Council

19 May 2026

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

In Attendance: Mark Chambers, Beverley Tew, Neil Scott, and Amanda Wilcox (all items), Nic Johnston for Minute 90, Lorna Wilson for Minute 92, Stewart Ross for Minute 93, John Pritchard for Minute 95, and James Walsh (Minutes).

Apologies: Philip Plyming.

Minutes of a Meeting of Council held in the Hub, Mount Oswald.

80. Welcome and Apologies

Noted: on behalf of Council, the Chair welcomed Mark Chambers and Beverley Tew, who would be observers at Council prior to becoming formal members from 1 August 2026.

81. Declarations of Interest

Noted:

a) Tom Mole declared an interest in the report from Remuneration Committee relating to the Living Accommodation Allowance, as he was resident in University accommodation due to his role as Principal of Van Mildert College; and
b) Corinne Saunders declared an interest in the Residential Strategy Update relating to the disposals work as her current office was identified in the disposal plan.

82. Minutes of Meetings held on 24 February 2026 (C/25/69 Confidential)

Approved: the minutes of the meetings held on 24 February 2026, subject to the following amendments:

a) Minute 58 a) to read: on behalf of Council, the Chair welcomed June Hughes to the meeting. June was observing the meeting as part of her Council Effectiveness Review;
b) **Closed Minutes**
d) Minute 72 e) iv) to read: group three were happy with the existing purpose and values and liked the idea of a place of choice contained within the imperatives. There was a recommendation that there should be more emphasis on the overall University experience as educating and developing the whole person, evidenced through education and wider student experience being delivered in a holistic manner. Graduates did not just enter the employment market, but could be transformative and impactful in their communities, it would therefore be helpful to consider how that was framed in the Strategy.

83. Matters Arising

Noted:

a) Minute 62 a): an update on the Student Support Project would be considered by Senate at their June meeting and reported to the July Council meeting;
b) **Closed Minute**

e) Minute 70 i): the University would not receive confirmation of student numbers for the Wuhan Joint Education Initiative (JEI) until the Gaokao results were announced, which was not until 20 June 2026. Following confirmation of grades, students had 7-days to decide where they wished to study, confirmatory numbers may therefore be available to report at the July meeting of Council.

84. Action Log (C/25/70 Confidential)

Noted:

a) Minute 64 a) iii): to add to the action log for Council to receive an update on the AI Strategy with an appropriate timescale;
b) Minute 69: to add to the action log for Council and / or Finance Committee to receive details of the full business case for Student Journey Futures with an appropriate timescale; and
c) Minute 71 c) ii): to include an action that when the Strategic Performance Indicators (SPIs) are received by Council, the report includes a single page summary (similar to the revised risk reporting and the financial sustainability tracker).

85. Annual Planner (C/25/71 Confidential)

Noted: the Annual Planner had been updated to include topics for Council engagement in Monday evening presentations, and strategic items for consideration as part of the formal Tuesday meetings. All members were welcome to suggest items for the tracker but it recognising the time pressures, items will need to be prioritised over some time.

86. Vice-Chancellor's Report (C/25/53 Confidential)

Noted:

a) the Vice-Chancellor (VC) provided details of some of the key initiatives since the last update to Council, including:
   i) strong performance in student recruitment for home undergraduate (UG) and postgraduate taught (PGT) students;
   ii) **Closed Minute**
   iii) Sussex University had won the judicial review it had brought against the Office for Students (OfS) in response to a £500k+ fine imposed by the OfS. The case had hinged around evidence of prejudgement in the OfS investigation and what documents could be considered as governance documents. The judicial review was not about freedom of speech duties, or the original case brought against Sussex University by a former member of staff. The Executive would reflect on the process in place for the refreshment and monitoring of policies, with Council oversight where appropriate; and
   *[**Secretary's Note:** Following the meeting it was confirmed that the OfS would not be pursuing an appeal against the judicial review].*
   iv) the Durham Doctoral School (DDS), which had been identified as a strategic action in the Strategy Refresh of 2023, was close to launch and it would be helpful for Council to receive an update on progress. Council members would welcome some greater understanding of: how the DDS would link to University colleges; and the postgraduate research (PGR) student challenge resulting from their student-employee role at the University.
b) **Closed Minute**
c) in relation to funding changes from UK Research & Innovation (UKRI), the following in discussion:
   i) the UKRI was undertaking a significant realignment of funding, mainly to align to the Government's Modern Industrial Strategy 2025;

