



Annual Report 2023/24

Introduction

Chair's Foreword - Cllr Mark Purvis

The 2023-2024 year has seen Ashington Town Council make tremendous strides in fulfilling our mission of creating a better community. The numbers tell an inspiring story of progress and positive impact across all our priority areas.

On the environmental front, we installed 36 new litter bins, bringing our total to 424 servicing the town. Our sustainable planting initiatives flourished with 52 planters, 17 beds, and over 3,000 square meters of bulbs and wildflowers cultivated. Moreover, we expanded Ashington's greenery by planting and maintaining 192 new trees. Climate action also took centre stage, with 8 councillors and officers achieving Carbon Literacy certification.

Parks and public spaces saw major improvements, including 2 newly designed play areas at Aintree Close and Epsom Drive, with £53,000 allocated for further development. We maintained 89 public seats and, thanks to funding from County Councillors, installed 11 new bus shelters.

Ensuring community safety remains paramount, so I'm pleased to report upgraded CCTV cameras were added in the town centre, complemented by 2 additional interactive speed signs. Perhaps our most vital addition was maintaining 12 public defibrillators, with the help of local guardians, across Ashington.

Engaging residents and supporting local organisations continued to be an area of emphasis. Financial assistance included £9,250 in small grants to 19 applicants and £79,000 in annual grants to 15 organisations operating in the town.

While this year brought many accomplishments, it also brought profound loss. We mourn the passing of esteemed councillors Lawrence Henderson and Vicki Brown, whose dedication to Ashington will be sorely missed. At the same time, we welcomed new councillors Graeme Wright and Paul Wright, as well as officers Gary Holmes and Alan Bunker, to our team.

Our strong partnership with Northumberland County Council allowed us to enhance services and I would like to thank NCC staff who collaborated with us so effectively. We also could not have achieved this year's successes without the efforts of those we contract work to, 75, with 65 of them local or Northeast-based companies. This dedication from our partners has been invaluable, and we will continue to support local trade where we can.

In closing, I must extend my sincere gratitude to our exceptional staff, including Sarah, Stephen, Mark, Ryan, Sharon, Gary, and Alan. Their hard work and commitment have been vital in translating our objectives into meaningful action for the benefit of Ashington. My thanks also go to my fellow councillors for their time, insight, and debate throughout this productive year. It is an honour to work alongside such a dedicated team.





Annual Report 2023/24

A Message from The Leader - Cllr John Tully

When I was appointed Leader in May last year, I outlined four key priorities for Ashington Town Council: keeping our town clean and litter-free, taking action against climate change, supporting the community, and improving the environment. I'm proud to report that over the past twelve months, we have made significant strides in each of these vital areas.

Our efforts to keep Ashington's streets and estates tidy have included expanding our litter bin installations, enhancing street cleaning services, and supporting volunteer litter-pickers. In the fight against climate change, we have planted hundreds of new trees, planted wildflowers, shifted to more sustainable practices, and raised awareness through events like the Great Big Green Week.

Engaging with the community has been a top focus, through improved communications, organising annual events, more active engagement with local community groups, and providing grant funding to local groups. We've also taken steps to create a more pleasant environment by upgrading play areas, installing CCTV and Christmas lights, and implementing a long-term asset management plan.

While I'm delighted with our progress, I know there is still work to be done by us, and others. The current year will be a busy one for Ashington Town Council, in addition to our usual work. We will be planning our first Eco Fair and working on several new projects like the Miners Memorial Meadow, development plans for a Skate Park, and supporting the World War II Memorial Arboretum and Plaque Project at Ashington Cricket Club.

We cannot fail to be taken along with the excitement of the £30 million regeneration programme announced for Ashington town centre. Projects like the redevelopment of Wansbeck Square, improvements to public spaces and connectivity, and the revival of the Portland Park site have the potential to transform our town.

