

ASHINGTON TOWN COUNCIL

Minutes of the Finance & General Services Committee Meeting held at 7:00pm on Tuesday 1 December 2020, on-line via Zoom.

PRESENT:

COUNCILLORS: Lynne Grimshaw (Chair) Eleanor Armstrong
Marjorie Chambers Nicola Chambers
Avril Chisholm Matthew Cuthbert
Stephen Fenwick Brian Gallacher
Jim Lang Liam Lavery
Ken Parry Mark Purvis
Pauline Thompson Bob Walkinshaw
Tom Wilson

IN ATTENDANCE: Mike Slaughter – Town Clerk & Responsible Financial Officer
Sharon Parmley – Senior Administration Officer (minutes)
Members of the Public - 0

FGS 20/036 1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE.

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors, Victor Bridges, Lawrence Henderson and Kris Lavery.

FGS 20/037 2. DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS.

There were no disclosures of interest.

FGS 20/038 3. MINUTES OF LAST MEETING.

The minutes of the meeting held on Tuesday 4 August 2020, were agreed and signed as a true record.

FGS 20/039 4. MATTERS ARISING FROM THE LAST MINUTES.

FGS 20/032. IMPROVEMENT WORKS/FOOTPATH REPAIRS – ST JOHNS CEMETERY.

Cllr. Mark Purvis updated members on the progress of the scheme. It was reported that full external funding was now in place for the works and should be completed early in 2021. Cllr. Purvis confirmed that no contribution would be required or requested from the Town Council.

FGS 20/033 NEW ASHINGTON ENTRANCE FEATURES.

The Chair reported that the work to install entrance features on the B1334 and A196 road entrances had now been completed. The general consensus of members was that the features had been welcomed and well-received by residents. Cllrs. Avril Chisholm and Jim Lang reported that they had both received a number of positive

comments from residents on the work that has been undertaken and the overall design.

FGS 20/040 5. ESTABLISHMENT OF A WINTER SUPPORT FUND.

Cllr. Matthew Cuthbert, Leader of Ashington Town Council, presented a detailed report to members providing the opportunity to consider discuss the establishment of a dedicated “Winter Support Fund” in order to assist recognised organisations in meeting identified hardship and other needs during the Christmas and winter period.

The Leader requested that, subject to the agreement in principle to setting up a fund, the Committee would then be asked to identify and use appropriate budget savings in 2020/21 for this purpose.

The Leader reported that, as members are aware, as a direct result of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, there were a significant number of families and individuals in the town who were experiencing and facing significant financial hardship. Jobs were at risk or had already been lost, incomes had fallen due to the furlough schemes and reduced hours and the future remained uncertain and a worry for many.

The Chair reminded members that the Town Council at the outset of the pandemic, established a £10,000 COVID-19 fund with a virement of the funds that had been set aside as the annual contribution to the Northumberland Miner’s Picnic. The dedicated fund was made known to the newly established “Communities Together” team at Northumberland County Council (NCC) who were then co-ordinating the targeted community responses across Northumberland.

Members were reminded by the Chair that to date payments totalling £2,238 have been made from the fund. Very recently, during the late October school break and further to discussion with NCC Communities Together and Early Learning, store cards to a value of £1,500 were also purchased from the fund and were currently held by the Town Council for identified targeted need.

The Chair stated that it was clearly apparent from discussions that the Town Council itself, or its individual members, however well-intentioned, would or could never be best placed to identify widespread need on a fair and equitable basis. In addition, the Town Council could not make payments of public monies direct to individuals; the Council must work through formal constituted groups and recognised organisations.

The Leader commented that there were a number of ways that Council staff and members had practically and safely helped through both volunteering and assisting in “COVID-19 related work”. Staff and members had assisted with the use of vehicles, both Council and private in numerous area-wide food runs and collection for a number of months.

