

Council

14 July 2026

Present: Caroline Johnstone (Chair), Rebecca Askew, Andrew Baldwin, Richard Dale, Leslie Ferrar, Oliver Foster, Tom James Harrington, Mark Jagger, Denise Lievesley, Tom Mole, Karen O'Brien, Nigel Perry, Philip Plyming, Ari Sadanandom, Corinne Saunders, Rob Senior, Mike Shipman, Abi Taylor, JJ Thakkar, and Terry Toney

In Attendance: Mark Chambers, Callum Hendry, Neil Scott, and Amanda Wilcox (all items), Sarah Hainsworth for Minutes 123 & 125, Tony Fawcett, John Pritchard, Clive Roberts and Janet Stewart for Minute 125, and James Walsh (Minutes).

Apologies: Cheryl McEwan, Cheryl Millington, and Beverley Tew.

Minutes of a Meeting of Council held in Room 1001, Waterside Building.

112. Valedictions**Noted:**

- a) on 13 July 2026 a thank you meal had been held at University College for Council Members for whom this would be their last Council:
 - i) on behalf of the University, the Vice-Chancellor thanked Caroline Johnstone for her service as Chair of Council. Council was appreciative of the energy that Caroline had brought to the role as Chair and wished her well in her future endeavours;
 - ii) on behalf of Council, the Chair thanked Leslie Ferrar, Tom James Harrington, Corinne Saunders, and Abi Taylor for all their input and efforts as Members of Council and Trustees of the University.
- b) on behalf of Council the Chair raised a toast to the success over the last 12-months that the University had achieved, including being named University of the Year, improving their position in the QS World University Rankings, and improved outcomes in the National Student Survey (NSS). Council agreed that this was due the outstanding commitment and excellent of colleagues right across the university over many years and asked that the VC convey Council's appreciation and congratulations.

113. Welcome**Noted:**

- a) on behalf of Council, the Chair welcomed Callum Hendry, the new Durham Students' Union (DSU) President who was an observer at Council prior to becoming formal member from 1 August 2026; and
- b) Amy Doyle, the DSU Postgraduate Officer had submitted her apologies but would also be joining Council from 1 August.

114. Declarations of Interest

Noted: Philip Plyming declared an interest in minute 129 Recognised Colleges Agreement due to his unremunerated role as Rector of St Chad's College.

115. Minutes of Meetings held on 19 May 2026 (C/25/96 Confidential)

Approved: the minutes of the meetings held on 19 May 2026.

116. Matters Arising

Noted:

- a) actions from minutes would benefit from clarification regarding whether they were to be addressed through the Action Log (ALo) or Annual Planner (API);
- b) **Closed Minute**

117. Action Log (C/25/97 Confidential)

Noted: to update the Action Log with items identified in the Minutes, including an additional action relating to Council receiving a briefing on the University Superannuation Scheme (USS).

118. Annual Planner (C/25/98 Confidential)

Noted: to update the Annual Planner with items identified in the Minutes, with particular reference to topics for Council Engagement, including an update on the Doctoral School. Members were encouraged to submit items of interest and importance for future meetings.

119. Vice-Chancellor's Report (C/25/99 Confidential)

Noted:

- a) the University had performed strongly in the recent NSS with some outstanding results in many areas. Although perception of the representation of the student voice by the DSU was the weakest area, this had improved in comparison to the outcome in the 2025 NSS;
- b) the Deputy-Vice-Chancellor (DVC) had attended a launch event for the 35 universities which had been selected by the Ministry of Defence (MoD) to be a founding member of the Defence Universities Alliance (DUA). The DUA would provide a stronger network of defence research expertise and followed a recent successful bid for funding from the Office for Students (OfS), MoD and Department for Education (DfE) aimed at improving defence-related skills. Although communications had been released, the University would reflect whether further communications were required, following the DuA announcement appearing on breakfast news and the statement being uploaded to the University website;
- c) **Closed**
- e) in relation to the partnership with Microsoft, the following in discussion:
 - a. there would be a launch event in October with the UK CEO for Microsoft, following an announcement at the recent London Tech Week event;
 - b. Council agreed that the partnership was an impressive achievement, and was the result of some excellent discussions led by the Chief Operating Officer (COO) and the Chief Information Officer;
 - c. the partnership was not on an exclusivity basis, and it would be for the University to decide how it would develop the AI Skills Centre. University researchers involved in AI would be consulted as part of the Skills Centre development; and
 - d. announcement of the partnership had been welcomed by the North East Mayoral Strategic Authority (NEMSA, previously NECA) due to its likely contribution to the region.
- f) **Closed Minute**
- g) in relation to the Financial Sustainability Initiatives Tracker:
 - a. the document may benefit from an executive summary, which mirrored that employed by the Strategic Risk Register;