   ii) changes to research funding in Physics were of particular concern to the University, with pressure being applied to the UKRI and the Government to reconsider what and how much research funding was made available;
   iii) UKRI had announced that there would be a certain focus on blue sky research, but this would result in a decline in discovery research funding. Evidence from recent grant applications was that the number of applications received for each opportunity had risen from previous grant rounds;
   iv) the University was undertaking a review of its research strengths and areas of development to understand how that matched against the UKRI funding council priorities;
   v) Council noted concerns raised by Digital Catapult UK about changes to funding and what this might mean for innovation; and
   vi) funding through Horizon Europe was still in formation and clarity was needed in relation to how much of an opportunity this might provide for research funding.

d) Council members queried the current progress in the admissions project and were informed that progress had been positive, and the project was currently in the user acceptance testing phase. UEC was receiving regular updates on progress, with the Chief Operating Officer (COO) directly leading the project. External assurance had confirmed that the project was currently rated green for progress;

e) in relation to the Research Excellence Framework 2029 (REF) the following in discussion:
   i) the stated ambition of achieving a top 10 position institutionally was bold, but should not be interpreted that every unit of assessment would achieve that ranking; and
   ii) Senate had agreed the position statement which presented a strong ambition. With the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (PVC) Research invited to the July Council meeting to share her thoughts and update on: REF preparations; research grants; and the value of research expenditure.

f) **Closed Minute**

Agreed:

a) to receive an update on the Durham Doctoral School at a future Council meeting; and **DR**

b) Council to receive an update on the outcome of the conclusion to the Policy Review. **KOB**

87. Durham Students' Union President's Report (C/25/73 Public)

Noted:

a) with the sabbatical officers' terms of office ending, several projects were coming to fruition including the following:
   i) Ethical Banking:
      A. the President of the Durham Students' Union was grateful for the level of engagement provided by Finance Committee members, in particular the Chair, Chief Financial Officer (CFO) and University Secretary in relation to concerns raised by students about ethical banking;
      B. recognising the complexity of the financial operating needs of the University limited the opportunity to work entirely with a bank that the students union would support as ethical in nature, details of a newly emerging opportunity had been shared by the President of the DSU for further exploration; and
      C. the Chair of Finance Committee noted that focussing on ethical investments may prove useful in demonstrating commitment to students, with the University's investment adviser interested in exploring opportunities.

ii) Student Pantry: the Vice-Chancellor had taken particular interest in this initiative, providing resources towards the opportunity. Council members were welcome to attend the launch of the pantry, with the DSU President to confirm the launch date;

iii) Renters Rights Act:

A. there had been a significant level of interest from students in the guidance produced by the DSU in relation to their rights and it had helped resolve issues with some landlords;

B. recognising that the postholder of the DSU Presidency was about to change, Presidents of the Junior Common Rooms (JCRs) had agreed to help share information amongst its community on this complex issue;

C. Council was impressed with the energy from the DSU President to this important change in legislation;

D. early evidence was that the Act had not impacted on the number of private rental landlords providing student accommodation, although some evidence existed that the availability of 1-2 bedroom properties had declined; and

E. students arriving for the 2026-27 Academic Year would not necessarily have knowledge that the Michaelmas Term deadline to secure accommodation for the following year had been removed. Colleges were the best place for initial guidance to be provided, with the Principal of Van Mildert College willing to discuss how to facilitate this with the outgoing DSU President.

iv) there were lessons to be learned where decisions taken necessarily at pace might have been implemented more smoothly with earlier communications between the University and the SU. This may be helped through the current review of the Student Consultation Framework – and it was noted that the University had been very supportive in taking action when alerted to the issues;

v) some remedial work had been planned for Dunelm House - however, the longer term issue of the suitability of the Dunelm House as a base for the DSU required further consideration; and

vi) there were several events that Council may be interested in attending, such as the launch of the Student Pantry. Although Council Members could not always attend events and non-attendance should not be interpreted as a lack of interest, it would be helpful to explore how to appraise Council of opportunities to attend events.

