

ASHINGTON TOWN COUNCIL
DRAFT Minutes of the Finance & General Services Committee,
held at 6:00pm on Tuesday 10th December 2024
at Ashington Town Hall, 65 Station Road

COUNCILLORS PRESENT:

Cllrs. Lynne Grimshaw (Chair), Cllr Gemma Hemsley, Cllr Graeme Wright, Cllr Paul Wright, Cllr Pauline Thompson, Cllr Caroline Ball, Cllr Jim Lang, Cllr Matthew Cuthbert, Cllr Louis Brown, Cllr Marjorie Chambers, Cllr Matthew Cuthbert, Cllr Glynn Davies and Cllr John Tully.

ALSO, IN ATTENDANCE

Sarah Eden – Executive Office, Stephen Humphrey – Assets and Development Manager, Alan Bunker – Allotment Officer.

FGS24/075 WELCOME BY THE CHAIR

Welcome by the Chair, Councillor Lynne Grimshaw.

Cllr Lynne Grimshaw sought the agreement of the meeting to bring two urgent items not placed on the agenda. The first as part of Budget and Expenditure, seeking delegated for officers with respect to Youth Funding spending. The second a private and confidential matter in regards staffing. **It was AGREED.**

FGS24/076 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Cllr Victor Bridges, Cllr Mark Purvis, Cllr Sophie Robinson, Cllr Bob Walkinshaw.

FGS24/077 DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS

Cllr Louis Brown declared an interest in agenda item 10, Allotment Liaison Group, as an allotment holder and site representative at North Seaton Colliery Allotments. Cllr Brown declared that he would leave the meeting, and therefore take no part in discussion or decision-making.

FGS24/078 DISPENSATIONS

There were no dispensations requested.

FGS24/079 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

The meeting heard questions from *a member of the public* which were received in advance of the November Full Council meeting, but outside of standing orders time limit. The Executive Officer advised that it had been the Chair's intention to hear the questions at Full Council but these had not been brought to the meeting, which she apologised to the resident for.

The questions as follows were heard, and the responses that had been communicated were agreed to be a sufficient response.

- 1. Does the Council consider it can best represent the interests of all residents when it is composed of members from only one party?**
- 2. What measures are Ashington Town Council taking to ensure the public are made aware of the elections for the Council in May 2025 and the eligibility requirements to stand?**

The Executive Officer advised that in consultation with the Business Chair, the following response was given, however the meeting could agree any further comment.

Regarding Council representation, while our current Council members are all from the Labour Party, it's important to note that our Council meeting agendas contain no items marked with a

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political 'P'. Each councillor votes as an individual, focusing solely on community needs rather than party-political concerns. There are no party-political issues influencing our decision-making processes. The Council's primary goal is to serve all residents equitably and transparently, with each member committed to representing the entire community's interests independently signed up to when they take up office and in adherence to the Code of Conduct.

In regards election awareness and candidate eligibility, as the Council's Executive Officer, I have the legal responsibility for sharing election information. I will be personally managing the dissemination of comprehensive election details for the May 2025 elections. This includes:

- *Preparing and distributing official election correspondence*
- *Ensuring clear communication of candidate eligibility requirements*
- *Using all our communication channels to reach all potential candidates and voters*

Members added that anyone eligible could put themselves forward for election in May, and this would be decided as part of the democratic process.

Representatives from Woodhorn Allotments were in attendance, and following the agreement of the Chair, they were offered the opportunity to ask a question.

A representative of Woodhorn Allotments advised that they did not have a question but would like to address the meeting. The Chair allowed this, and they offered very heartfelt thanks to Stephen Humphrey following hearing of his decision to leave the Council. In a speech of thanks and commendation which included an acknowledgement of him going above and beyond in his role and in support of the allotments, with reference also to the previous Clerk, Mike Slaughter. Whilst representatives were very sorry to hear that Stephen was leaving the Council, they wished him all the best in his new job.

The Chair thanked those present for their comments and advised that everyone in the chamber felt the same and were sorry to lose Stephen but wish him well as he progressed in his career.

FGS24/080 MINUTES OF LAST MEETING

It was **AGREED** to **RECEIVE** and **SIGN** as a true record, the minutes of the meeting held on Tuesday 8th October 2024.

