the amendment.

Councillor Robson proposed that the amendment be altered to remove reference to “since 2007” which was accepted by Councillor Sinclair.

Councillor Thornton-Nicol, seconded by Councillor Thomson, proposed that the vote be taken by roll call and this was unanimously approved.

Members discussed the motion and the amendment, and a vote was held the results of which were as follows:

Roll Call Vote

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| <i>Motion by Councillor Leagh Douglas</i> | <i>Amendment by Councillor Sinclair</i> |
| <i>Councillor Leagh Douglas</i> | <i>Councillor Anderson</i> |
| <i>Councillor Greenwell</i> | <i>Councillor Begg</i> |
| <i>Councillor Carol Hamilton</i> | <i>Councillor Cochrane</i> |
| <i>Councillor Scott Hamilton</i> | <i>Councillor Cox</i> |
| <i>Councillor Jardine</i> | <i>Councillor Marshall Douglas</i> |
| <i>Councillor Linehan</i> | <i>Councillor Mackinnon</i> |
| <i>Councillor Marshall</i> | <i>Councillor Moffat</i> |
| <i>Councillor McAteer</i> | <i>Councillor PatonDay</i> |
| <i>Councillor Mountford</i> | <i>Councillor Ramage</i> |
| <i>Councillor Parker</i> | <i>Councillor Robson</i> |
| <i>Councillor Pirone</i> | <i>Councillor Sinclair</i> |
| <i>Councillor Richards</i> | <i>Councillor Smart</i> |
| <i>Councillor Rowley</i> | <i>Councillor Steel</i> |
| <i>Councillor Scott</i> | <i>Councillor Tatler</i> |
| <i>Councillor Small</i> | <i>Councillor Thomson</i> |
| <i>Councillor Weatherston</i> | <i>Councillor Thornton-Nicol</i> |

There being an equality of votes the Convener exercised his casting vote in favour of the motion. The motion was accordingly carried.

DECISION

AGREED to approve the Motion as detailed above.

19. **PENSION FUND CREDIT**

It was highlighted by Councillor Thornton-Nicol that over £3.6m of Pension Credit remained unclaimed in the Scottish Borders in the current financial year. Members were asked to encourage their constituents who were in receipt of state pension to undertake a pension credit check to see if they were entitled to extra support. Posters and leaflets had been prepared and would be handed out and placed across the region. Those leaflets included a QR code and a telephone number which allowed callers to speak to a trained officer who could help assist them and determine if they were eligible for Pension Credit.

20. **PRIVATE BUSINESS**

DECISION

AGREED under Section 50A(4) of the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973 to exclude the public from the meeting during consideration of the business detailed in Appendix II to this Minute on the grounds that it involved the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in Paragraphs 1, 6, 8 and 9 of Part I of Schedule 7A to the Act.

SUMMARY OF PRIVATE BUSINESS

21. **Minute**

The private section of the Council Minute of 14 December 2023 was approved.

22. **Committee Minutes**

The private sections of the Committee Minutes as detailed in paragraph 3 of this Minute were approved.

The meeting concluded at 1.05 p.m.

SCOTTISH BORDERS COUNCIL
25 JANUARY 2024
APPENDIX I

OPEN QUESTIONS

Question from Councillor Thomson

To the Executive Member for Roads Development and Maintenance

Will the Council consider moving from the provision of cut Christmas trees to the provision of a living tree to those communities currently in receipt of a cut Christmas tree? Whilst it is recognised that there would be a cost implication for provision and planting of a living tree, these could be mitigated by the reduction of delivery journeys from plantation to site, annual cost of tree (potential replacement thereof as happened this year), all giving a significant benefit to the environment, as well as Council finances.

Reply from Councillor Greenwell

I would like to first of all acknowledge the challenges faced in the provision of Christmas trees last month. As outlined previously, the contractor experienced some significant supply issues which, in trying to mitigate the impact of, caused further problems in the discrepancy of provision across communities. I would like to again assure members that the specification and standard of trees ordered was the same as in previous years. We have received an apology from the contractor for the issues that we experienced this year.