The Chair stated that it was also worth recalling that the Town Council has for many years also funded and supported key infrastructure organisations in the town by way of annual subsidy. Members were reminded that the current financial year alone to date awards totalling £42,000 had been made, including sizable sums to Wansbeck Valley Food Bank, Citizen's Advice Northumberland and Northumberland Community Bank to provide practical help and assistance at this difficult and challenging time.

Member expressed real concern that the Christmas and Winter period would prove particularly challenging and it was evident that already scarce resources for families were being directed at food and additional heating and that many who had previously not had to, were now reliant on assistance and third-party support.

Members were strongly supportive of the need to set up a Support Fund subject to available funding. The Town Clerk reported that, as a direct result and impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, a number of Council managed, funded and administered public events had been cancelled throughout this year. Members were informed that those events had included Fayre Day, planned VE and VJ commemorations, annual gardens and bowls competitions and lately the Christmas Lights Switch on event. The Town Clerk reported that cancellation of those events alone had resulted in a £12,000 saving. Members were reminded that the current COVID-19 Fund itself was established in April from a £10,000 saving in the budget for the planned contribution to Northumberland Miners' Picnic event.

Members agreed the setting up of a Winter Support Fund and it was suggested that the current COVID-19 Fund be re-named as the "Winter Support Fund". It is also requested by members that consideration be given to topping-up the fund to a total of £15,000 through virement of savings identified by the Town Clerk.

Resolved:

That the Finance & General Services Committee:

- (i) Establish and rename the COVID-19 Fund as a "Winter Support Fund"; and that**
- (ii) The current fund balance be increased to £15,000 with a virement from identified savings with in the 2020/21 Community Events Budget.**

FGS 20/041 6. APPLICATIONS FOR FUNDING SUPPORT.

- **Heart of the Hirst Tenant & Resident Group.**

The group requested that the Town Council consider a grant of £200 to support the costs of providing Christmas presents for families in need within the Hirst Ward.

- **Real Deal Plus.**

In the run up to the Christmas period the organisation was expecting a significant increase in demand on its services from the Ashington community. The organisation envisaged that, based on current demand, approximately 70 families per week would benefit from the emergency foodbank and 30 families with Christmas gifts and other items via the organisations Teen Bar. Support was also to be provided to elderly members of the community and a number of street sleepers and sofa surfers.

- **Friends of Bothal Primary School.**

The Friends of Bothal Primary school, in partnership with the Friends of Central Primary School, were working to ensure that all students, who attended the Ashington Learning Partnership (1,387 in total), received at least one present at Christmas.

To meet this target, the two organisations envisaged that total funding of £8,000 was required. A number of contributions had already been made from the community as well as from staff, totalling £5,500.

The organisation requests the Town Council to consider a grant of £2,500 to support the costs of providing Christmas presents for all students.

Resolved:

That:

- **Heart of the Hirst Tenant & Resident Group be awarded the sum of £200.**
- **Real Deal Plus be award the sum of £1,000 and that,**
- **The Friends of Bothal Primary be awarded the sum of £2,500.**

FGS 20/042 7. MEMORIAL TO JACK CHARLTON.

The Town Clerk presented the following detailed report to the Council and provide members with an update on the “Memorial to Jack Charlton” project, agreed at the Finance and General Services Meeting held on 4 August 2020.

Members were reminded that, at the Finance & General Services meeting held on the 4 August 2020, a motion was presented by Cllr. Liam Lavery that *“noted and recognised the wonderful contribution made by the late Jack Charlton during his life; noted the fondness by which he is remembered on both sides of the Irish Sea and the high esteem in which he will always be held in his hometown”*.

Members were reminded that at that time, a public *“Go Fund Me”* campaign had already been set up to raise funds for a Jack Charlton statue and that the current fund stood in excess of £3,000.

The Town Clerk reminded members that at the meeting, a letter to the Council, from a member of the public, had also been circulated requesting that formal recognition be properly given to commemoration of the 1966 World Cup and footballing achievements of the Charlton Brothers. The Town Clerk informed members that Northumberland County Council (NCC) had also now indicated that they wished to see recognition in Ashington of the Charlton Brothers sporting achievements and that support, including funding, would be considered for such a project.