FGS24/081 CLERK AND OFFICER UPDATES

The following update was given:

Allotments (General)

Alan has arranged the second recycling day at our North Seaton Colliery site. With assistance from plot holders, UPVC window frames and doors were removed and recycled on Tuesday 10th December. Approximately 25 door and window frames were collected that would otherwise have ended up in landfill, or as a continued blight on the appearance of gardens. There are several frames abandoned on plots and this initiative offers a simple solution after many years. Following the success, this will be rolled out on other sites. In addition, glass recycling is planned for the new year, including full frames and broken pieces. This has been arranged in partnership with NCC who will collect the glass, and following an appraisal of the success, could be further rolled out.

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Several tap repairs have been carried out across all sites after the latest cold snap in late November. The work was carried out by Mark and assisted by Alan. Additionally, as a preventative measure several taps have had fittings changed to minimise the effects of changes in temperature. The solution brought by Mark, with Mark and Alan working together across all sites, is expected to reduce the issues with taps during the winter. This is good news for water bills and water conservation.

Invoices are due to be sent to North Seaton Colliery plot holders in the coming weeks. We are aware that some plot holders will be vacating their plots which is usual at the end of the growing season.

Across the sites we manage, only two allotments holders have been issued with notice due to non-payment of rent.

Allotment (Capital)

Last month, it was reported that some capital projects identified during budget planning were not moved forward in 2024/25 as the budget was not made available. Those outstanding projects remain to be addressed.

The most pressing of these outstanding projects is the water system upgrade at Nursery Park. The updated cost estimate for this project has been received, and it is 10% higher than the quote from November 2023.

In addition to the Nursery Park water system, there are also outstanding capital projects for:

- Roadway upgrades at Woodhorn, Seaton Hirst, and High Market
- Boundary fencing at High Market

The proposed Allotment Liaison Committee will hear future suggestions for capital works from October 2025, for the following years budget.

ATC Neighbourhood Services

Play Areas

Further vandalism has taken place at Alexandra Road Play Area. The play area remains closed following the initial vandalism and the matter has been reported to the Police and Community Safety Team. Unfortunately, due to weather conditions work has not yet taken place following the initial vandalism (work is sensitive to temperature and rain), however our contractors (Kompan Ltd) will carry out all work, to include the new vandalism, as per the original quotation at the earliest opportunity.

Additionally, Mark and Ryan have carried out repairs to play equipment at People's Park and Paddock Wood. This is quite technical work, especially fitting and setting the gates. It is rewarding as well as advantageous that the Council's Officers are able to carry this out. Wet pour surfacing has also been carried out by Mark and Ryan, at both North Seaton Colliery play area, and Bywell Road; both were 'wear and tear'.

Litter Bins

Two litter bins have been moved following feedback about the positioning from members of the public.

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Christmas Lighting

Ashington's Christmas lighting has been well received following the Switch-On event on the 28th November. Unfortunately, due to Storm Darragh, a number of features have been affected. Our contractor, Gala Lights, have been quick to respond to this issue and the lights should be restored in the next two days.

Entrance Features and Town Centre Planting

Ryan and Mark will work together on the final tidy of the town's entrance features and town centre planting prior to Christmas. To many eyes the entrance features look quite drab, but this is due to plant selection and the time of year. The schemes were designed to achieve year-round interest and what some might see as very dark, dead looking shrubs (rudbeckia especially) have appeal in frosty weather. Once the weeding, leaves and clearing has been completed we will be putting something out to explain our sustainable planting.

Bus Shelter Cleansing

Town centre bus shelter cleaning will take place w/c 16th December, in the run up to Christmas.

Projects

Ashington Cricket Club Commemorative Tree Project to Mark the 80th Anniversary of the ending of WWII

Groundworks will commence in January. Dead trees will be removed, with crown-lifting works also; this will enable other preparatory work including wildflower and tree planting. On Saturday 15th February, Reiverdale Scout Group will carry out the tree planting in preparation of the unveiling ceremony in May. Work is underway to make the 175 plaques to be placed alongside individual trees.

Ashington Community Woods

A meeting will take place with Friends of Ashington Community woods and Groundwork NE on 11th December regarding possible improvement works in the woodland and development of walking and running routes.