Agreed: to consider how to promote opportunities generally across the University to which Council members might attend. **AT**

88. Chief Financial Officer's Report to Council (C/25/74 Confidential)

Noted:

a) the CFO reported that Finance Committee had undertaken a detailed review of the Management Accounts and Quarter 2 Forecast, with both documents made available for Council Members via the Boardvantage Reading Room;

b) **Closed Minute**

c) the University Superannuation Scheme (USS) was due for its triannual valuation and investment review, although the University is clear that maintaining stability was fundamental;

d) the Inspire Spin-out fund had been launched. Council recognised that the fund could be transformational but as with all investment opportunities returns were not guaranteed;

e) in discussion the following:

i) Council welcomed the opportunity to consider the Management Accounts and recognised the improvement this demonstrated in financial reporting;

ii) although USS debt metrics were not directly of concern, Council would benefit from an explanation about how the debt metrics worked and how that linked to the budget setting process. This should help Council understand, articulate and challenge the impact of the debt metrics;
iii) the challenging energy market was highlighted by Council as a concerning pressure on budgets, with the CFO reporting the associated impact on the costs of some software and hardware products; and
iv) **Closed Minute**

89. Financial Sustainability Initiatives Tracker (C/25/75 Confidential)

Noted:

a) the Financial Sustainability Initiatives Tracker would be reported to every Council meeting and provided oversight for Council on progress being made in relation to achieving the long-term financial sustainability of the University;
b) there was a lot of detail behind the Tracker, and the red, amber, green (RAG) ratings had also included a 'grey' rating which was for projects which had not yet started;
c) **Closed Minute**
d) Council liked the summary table, but asked that it include additional columns so that they could more easily judge the scale of the project and what its anticipated delivery / milestone dates were;
e) the absence of research from the Tracker was noted but it was agreed that this reflected that research was 'business as usual', although of course important and an opportunity, with the PVC (Research) to include this as part of their presentation at the July Council meeting. It was though noted that the size and shape of the institution would reflect the research it undertook; and
f) Senate had undertaken a lengthy discussion on the curriculum effectiveness proposals, with the postgraduate programmes close to agreeing a framework and with the undergraduate programmes to be approved at the June Senate meeting.

Agreed: for the Tracker's summary table to be updated as detailed in the meeting.

90. Chief People Officer's Update (C/25/76 Confidential)

Noted:

a) The pause to meetings of the People and Organisational Development Committee was noted. However, it was agreed that in addition to any Committee, it was important that Council receive and discuss directly progress against the People Strategy and other Human Resources (HR) strategic matters, with the Chief People Officer (CPO) present to provide the first of a regular series of updates;
b) in relation to recruitment and retention the following:
   i) the University continued to look to attract high performing staff to the University and in supporting recruitment processes was updating its recruitment support system. This new system will provide more data and help analysis of diversity information;
   ii) following the recent Voluntary Severance Scheme (VSS), there had been a small upturn in turnover, this was thought due to staff who were not allowed to leave under VSS finding other opportunities and moving on. More recently, turnover numbers had plateaued and was now comparable to non-VSS years;
   iii) HR continued to monitor reasons for people leaving, with career progression often mentioned. To respond to this a suite of ILM accredited leadership programmes had been developed and launched, with the aim of developing leaders internally;
   iv) the University's Reward and Recognition scheme had been reintroduced having been paused during the VSS;

v) in addressing workloads, a crowd sourcing initiative under the title of WISER had been launched, with over 600 responses identifying ways of improving the efficiency of processes and reducing workloads; and
vi) sickness absence was always an area for monitoring, with a small reduction in absences in comparison to the same period last year. The majority of sickness absence reports cited mental wellbeing as being the root cause of the absence, recognising that some of this was not work-related. All staff were currently contributing to a weekly survey on wellbeing, with real time data available to managers, with the most recent response rate being 60-65%. Managers were being asked to act on data, as and when trends emerged, with UEC to consider the overall effectiveness of the survey.