Members recognised that there were clearly two related, but distinct, projects to take forward for consideration and it was important that they were separated for both the purposes of transparency, funding support, communication and any required public consultation. Some members were concerned that there would be possible confusion with the *“Go Fund Me”* public campaign and how any similar Council project would be best taken forward. The Town Clerk advised that, after discussion with Cllr.L.Lavery, and prior to any consideration by the Committee, it would likely be the case that the Town Council would be asked and expected to take on and oversee both the delivery of any agreed project/s and the safe management of public monies, including those given via the public campaign.

Members were reassured and recognised that at similar arrangement had been made in the 1990’s by the then Wansbeck District Council, when public funding had been raised for the *“Jackie Milburn”* statue as part of the Civic Head’s campaign.

Members were reminded that, further to a full discussion of all points and related issues, the Finance & General Services Committee had resolved to:

- (i) *Pursue a lasting memorial for "Big Jack" in his hometown, a community that meant so much to him over his life,*
- (ii) *Discuss the proposals with the community and Jack's family to ensure a fitting memorial to a man who would always be a hero to our town,*

- (iii) *Explore the idea of erecting a statue of Jack Charlton in the town,*
- (iv) *Work with Northumberland County Council to discuss and develop a separate commemoration project of the of the 1966 World Cup and footballing achievements of the Charlton Brothers,*
- (v) *Set up a Working Group to take the projects forward and to report progress to future meetings of the Committee, the Working Group members to be Cllr.L.Lavery (Chair), Cllr.J. Lang, Cllr.M.Purvis together with the Town Clerk,*
- (vi) *Seek to identify and source external funding from both the public and any other identified private funding sources as much as possible; and*
- (vii) *Subject to the confirmation of funding commitments and level, to then identify and consider the project financial contribution to be made by the Town Council.*

The Town Clerk reported that, further to the Committee meeting, the Working Group was set up to scope the project and brief and to also firm and follow up the extent of the financial support. The Working Group recognised that there was real public interest in the Jack Charlton Statue project and contact has already received from national and local sculptors. The Town Clerk reported that, it was now clear that a successful project could likely be properly funded, managed and delivered but given the current crisis, it would be 2021 before any real progress on the practical aspects can be made.

Members were informed that, as at the date of the meeting, the current external committed funding was:

• NCC Members Local Improvement Schemes	£14,000
• Bernicia - Tenants Community Panel	£ 5,000
• Go Fund Me – Public Fundraising	£ 3,027
• Unite Union (Plaxton NE Branch)	£ 100
• Wansbeck Constituency Labour Party	<u>£ 750</u>
Total to date:	<u>£22,877</u>

Members recognised that the funding was very encouraging and were aware that, in addition, several third-party organisations had also expressed an interest and willingness to contribute to the statue project once it can be established that there is widespread funding support.

Cllr.L.Lavery stated that he was optimistic that given the current level of commitment and subject to the agreement to a Town Council financial contribution, then those expressions of interest could be followed up for a positive outcome.

Cllr.L. Lavery advised members that he had discussed the project with the Charlton family who very appreciative of the plans and expressed gratitude to those members of the public and others who had given so generously, especially at this particularly difficult time for everyone. The family had also clearly indicated a real preference that any memorial that was agreed to be sited within Hirst Park, a park that Jack had so many memories of, so fondly remembered and spoke about with real passion.

With regard to the level of any agreed Town Council funding support, the Town Clerk reminded members that a financial commitment was made back in 2017 to annually support the revitalised Hirst Park with annual revenue support via a Service Level Agreement (SLA).

The Town Clerk reported that the SLA contribution, capped at £23,680 was expected to commence in the current 2020/21 financial year but given the COVID-19 impact and delays in the park project, that contribution would not be required and would represent a significant unexpected revenue saving to the council. Cllr.L.Lavery requested that, given the likely location of the statue within Hirst Park, any recommended and agreed Council contribution to the statue project be met from the identified SLA savings.