Events and Engagement

Christmas Light Switch On

Ashington Christmas Light Switch-On held on 28th November 2024, was a highly successful community celebration that drew approximately 5,000 attendees throughout the day. The free family event featured indoor Christmas activities at the YMCA coordinated by over 20 community groups, musical performances by Gladwin's Ballet and Stage School and the Ashington District Male Voice Choir, and appearances on Station Road by special guests including Love Island's Adam Collard and singer Paul Skerit.

A particular highlight was the incorporation of a toy parade into the lantern parade organised by Walk the Plank.

While the event slightly exceeded its £6,500 budget, spending £6,575.34, it received overwhelmingly positive feedback from both participants and the public.

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The only notable concern was accessibility issues in the busy YMCA, which will need to be addressed differently in future years as the building will no longer be available for events due to its conversion into a nursery.

The road closure along Station Road proved beneficial, providing better space for the stage, parades, and pedestrian movement.

Animating Ashington

Following on from a very successful Christmas Light Switch On event working with Walk the Plank, Sharon will be working with them on several other events coming up in the new year.

Christmas Trail and Shop Window Competition

Gary has developed the Christmas trail this year, working with traders and sharing the publicity he created across our media. It was launched earlier than last year, and is slightly different with sweets in the shops, rather than a selection box at the end. We will wait until after the festive period, and after the schools break up to evaluate further.

The Christmas window competition is in full flow and will be judged by Cllr Caroline Ball.

Defibrillators

Thanks to funding from County Cllr Caroline Ball, an additional defibrillator will be added to the Central ward in the next couple of weeks, on the Baldy Butcher shop on Hawthorn Road. Thanks to funding from Bothal Ward Cllrs, a defibrillator will be installed on the outside wall of Brightside in Wansbeck Business Park. We have also supported Brightside to seek further funding to install public access defibrillators at High Hirst View and Laburnum House, to add to the total they fundraised via staff efforts.

Thanks to funding from Central Ward Cllrs, a defibrillator will be installed on the outside wall of the Police Station at the entrance to Ashington Woods. The guardian in this instance will be a volunteer from Ashington and Hirst Running Club. You will recall they suggested this area, and Wansbeck Business Park.

Community Safety Team – Operation Shield

Sarah attended a celebration event for the project in Cramlington on 21st November. Paul Brooks, Head of Services for the newly titled 'Safe and Resilient Communities' introduced, as well as Cllr Gordon Stewart who has the portfolio for Looking after Communities and is also the Chair of Safer Communities.

The officers were the real stars, police, security, and the Community Safety Team, most of whom Ashington Town Council have met - Neil, Grant, Zola, and Rob. They talked about the project and the partnership working and it is amazing how quickly they have linked up with services to support the areas they have been operational in. We had a presentation of the successes at the Council meeting the team attended in September, but what was great was hearing from the Security Officers at Manor Walks and the real difference they have made. Shoppers feeling safer, and later opening stores having more confidence.

We are very lucky to have this team in Ashington now, they are signposting, diverting, engaging, doing home visits, etc. – intervention before enforcement, and they are freeing up police time that may otherwise be taken up with ASB. Police Inspector Jon Caisley made the point that no

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one should be deterred from reporting, they are still the direct contact via 111, but they work so closely that Operation Shield can follow-up. I hope and I am confident that we will have some great stats from Ashington soon.

I did take the opportunity to ask a couple of questions. I asked who recruited the team as they should be congratulated as getting the right people in the right place at the right time is not easy; these four officers are exceptional. It was Ian Stephenson and Julie Leddy so hats off to them. I also asked if funding for the project would continue, as it would be scandalous if it stopped in April. The funding for the project came from numerous areas, Kelly from PCC office described it as an innovative approach to funding, and I really hope it continues – those involved seem keen that it does, and there will be an opportunity for Town Council's to get more involved.

Cllrs .gov.uk email addresses

Sarah has the details and will be sending out this week. If anyone needs any support to move over, please let us know. County Cllr emails have not been requested yet, but they will be if this does become law as expected.

Legislative changes are expected that will soon require all Councillors to use official .gov.uk email addresses linked to the Council's .gov.uk domain for all Council business. Many of our neighbouring Councils are in the process of making the change as their complete lack of a .gov.uk domain was picked up by audit. We have not been picked up as the Council has a .gov.uk domain and all officers' use .gov.uk email addresses, but once statutory, we will have no choice for Cllrs also. We have provided all Cllrs with a .org.uk email address, but few are using these.