Ashington Town Council is committed to working hand-in-hand with Northumberland County Council to ensure these ambitious plans come to full fruition. We want to play an active role in shaping a proud future for Ashington - one with quality jobs, excellent education, an exceptional cultural scene, and a prosperous, thriving community for all residents.

The regeneration road ahead is an inspiring one, and I have every confidence that by maintaining our priorities and partnership, we will make Ashington an even better place to call home.

The Ashington Regeneration Programme is being delivered by the Northumberland County Council and combines funding from: UK Government - Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, UK Shared Prosperity Fund, North of Tyne Combined Authority, Northumberland County Council and Advance Northumberland. For more information visit

<https://www.northumberland.gov.uk/Economy-Regeneration/Programmes/Town-Centre-Regeneration/ashington-regeneration.aspx>





Annual Report 2023/24

Civic Head's Reflections – Cllr Victor Bridges

As I reflect on my term serving as your Civic Head since May of last year, I am filled with immense pride and gratitude. Over the past twelve months, I have had the distinct privilege of attending more than 70 functions and events, each one allowing me to represent our great town.



From concerts and cheque presentations to the beloved Miners' Picnic and Ashington Community Fair, I have witnessed the vibrancy and spirit that make our community truly special. I have celebrated alongside our students at school events, recognised the selfless service of our uniformed personnel, and supported the tireless efforts of local charities and organisations.

The highlight of my tenure was undoubtedly the Remembrance Sunday ceremony, where we paid tribute to the brave men and women who made the ultimate sacrifice for our freedom. The Christmas festivities brought joy and cheer to all, while the art exhibitions showcased the immense talent that flourishes within our town.

Moreover, I had the distinct pleasure of taking a commemorative journey on the new Northumberland line, a testament to the progress and growth that Ashington continues to embrace as we look towards an even brighter future.

As my term draws to a close, I am filled with gratitude for the opportunity to serve the people of Ashington. To the next Civic Head, I extend my warmest wishes for a successful and fulfilling term, one that continues to uplift and celebrate the spirit of our community.

Thank you, Ashington, for the honour of representing you. It has been a true privilege.

Core Priorities

Ashington Town Council has four core priorities that guide our efforts to create positive outcomes and improve the quality of life for our residents:

- ❖ Keeping the town's streets and estates clean and litter-free.
- ❖ Taking urgent action to fight the effects of Climate Change.
- ❖ Supporting the community via events, engagement, and grant funding.
- ❖ Improving the environment by providing a pleasant and safe place to live.



Annual Report 2023/24

Keeping the Town Clean and Litter-Free

In our mission to maintain a clean and tidy town, we have taken proactive measures to combat littering and fly-tipping. Our partnership with Northumberland County Council has been instrumental in delivering enhanced neighbourhood services, including increased litter bin emptying, street cleansing, and a prompt response to fly-tipping incidents, thereby improving the overall local environmental quality.

We have maintained and installed over 400 litter bins across Ashington, pledging to update 24 bins annually to ensure they meet high standards. In 2023/24, we exceeded our target, thanks to the collective contribution of £4,480 from County Councillors Caroline Ball and Mark Purvis through their Members Local Improvement Scheme (MLIS) Funding.

Recognising the invaluable role of volunteers, we have provided support through grants and administrative assistance to litter-picking initiatives. Furthermore, we organised a town-wide litter-picking project during the Great British Spring Clean week, rallying our community to take pride in maintaining a clean and tidy Ashington.



Despite our efforts, recent figures revealed a concerning rise in fly-tipping, with a staggering 115 tonnes of illegally dumped rubbish spread over nearly 2,000 incidents in the last financial year. Additionally, an astounding 326 tonnes of general litter were collected from public bins and off the streets, highlighting the ongoing challenge we face.

In response, the Council has launched the #LoveWhereYouLive campaign, urging residents to recycle, reduce waste, reuse items when possible, and properly dispose of their waste. We believe that small changes can collectively make a significant difference in preserving the beauty of our town and protecting the environment for future generations.