c) in general discussion the following:
i) Council very much appreciated the update and the transparency of reporting from the CPO, recognising that the report to Council will develop over time;
ii) Council were keen to understand what was being done in relation to staff mental health. The CPO reported that, in HR, managers were RAG-rating their team's capacity which helped identify areas which might need temporary support and where that support might be provided from, and this was helping with resilience of teams. The University's Employee Assistance Programme provided support beyond work related matters, covering debt and legal advice or signposting;
iii) questioning if workload or job security were of most concern to staff, the CPO noted that the recent University and College Union (UCU) strike action had referenced both as concerns. However, the University was trying to address workloads through the WISER programme and the development of an Academic Workload Framework. There had also been no compulsory redundancies to date, although in the current economic circumstances, for the entire Higher Education (HE) sector, it would be financially irresponsible to not recognise that staff costs were by far the largest area expenditure for the University;
iv) analysis of turnover of staff highlighted a greater number of women than men leaving. If there was a causality between being rejected for VSS and leaving the University it should be noted that, of academic staff who applied for VSS 70% were women;
v) **Closed Minute**
vi) the Academic to Professional Services staff ratio data, presented in the report, was lagged as HESA only provided it on a yearly basis. Internally there was more up to date data available and Council would appreciate this data being provided in future iterations of the CPO's report; and
vii) PODC had previously considered HR and Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) matters and it would be important to consider how EDI developments were shared with Council. It was also important to note that not all people matters are overseen by the CPO, and consideration of what takes place in faculties and departments will also be required.

Agreed: to receive an update from the PVC (EDI) on EDI matters. **SM**

91. Adoption of the World Heritage Site Management Plan (C/25/77 Internal)

Noted:

a) the World Heritage Site (WHS) Management Plan was the culmination of an immense piece of work, which recognised the importance of the WHS to the University and the City;
b) although the Dean of Durham Cathedral had submitted apologies to the meeting, via the Chair, he had expressed his support for the Plan and thanks to the team who had pulled the document together. The Dean also referenced that the Plan was an

excellent example of collaborative work and evidence of how well the Cathedral and University worked together and how important that collaboration was to both; and

c) in ensuring that Palace Green was a place worthy of 'destination' status, a strategy would be developed to carefully manage the activities which occurred on the open space, recognising that the University was a custodian of an important aspect of the WHS.

Agreed: to approve the adoption of the UNESCO World Heritage Site Management Plan 2025-2035.

92. Closed Minute

93. Residential Strategy Update (C/25/79 Confidential)

Noted:

a) good progress was being made in developing the Residential Strategy, although the accommodation capacity restrictions in the city which limit grow student numbers is now clear, and work is progressing on what opportunities exist to improve the availability of student accommodation;
b) **Closed Minute**
c) Cushman & Wakefield's assessment of accommodation needs was based on current student number planning and allowed for decant accommodation, which was needed where University's owned and managed accommodation required refurbishment;
d) the Strategy would consider opportunities to re-imagine the existing University Estate and where opportunities to provide additional student accommodation;
e) currently the Hild Bede site on Leazes Road had been mothballed (as discussed in detail over a prolonged period at Council) and this was now a major consideration in developing a new Residential Strategy in a more holistic manner; and
f) the Residential Strategy would be considered by UEC in October, prior to submission to Council.

94. Higher Education Governance (C/25/80 Internal)
Council Effectiveness Review (C/25/80 Confidential)
Committee of University Chairs Code of Governance (C/25/81 Confidential)

Noted:

a) following the conclusion to the Council Effectiveness Review (CER) and publication of a near-final draft of the Committee of University Chairs (CUC) Code of Governance, it was important for Council to reflect on strengths and opportunities for improving University governance;
b) an overview action plan would be developed which was proportionate and respond to the areas identified in both the CER and the CUC Code, for Council to approve in July;
c) in relation to the CER, there had been work done since the last CER in 2021 with progress being made to improve governance. The CER also commented positively on the openness, willingness and challenge provided by Council members and in Council meetings;
d) in relation the CUC Code: the CUC were not expecting major changes to the final Code and were meeting on 27 May to approve the final version of the Code. The OfS had spoken positively of the Code and were likely to build some of their compliance regulations around adherence to the Code. Six principles had been identified by the CUC, with 'must' or 'should' provisions for governance processes. Institutions would need to consider how they might comply with each provision or explain why they don't comply. Early analysis of the CUC Code did not highlight any