While this change cannot currently be enforced, it is expected to become mandatory in the future (2026). To prepare, we propose setting a deadline of May 2025 to fully adopt .gov.uk email addresses for all Council communications. This gives ample time to transition and adapt to this new standard; many of our neighbouring councils are doing this already. We will work with you to minimise disruption, as we recognise that some of you may have used the same personal email account for years. I appreciate that this may seem inconvenient at first, but these measures are necessary to meet our obligations and protect the Council and its members. Using .gov.uk email accounts will demonstrate our commitment to best practices, enhance our security and professionalism, and ensure compliance with data protection and audit standards.

ScottishPower Renewables Community Benefit Report 2024

Epsom Drive and Aintree Court play areas will feature in this report, which includes case studies and stories for the year in question. We successfully used funding from the scheme (windfarm funding) to do both play areas, in addition to the Council's own earmarked reserves.

FGS24/082 BUDGET AND EXPENDITURE 2024/25

a) Updated Budget Report

The updated budget and expenditure report was **RECEIVED**. There were no question asked of the RFO.

b) Accounts Paid and to be Paid (including Bank Reconciliation)

The schedule of accounts paid and to be paid since 31st October was **RECEIVED**, it was **AGREED** to endorse those accounts paid.

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c) Budget Consultation Reminder: Opportunity for Input

The RFO reminded members of the informal pre-budget discussion being held on Tuesday 17th December.

In response to a comment from Cllr Graeme Wright the Executive Officer agreed that it was inaccurate to state that this would be the last opportunity for members to present budget ideas prior to a formal recommendation being agreed at the FGS Meeting on Tuesday 14th January 2025, and Full Council agreement on Tuesday 28th January 2025. Whilst bringing forward ideas at this earlier opportunity allowed officers the opportunity to look at costs and feasibility, it was possible for Cllrs to bring items forward at anytime up to the budget being agreed.

FGS24/083 CLOSED CIRCUIT TELEVISION (CCTV)

The Chair advised that the written record of the meeting would be deferred to the January FGS Committee meeting, however Cllr Caroline Ball who chaired the meeting was able to give a verbal update.

Cllr Ball stated that everyone was very impressed with the new building Asset Watch were operating from and encouraged members to have a look at the systems in place if they had not already. A successful take-away from the meeting was that the CCTV in Ashington had been used to arrest a national crime gang who were targeting elderly people at cashpoints. They were picked up on the CCTV in Ashington and the police team were able to crack down on their activities, which would otherwise not have been possible.

Cllr Ball concluded that the meeting demonstrated the very close and productive relationship between Asset watch and the policing team in Ashington, as well as new links being formed with the 24/7 policing team.

Cllr Louis Brown left the meeting for the consideration of the following item.

FGS24/084 ALLOTMENT LIAISON GROUP (Placed on the agenda by Cllr John Tully)

a) Allotment Liaison Group Terms of Reference

Cllr John Tully placed the item on the agenda and asked that the terms of reference presented by the Executive Officer be amended to include other matters, in addition to the rent and capital costs. He supported this by stating that matters relating to climate could also be discussed, or any other matters brought forward and necessary.

Members discussed the pros and cons of bringing items to a less scheduled allotment meeting, as opposed to being dealt with in accordance with the procedures in place on allotments, or via the Climate Change Committee.

It was discussed that the former Allotment Liaison Group was established to research and agree Allotment Tenancy Agreements and Rules and Regulations, which were now in place. It was debated what matters would be brought to committee that would not be dealt with under these rules and regulations.

To progress the item, the Executive Officer suggested an addendum to include in the terms of reference:

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“Any other matter brought by either Council representatives, or Allotment representatives”, and
“A special or extraordinary meeting can be convened if agreed by the Finance and General
Services Committee, following suggestion by Town Council, or Allotment representatives.”

The Terms of Reference with additions was **AGREED**.

b) Council Representatives

The Chair advised that the Council could agree representatives as per the agenda, but it would be necessary to agree these again in May, following elections.