Resolved:

That the Finance & General Services Committee:

- (i) Note the report and the progress made by the Working Group to date in establishing and sourcing external public and private support,**
- (ii) Agree to a Town Council funding contribution of £10,000 to the Jack Charlton Statue Project and £2,000 to the commemoration project for the 1966 World Cup, the funding to be met from the identified saving within the current financial year.**

FGS 20/043 8. ENVIRONMENTAL ENFORCEMENT – SERVICE LEVEL AGREEMENT.

The Town Clerk presented a detailed report to the Committee providing members with the opportunity to review the current Service Level Agreement (SLA) between Northumberland County Council (NCC) and

Ashington Town Council for the provision of a dedicated Environmental Enforcement Officer.

The Town Clerk reported that, as members were aware, the Town Council first entered into an SLA with NCC for Environmental Enforcement with effect from 1 January 2018 for a 9-month period to 30 September 2018, initially on a pilot basis. Following an approach from NCC in June 2018, the Town Council agreed to extend the SLA for a further 18-month period to 31 March 2020.

In determining the budget for 2020/21 the Town Council agreed to a further one-year SLA at the cost of £20,760 inclusive of all employee related overheads and the provision of a dedicated vehicle by NCC.

Members commented that monthly performance reports, prepared by the Environmental Enforcement Officer detailing the work undertaken, were circulated prior to the lockdown and current impact of the Covid pandemic. Several members noted that, although NCC Officers have been working from home during the pandemic, no reports had however been received since March 2020.

Members stated that they had requested work to address arising matters and that the scheme has operated over the SLA period with work requests being made via the general office for forwarding to the Environmental Enforcement Officer. The Chair commented that it had also been expected that it was also envisaged that the SLA service for environmental enforcement would operate closely with the newly introduced Rapid Response team.

The Town Clerk reminded members that the SLA required that a review take place in the last quarter of the 12-month period and that the review should cover the costs, risks and benefits of the existing arrangements.

Further to member questions, the Town Clerk reported that the options available to the Town Council on completion of the current SLA at 31 March 2021, were:

1. Continuing with the current SLA content and discussing the duration and cost of any further extension,
2. Continuing with a revised SLA to be properly discussed; or
3. Discontinuing the SLA meaning that the service provision would cease with effect from 31 March 2021.

The Town Clerk reminded members that it should be noted that any decision taken to continue with the SLA placed an onus on the Council to identify appropriate 2021/22 resource requirement from within the core service revenue budget.

Resolved:

That the Finance & General Services Committee:

(iii) Agree “in principle” the continuation of the current Environmental Enforcement SLA for a further period of one-year, subject to:

- A full review of the effectiveness of the SLA, including reporting and management arrangements; and**
- The identification of appropriate revenue funding for the 0.5 Full-Time Equivalent service; and that**

(iv) The Budget Working Group be delegated to establish the projected costs of a 2021/2022 Service Level Agreement and to report back to Finance & General Services Committee.

FGS 20/044 9. SCHEDULE OF PAYMENTS 2020/21.

The Town Clerk submitted a full schedule of payments and income for the financial 28 July to 23 November 2020.

Resolved:

That the Schedule of Payments for the financial period 28 July to 23 November 2020 be formally agreed and approved.

FGS 20/045 10. BUDGET MONITORING REPORT 2020/21.

The Town Clerk presented members with the budget monitoring report for 2020/21 and highlighted the following items. Members were reminded that detailed budget discussions would be taking place in coming weeks.

Resolved:

That the Budget Monitoring Report for the financial period 1 April to 23 November 2021 be formally agreed and approved.

FGS 20/046 11. DATE, TIME AND VENUE FOR THE NEXT MEETING.

The next meeting of the Finance and General Services Committee was scheduled for 19 January 2021 (Venue/Format to be agreed).

The meeting closed at 8.50pm.