immediate challenges for the University (assuming we implement recommendations from the CER), but it should not be underestimated how much progress was being made at pace to governance and Council and the University cannot be complacent, there was further change required;

e) Council were posed several questions: How much change the CER and CUC Code might mean for Durham's governance arrangements? Initial views on what the areas of priority might be? Concerns about the recommendations from the CER and CUC Code? Following consideration in mixed groups, the following points were made:
   i) There were differing views on the size of Council – one member suggested that reducing the size of Council might disable the ability of committees to operate effectively, particularly when this contributed to the challenge of diversity whilst others encouraged the University to be bold;
   ii) addressing the number of committees was one solution in enabling a reduction of Council members to be enacted; and
   iii) the average size of councils across the HE sector was between 20-22, Durham currently had 24 members of whom 7 were staff. However, in response to the CUC Code, other institutions may well also be reflecting on appropriate size, so this benchmark may change.

Agreed:

a) to accept the findings of the Council Effectiveness Review; and
b) to look forward to receiving an overall action plan responding to the Council Effectiveness Review's and CUC Code's recommendations. **AW**

95. New University Strategy: Update on Progress and Future Development (C/25/82 Confidential)

Noted:

a) the Monday evening session to discuss the development of the University Strategy with Senate members had been very much appreciated by Council and Senate members present. The event had generated some emerging headlines which would feature heavily in the formal consultation period;
b) it was important that the new Strategy converged with the ongoing focus on financial sustainability. With staff from the Business School facilitating consideration of the Business Model Canvas (BMC) in sessions with departments in capturing the value of the institution. Although valuable in some situations, some Council members suggested the use of the BMC may not deliver the answer which will help the University identify its North Star, although others suggested it was possible that the University did not have one North Star but several points;
c) focussing on what had been delivered through the current Strategy was designed to emphasise the value to staff of engaging in the development of the new University Strategy;
d) although timing was always a challenge, the period of consultation was sufficient to enable all to participate at a time when they were able to. Senate and Council would continue to engage in the development of and contribution to the Strategy at appropriate milestones through to July 2027;
e) the Strategy Refresh involved several workshops to explore what the University's Purpose and Values were, and it was unlikely that the new Strategy would revisit those Purpose and Values in terms of redefining them;
f) resilience would be particularly important in the future and there should be a reflection on how this might be built through the new Strategy; and
g) there were a core of Council members who would be invaluable as an advisory group to the development of the Strategy and would be individually approached by the Vice-Chancellor to support the development of the Strategy.

96. Staff Governor at St Chad's College (C/25/92 Public)

Noted: following an open recruitment process, Council were asked to approve the appointment of a new University Adviser to St Chad's College's Governing Body.

Agreed: to approve the appointment of Professor Richard Slack as the University's Adviser to St Chad's Governing Body for an initial 5-year period, subject to his continued employment as a University employee.

97. Audit and Risk Committee Report (C/25/83 Confidential)

Noted:

a) the matters discussed by Audit and Risk Committee (ARC) at its meeting of 18 March 2026;
b) ARC had undertaken a deep dive into the risks associated with the Student Journey Futures project, agreeing that a good level of assurance had been received through a well-managed project. Process and governance around the project were appropriate and ARC would revisit progress at a later date;
c) The termly refresh of the Risk Register had highlighted recommendations from ARC to Council for the reduction of the residual risk score for Business Model & Financial Sustainability (from 25 to 20) and Student Wellbeing (from 10 to 8). These were felt appropriate due to the mitigations which had been put it in place; and
d) although there were some rising trends which might impact on risks relating to People and Culture, and Research and Engagement, these had not resulted in an overall increase to the risk score but would be monitored by ARC.

Agreed: the reduction in the residual risk scores for SR02 Business Model & Financial Sustainability, and SR08 Student Wellbeing as presented.