Living Christmas trees are something that Officers have been exploring as a sustainable alternative to annual tree provision in communities. As the question states, the costs of one-off provision of a Living tree to communities could offer a more financially and environmentally sustainable means of Christmas tree provision. The trees could be planted at an agreed site in those communities that can accommodate a living Christmas tree. Where relevant, the one off investment could ensure communities have a recurring, consistent standard of Christmas Tree for a number of years. We have had some approaches from communities noting interest in this approach – it is acknowledged that not all locations currently used would necessarily be appropriate, and this would require further consideration with communities.

It is proposed to review the wider issue of Christmas tree provision by Scottish Borders Council to communities across the region – the current budget consultation includes a question around Christmas tree provision so we await the outcomes of this consultation process.

Question from Councillor Begg

To the Executive Member for Environment and Transport

Are there any plans to share transport resources with partner agencies?

In particular has SBC explored the possibility of sharing NHS Borders patient transport / delivery services with SBC bus / transport services?

Reply from Councillor Linehan

SBC are regularly engaging with partner agencies to see how we can work more effectively to achieve common goals and avoid duplication of effort and resource. Such initiatives depend on resource and capacity which can often impede progress.

However, our Passenger Transport team re-engaged with NHS Borders on the 11 January to arrange a meeting to explore the potential of sharing vehicles and resources. The objective being to support the delivery of services and addressing the pressures are currently facing whilst also maximising use of vehicles we have available.

Officers have provided dates for meetings and will get together with colleagues at NHS Borders to look at options.

We will update members in due course of the outcomes of discussions.

Supplementary

Councillor Begg asked if Councillor Linehan would be prepared to report back in 6 months on how progress was being made on partnership working, particularly given ongoing budget pressures and the need to maintain services. Councillor Linehan agreed to provide comments after 6 months.

Question from Councillor Anderson

To the Executive Member for Community Engagement

Under the Single Outcome Agreement and the SBC strategy, SBC measure the median wage against other regions of Scotland. What progress is being made to meeting the target?

Reply from Councillor Cochrane

The purpose of the Single Outcome Agreement was to specify the improvement priorities that had been identified for the Scottish Borders Community Planning Partnership and which focused the partnership on delivering better outcomes for the people of the Scottish Borders and Scotland.

In the 2013 Single Outcome Agreement the Partnership agreed performance measures with targets set at internals over a 10 -year period. At that time the following measures were recorded:

- the gross weekly earnings (residence based) as 90% of the Scottish average. The target was to increase this to 95% by 2023. In 2023 the median gross weekly earnings (residence based) were recorded as 96% of the Scottish average.
- the gross weekly earnings (workplace based) as 81% of the Scottish average. The target was to increase this to 85% by 2023. In 2023 the median gross weekly earnings (workplace based) were recorded as 93% of the Scottish average.

Both of the targets identified for 2023, in the Single Outcome Agreement, were exceeded.

During the period covered by the Single Outcome Agreement the National Living Wage was introduced. This has been adopted by a number of organisations, with 55 registered as living wage employers in the Borders, including:

- Scottish Borders Council
- South of Scotland Enterprise
- Borders College
- NHS Borders, and
- The four main Registered Social landlords in the Borders

Scottish Borders Council adopted the Living Wage for Modern Apprentices in April 2023, before many other local authorities in Scotland.

The multi-agency Scottish Borders Living Wage Group works to address the rise of in-work poverty and rebuild prosperity within local communities.

It should be noted that the Single Outcome Agreement was superseded by the Community Plan following the enactment of the Community Empowerment Scotland (Scotland) Act in 2015. The Community Planning Partnership is working to address wider factors contributing to poverty and the following improvement outcomes have been identified:

- Help mitigate against the financial challenges of day to day living for those who are most affected; and
- Children and young people from low-income households are supported to develop life skills to help them succeed in life.

I also have some supplementary information on the actions that other partners have taken during that time which I will share with you.