In response to a question from Cllr Jim Lang, the Executive Officer advised that the numbers suggested for each site was based on the size and what had been usual in the past. It was clarified that most sites it was obvious who would be the site representative, or the officer from the association, but we would need to contact allotment holders at Hirst East End before assuming anyone.

With the permission of the Chair, a representative of Woodhorn Road Allotment site suggested those members that would be suitable for the Allotment Liaison Group.

The Council representatives who will make up the Allotment Liaison Group were **AGREED** as Cllrs John Tully, Marjorie Chambers, Pauline Thompson, Gemma Hemsley, and Graeme Wright.

Representatives from Woodhorn Road Allotment site left the meeting.
Cllr Louis Brown returned to the meeting.

FGS24/085 ENVIRONMENTAL ENHANCEMENTS – HAYDON WARD

It was AGREED to support the proposal from Haydon Ward Cllrs for works to ‘Doves Corner’ the area off the roundabout (Newbiggin Road/North Seaton Road) for work from their £7,820 Environmental Enhancement budget heading (£5k c/f from 23/24), and to agree to delegate to the Assets & Development Manager to place orders and oversee work. *This land is owned by Northumberland County Council.*

The Assets and Development Manager outlined that the Doves Corner Improvement Project in Haydon Ward aims to revitalise the area through a phased approach. Phase 1, led by Northumberland County Council (NCC), will remove overgrown rockeries, redundant paving, and invasive shrubbery, replacing them with soil and grass seed. Phase 2, carried out by local contractors for an estimated £3,500, will enhance the site with insect-friendly shrub planting, improved paving, and possible wildflower additions. Phase 3, managed by Ashington Town Council’s Neighbourhood Services Officers, involves installing two accessible public seats and replacing the litter bin at an anticipated cost of £1,850. The project promotes a partnership approach, involving Haydon Ward Councillors, and aims for completion by Spring 2025.

FGS24/086 ENVIRONMENTAL ENHANCEMENTS – SEATON WARD

It was AGREED to support the proposal from Seaton Ward Cllrs for replacement fencing works from their £6,186 Environmental Enhancement budget heading (£2,186k c/f from 23/24), and to agree to delegate to the Assets & Development Manager to place order and oversee work. *This land is owned by Northumberland County Council.*

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The Executive Officer outlined that the Seaton Ward Improvement Project focuses on two initiatives: enhancing a 120m section of Summerhouse Lane and installing two additional litter bins in the Seaton Vale housing estate. The Summerhouse Lane works include clearing overgrown brambles and shrubbery and repairing damaged birds-mouth fencing, with bramble removal managed by NCC and fencing repairs estimated at £850 by a local contractor. For Seaton Vale, the Town Council plans to install two litter bins on main access roads (Harrington Way and Slaley Drive) with landowner permission, while NCC has agreed to empty the bins despite the estate not being adopted. Both projects aim for swift implementation, reflecting prior successful partnerships.

Alan Bunker and Stephen Humphrey left the meeting.

FGS24/087 EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC

It was AGREED to pass the following resolution:

That the press and public be excluded from the meeting during consideration of the following items, permitted under Section 1 (2) LGA 1960, due to the confidential nature of the business being transacted.

FGS24/088 URGENT ITEM STAFFING MATTER

The Executive Officer advised that following consultation with the Personnel Committee, they are supported in making a recommendation in view of the resignation of the Assets and Development Manager.

It was AGREED to support and implement the following Interim Organisational Arrangements:

Neighbourhood Services Officer, Mark Air will be temporarily promoted to an Acting Team Leader role. The Acting Team Leader will report directly to the Executive Officer. This arrangement is designed to provide stability during the transition period.

The Executive Officer will provide direct oversight of ongoing projects during the interim period. This includes continued support for the Cricket Club and Ashington Community Woods projects.

A comprehensive review of team structure and resources will be conducted following strategic planning as a priority following the May 2025 elections. The goal is to ensure the team structure optimally supports the Council's priorities.

The interim arrangement will be in place for an initial six-month period, and a full strategic review will be undertaken to inform long-term staffing decisions.

The Council approved the interim measures and authorised the Executive Officer to continue supporting the team and scoping future resource needs.

FGS24/089 DATE, TIME, AND VENUE FOR THE NEXT MEETING

Tuesday 14th January 2025, 6:00pm, Council Chamber.

Meeting ended 19:03pm