- b. although not part of the Tracker, it was important for Council to receive a benefits realisation of projects the University had invested in, with the Waterside Building being one example; and
- c. **Closed Minute**

Agreed: to schedule a benefits realisation update on the Waterside Building and consider other projects which Council may benefit from a progress update on. **KOB**
(ALo)

120. Durham Students' Union President's Report (C/25/100 Public)

Noted:

- a) on reflection on their year in office, the DSU President highlighted the following legacies:
 - i) Ethical Investment: in tackling the challenges of the climate crises and reduced carbon emissions, the President was thankful of the support of the Chief Financial Officer (CFO) and University Secretary, for listening to the concerns of students and investigating how ethical investment might work for the University;
 - ii) the DSU Community Officer and PVC (Equality, Diversity, Inclusion & Skills) had worked hard to respond to concerns raised over a racist post on Instagram, with the outcome being some actionable ways forward, with more information available from the DSU President;
 - iii) Renters Right Act: Council praised the DSU President for her leadership in this area, enabling complex government legislation to be accessible and understandable for students;
 - iv) the DSU was grateful to the COO for identifying funding for maintenance work at Dunelm House. The DSU was looking to fund new furniture and brown goods for communal areas; and
 - v) the University's relationship with the Durham Union Society trustees had improved and there was only one event arranged which required an enhanced risk assessment, albeit that a counter-talk on the same evening had mitigated any protests.
- b) in relation to the Student Pantry, the following:
 - i) the DSU was grateful to the Vice-Chancellor for their support for the launch of the Pantry, which would be an important part of tackling food poverty amongst students in need;
 - ii) data collected by the DSU was to justify future funding and to ensure that the provision was not abused. The data would also enable appropriate triaging to the University's hardship or support services; and
 - iii) the Student Pantry in Newcastle had been very successful and there was much to learn from that initiative. There may be opportunities to work with regional providers in sourcing produce through 'rescue groceries' markets, although care was needed that the Pantry did not detract from the local Food Banks.
- c) resulting from the survey of Common Room Presidents:
 - i) concerns had been raised by some Common Room Presidents about the unevenness of support they received in undertaking their role;
 - ii) the report commissioned by the DSU required further work before it was ready to be shared with the Executive, although the COO had been briefed on the early findings;
 - iii) the University Secretary cautioned that some Common Rooms were classed as independent charitable organisations, and it was for the trustees of those Common Rooms to appropriately support their President. The DSU and the

University needed to be careful that they did not assume legal responsibility for a separate charitable organisation and

- iv) it was worth reflecting on the number of related organisations which impact the university's brand and reputation but have their own unique governance arrangements.

121. Chief Financial Officer's Report to Council (C/25/101 Confidential)

Noted:

- a) the CFO reported that Finance Committee had undertaken a detailed review of the Period 9 Management Accounts and Quarter 3 Full-Year Forecast, with both documents made available for Council Members via Boardvantage;
- b) **Closed Minute**
- d) the conclusion to the HRMC Audit had been very positive, with Council acknowledging that having no material points to respond to was a commendation of the improvements to the University's financial reporting and systems;
- e) new accounting standards were likely to affect how leases were reported on. This change may make accounts even more opaque, although there was little that the University could do about this and would focus on communications; and
- f) the Durham University Pension Scheme (DUPS) was moving towards a surplus, although the pensions regulator was likely to insist on continuing/additional payments to maintain the surplus, rather than giving the University a financial break from payments.

122. 2026/27 Budget (C/25/102 Confidential)

Received: Presentation on Financial Update

Noted:

- a) in developing the case for the 2026/27 Budget, the CFO provided Council with a presentation covering the following areas: Policy Environment and Context; 2023-25 Years' End Surplus / Deficit, splitting out the restricted and unrestricted income; 2025/26 Quarter 3 outcomes, which was consistent with the OfS forecast; Investment, Cash, Debt and Endowments, showing that debts had increased but should remain at current levels before reducing based on budgets/forecasts; Income and Surplus, which showed that, although projections were towards a sustainable recovery, energy increases and tuition fees remained a significant variable; Strategic Performance Indicators, which were broadly stable; Operating Cash, Capital Expenditure and Net Debt; the 5-year OfS Income Forecast; Realignment Actions, with a lot of ongoing actions to reduce expenditure and increase income; and the 2026/27 Budget;
- b) **Closed**

Agreed: to approve the 2026/27 Budget as presented.