98. Finance Committee Report (C/25/84 Confidential)

Noted:

a) the matters discussed by Finance Committee at its meeting of 22 April 2026;
b) the University's investment partner, Sarasin, had presented a very helpful update on the University's investment portfolio. Once the new Chair of Finance Committee was in post, consideration would be given to the formation of the Investment Sub-Committee, which would consider the University's Investment Strategy; and
c) the consideration of progress made against the Strategic Asset Management Plan had included Red Book Valuations. These valuations were designed to provide a sector agreed value of University assets - however, Finance Committee recognised that these valuations were not always guarantees of what you might receive on the open market.

99. Governance and Nominations Committee Report (C/25/85 Internal)

Noted:

a) the matters discussed by Governance and Nominations Committee (GNC) at its meeting of 22 April 2026;
b) GNC had agreed to a re-tendering exercise to support the search for new Lay Members of Council, whilst also approving the composition of future appointment panels for Lay and Staff Members of Council; and
c) with the endorsement of the Chair of ARC, GNC endorsed the re-appointment of Alison Alden as a Co-opted member of ARC for Council approval.

Agreed: the re-appointment of Alison Alden as a Co-opted member of ARC until 31 July 2029.

100. Remuneration Committee Report (C/25/86 Internal)
Noted: the matters discussed by Remuneration Committee at its meeting of 19 February 2026, with the substantive business of the Committee relating to the approval of changes to the role of the PVC (EDI) and consideration of tax payments relating to staff living in University accommodation, mainly Heads of Colleges.

101. Ethics Committee Report (C/25/87 Confidential)
Noted:
a) the matters discussed by Ethics Committee at its meeting of 19 March 2026; and
b) the committee had discussed the issue of international security risks, which included consideration of the influence of foreign state actors on decision-making processes.

Agreed: to schedule an update to Council on international security risks. **COM**

102. Senate Report (C/25/88 Public)
Noted:
a) the matters discussed by Senate at its meeting of 28 April 2026;
b) Senate had discussed several issues in depth including the REF code of practice and the Durham Education 2027 development. Council would be appropriately informed of both developments in future scheduled presentations by the PVC (Research) and PVC (Education);
c) in relation to the PVC (EDI) role the following:
   i) in recognition of the development of the role and the changing political landscape, proposals had been developed to include ‘Skills’ in the title and job description of the PVC (EDI);
   ii) Senate has passionately advocated for the retention of EDI within the title, and it was important for staff with a lived experience of EDI that this was still recognised in this role; and
   iii) changes to the role title required a minor amendment to Ordinance 2: Officers of the University.

Agreed: the changes to Ordinance 2: Officers of the University as presented, although ensuring that the new title was PVC (Equality, Diversity, Inclusion and Skills).

103. Chair’s Report (C/25/89 Internal)
Noted:
a) the matters set out in the Chair’s report;
b) the Chair thanked the President of the DSU for the invitation to speak at the International Women’s Day and for the Dean of Durham Cathedral for the invitation to Evensong for St Cuthbert’s Day; and
c) there had been limited feedback on the pattern of Council meetings, so the Monday evening presentations would continue, with feedback always welcome.

104. Register of Sealings (C/25/90 Confidential)
Noted: the report for information.

105. Chair’s Action or Business by Circulation (C/25/91 Internal)
Noted:
a) business taken by Chair’s Action in relation to the Terms of Reference for Finance Committee in ensuring the quoracy of the meeting; and

b) business taken by circulation outside formal Council meetings, in approving the re-appointment of the Head of Van Mildert College, the appointment of two Lay Members of Council and the appointment of four Interim Heads of College.

106. Meeting Effectiveness

Noted:

a) in response to the Council Effectiveness Review, the Chair asked Council Members for any immediate feedback about the effectiveness of the meeting; and
b) Members agreed that they had considered a very full agenda, but that the meeting had been chaired well and appreciative of concluding deliberations by the stated finish time, whilst feeling that all matters had had appropriate time for debate and discussion. All members felt that they had had the opportunity to contribute, and despite differing views, conversations had been respectful. It was to be celebrated that Council could have frank and open debate about differing views and members were thanked for their openness to this approach.

107. Dates of Future Meetings

Noted: the dates of future meetings: 13 and 14 July 2026.

108. Closed Minute