123. Research Update and Early Thoughts of the New Pro-Vice-Chancellor Research

Received: Presentation on a Research Update

Noted:

- a) UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) had published its new Strategy for 2026-2031, detailing how funding would be provided to enable research activity to be undertaken. Although the University would continue to undertake analysis of the detail, the PVC (Research) shared a presentation building from the UKRI Strategy and covering the following areas:
 - i) UKRI funding was likely to be more outcome focussed and fall into four categories: Curiosity-driven research; Strategic government and societal priorities; Supporting innovation companies; Enabling and strengthening

research and development. Although the University's research covered all four categories, staff would need to align their research carefully with some crosscutting category grants likely to be made available;

- ii) resulting from successful grants, the University could be considered a leading research institution in relation to quantum physics; farming and nature; and mental health challenges in young people;

iii) **Closed Minute**

- vi) it was likely that QR funding following REF2029 would focus on those institutions with 4-star REF performance, with Durham equal 25th in the last REF. REF was also an important reputational measure;

- vii) REF2029 had changed focus from individual submissions to institutional or disciplinary submissions. This would mean that research would be assessed on a volume basis, with it important that the University ensured its Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) return was accurate, as this would determine the number of impact case studies required for submission; and

- viii) REF2029 had also changed the narrative statement from people, culture & environment, to strategy, people, research environment (SPRE). It was therefore important that the University's narrative statement reflected this change, with the work of the Flourish@Durham and Reimagining Research Governance projects contributing well to the statement.

b) **Closed Minute**

- c) Council members were highly appreciative of the honest and open discussion and agreed regular updates would be appropriate.
- d) Council benefited from the previous PVC (Research) providing a presentation on the economics of research activity and would welcome an update.

Agreed: to schedule consideration of an updated presentation on the economics of research activity. **SH (API)**

124. Audit and Risk Committee Report (C/25/107 Internal)

Noted:

- a) the matters discussed by Audit and Risk Committee (ARC) at its meeting of 10 June 2026;
- b) ARC would be undertaking several deep dives to which Council Members were welcome to attend, these would be into: IT in October; Financial Sustainability and scenario planning in November; Research in January; Estate in March; and Horizon scanning and internal planning in June;
- c) following the recent improvement to University's positions in the QS World University Rankings, ARC recommended to Council a reduction in the residual risk score for SR01 Brand and Value Proposition from 20 to 15;
- d) although ARC was reluctant to approve revised target dates, it had agreed with the rationale and plan behind changing the dates for SR01, SR02, SR03, SR04 and ST10; and
- e) in addition to a recommendation to archive the legacy SR12: Effective Data-Led Decision Making, ARC also endorsed to Council revisions to the Risk Management Policy and Risk Appetite Statement, and amendments to the Public Interest Disclosure Policy.

Agreed:

- a) to reduce the residual risk score for SR01: Brand and Value Proposition from 20 to 15;
- b) the archiving of SR12: Effective Data-Led Decision Making;

- c) the revised target dates for SR01: Brand and Value Proposition; SR02: Business Model and Financial Sustainability; SR03: People and Culture; SR04: Infrastructure (Estates); and SR10: IT Delivery; and
- d) updates to the Risk Management Policy, Risk Appetite Statements, and Public Interest Disclosure Policy, as presented.

125. Durham University Strategy 2027-37 (C/25/105, /106 Confidential)

Noted:

- a) the Monday evening presentation from the COO, Dean of Colleges, and Principal of Van Mildert College, had been very thought provoking, providing an important evidence base in relation to Wider Student Experience and Colleges, for Council to consider in developing the new University Strategy;
- b) members of the University Executive Committee (UEC) were welcomed to the meeting to share their input from a recent UEC Away Day, with the Vice-Chancellor setting the scene and providing an overview to the documentation which covered: data on where the University currently was in relation to reputation, annual income and student numbers; size, strength and areas for improvement in relation to academic departments; consolidated data from the workshops held across the University; and the DSU's discussions with students. Some of the evidence base for the Strategy (e.g. business engagement) UEC was to consider early in Michaelmas Term;
- c) Council were asked to focus on three overarching questions in considering the Strategy papers: Is there anything missing? What further work is needed? Do you have any helpful observations? Following consideration in mixed groups, the following points were made:

Closed Minute

126. Student Conduct Office Annual Report: Academic Year 2024/25: Student Complaints and Non-Academic Misconduct (C/25/104 Confidential)

Noted:

- a) Council was concerned about the length of time investigations took in relation to sexual misconduct and violence cases, and although benchmarking was difficult, it would be helpful to consider 'active day' and not delays caused by external investigations which were beyond the University's control; and
- b) although Council was confident it would be alerted should there be a major issue in this area, presenting data relating to the 2024/25 Academic Year was a significant time-lag and it would be helpful to receive more timely information.

Agreed: to seek clarification over timings for future reports.

SR (ALo)

127. Bullying and Harassment Policy (C/25/103 Confidential)

Noted: the Policy had been updated to replace the existing Complaints Procedure for Student (Individuals and Behaviour), which brought bullying and harassment into the same consistent framework as that for sexual misconduct and other non-academic misconduct matters. Council members agreed this had been a very careful and through review and updating of the policy.

Approved: the Bullying and Harassment Policy as presented.

128. Finance Committee Report (C/25/108 Confidential)**Noted:**

- a) the matters discussed by Finance Committee (FC) at its meeting of 25 June 2026, including for Council's information the Microsoft and Durham University Partnership, and the IP Assets and Spinouts Annual Report 2026;
- b) FC had received an update from the Development & Alumni Relations Office (DARO) in relation to fundraising. FC was informed that work was ongoing to improve the sustainability and predictability of giving, with Council to receive an update during the 2026-27 Academic Year from the Chair of the Campaign Board; and
- c) the Chair of FC thanked all Council Members for their support during the year and wished them all well in the future as they concluded their role as a Lay Member of Council.

129. Governance and Nominations Committee Report (C/25/109 Internal)**Noted:**

- a) the matters discussed by Governance and Nominations Committee (GNC) at its meeting of 25 June 2026;
- b) the Chair thanked the Head of Governance Support Services for his considerable work in developing the action plans to address the effectiveness review and new CUC code;
- c) following the Council Effectiveness Review (CER), GNC had endorsed for Council's approval an action plan relating to the recommendations from the CER. These recommendations had been mapped against the Committee of University Chairs (CUC) Higher Education Code of Governance which had recently been published. Similarly, the recommendations from the CUC Code had been extracted and mapped alongside the CER, with details of those areas which Council was complying with, and areas which required further Council consideration;
- d) there were some immediate actions which were proposed for approval, and detailed as tracked changes in Ordinance 3: Council, including: changes to terms of office for all Council Members to bring them in line with how other boards operated; a maximum term of office for a Lay Member assuming the role of Chair in their second or third term; and recommendations relating to the merging of Remuneration and People & Organisational Development Committees (PODC). The Chair of PODC had undertaken considerable information gathering and was happy to receive further input from Council Members, before she met with the Chair of Remuneration Committee to propose new Terms of Reference for approval by GNC and Council;
- e) following the Chair's annual 1:1 review with all Council Members, the current Chair would provide the incoming Chair with necessary information and reflect on how this might be reflected in Council sub-committee membership for the 2026-27 Academic Year; and
- f) GNC had considered the updated Memoranda of Agreement between the University and the two Recognised Colleges. FC had endorsed the funding formula, whilst GNC had received two recommended changes, one around wording in sections 5 and 6 which GNC had accepted and the length of the Memoranda which GNC agreed with the University should be three and not five years in length.

Agreed:

- a) the Governance Action Plan for implementation;
- b) the changes to Ordinance 3: Council as presented; and

- c) the Memoranda of Agreement with the Recognised Colleges.

130. Remuneration Committee Report (C/25/110 Internal)

Noted: the matters discussed by Remuneration Committee at its meeting of 11 June 2026.

131. Senate Report (C/25/112 Public)

Noted:

- a) the matters discussed by Senate at its meeting of 16 June 2026;
- b) Senate had discussed several issues in depth including adopting the Durham Education 2027 development for Single Honour degree programmes, with some minor amendments required to the Postgraduate framework; and
- c) recognising the challenge of secure assessment due to the impact of AI, Senate had undertaken a detailed review of how secure assessments might take place. The Durham Centre for Academic Development (DCAD) was due reviewing and updating the University's AI Policy to reflect these concerns. Data security and ethics had also been raised as a concern, and it will be important to bring a discussion to Council in relation to AI, recognising that outside the sector many boards were discussing AI governance.

Agreed: to schedule an update on AI at a future Council meeting.

KOB (API)

132. Chair's Report (C/25/113 Internal)

Noted:

- a) the matters set out in the Chair's report;
- b) the Chair had enjoyed the 1:1 annual reviews with Council Members and would be reporting back on general themes that came up in the discussions beyond individual contributions – one such area was ways in which induction and ongoing development of Members might be enhanced; and
- c) the Chair reflected that she had been proud of what the University had achieved during her year as Chair, and, in particular, the changes to working and Council governance - that in making changes in how we operated there had been some real success stories. Her theme had been transparency and Council was encouraged to be transparent in its interactions, and all Members encouraged to be active and not passive members. The Chair concluded by wishing Nigel Perry (the incoming Chair, the Vice-Chancellor and everyone at the university continued success.

133. Dates of Future Meetings

Noted: the dates of future meetings: 1 October 2026, Council Briefing; 26 & 27 October; 30 November & 1 December; 25 & 26 January 2027; 22 & 23 February; 17 & 18 May, Joint Senate Council Event on 17 May; and 12 & 13 July.