By fostering partnerships, empowering volunteers, and raising awareness, we remain steadfast in our commitment to keeping Ashington's streets and estates clean and litter-free, ensuring a safe and pleasant living environment for all residents.

Find out more on the Council's website www.ashingtontowncouncil.gov.uk



Annual Report 2023/24

Taking Action Against Climate Change

Recognising the urgency of addressing climate change, Ashington Town Council has taken proactive measures to equip Councillors and Officers with the knowledge and skills necessary to drive meaningful change. We are proud to report that 8 councillors and officers achieved the esteemed Carbon Literacy qualification, demonstrating our commitment to understanding and mitigating the impacts of our carbon footprint.



However, our efforts extended beyond mere education. We championed over 10 climate-inspired initiatives, translating our awareness into tangible actions that contribute to a more sustainable future for our community. From implementing more sustainable practices to promoting eco-friendly pursuits and reducing waste, these initiatives reflect our dedication to being agents of positive change.

Throughout the year, our efforts to enhance Ashington's green spaces and cultivate a sustainable environment were widespread. Our commitment to sustainable planting practices was evident in the 17 beds we meticulously maintained on Station Road, promoting biodiversity and ecological balance.

Ashington's entrances received a revitalising touch, with four entrance features undergoing redevelopment and ongoing maintenance, creating a welcoming impression for visitors and residents alike, with re-used bulbs and sustainable planting. Our dedication to expanding the town's greenery was underscored by tree planting, with 192 new trees being nurtured to contribute to a healthier, more sustainable environment.

In a concerted effort to promote biodiversity and support local ecosystems, we transformed expansive areas into vibrant wildflower meadows, spanning an impressive 2,115 square meters. Complementing these efforts, we planted 869 square meters of bulbs, ensuring a spectacular display of blooms in the coming seasons. We won't stop there and plan to do more bulb and wildflower planting in the current year.

Through these initiatives, we have not only beautified our town but also taken deliberate strides toward cultivating a greener, more sustainable future for Ashington. We organised the 'Great Big Green Week' event again at Ashington market, with plans for an Eco Fair in 2025, featuring leaders in energy efficiency, recycling, and climate-friendly practices.





Annual Report 2023/24

Supporting the Community

Fostering a vibrant sense of community lies at the heart of our efforts. Over the past year, we organised a remarkable 10 events, drawing an impressive attendance of over 5,000 residents and visitors. These events served as platforms for celebration, learning, and forging stronger connections within our community. We also attended more community engagement initiatives than ever, staying in touch with the community sector who work so hard throughout the town.



(Left to right Fair Day, Pride Picnic, Remembrance)



Empowering local organisations and individuals is a cornerstone of our commitment to supporting the community. Through our grant programs, we facilitated positive change by supporting 19 small grant applications, totalling £9,250. These funds provided vital resources for grassroots initiatives, enabling them to effect meaningful change within our community.



Annual Report 2023/24

Furthermore, we awarded £79,000 in annual grants to 15 local organisations, recognising their indispensable roles in addressing the diverse needs of our residents.

Through our events, engagement initiatives, and grant programs, we have cultivated a deep sense of unity and purpose within Ashington. As we look to the future, we remain steadfast in our dedication to supporting the community, nurturing its growth, and celebrating its achievements.

Improving the Environment

Creating a pleasant and safe living environment is one of the most encompassing priorities we have worked towards, as it takes in most of what the Council does.

Our efforts to enhance Ashington's environment and create a secure, inviting atmosphere for residents have been wide-ranging this past year. Ensuring our youngest community members have access to exceptional play facilities, we unveiled two newly designed play areas at Aintree Close and Epsom Drive. With £25,000 funding from Scottish Power Renewables, we were able to complete two play areas in the same year.



These vibrant spaces offer fresh opportunities for active and inclusive play and enjoyment. Working closely with Northumberland County Council, we managed and maintained a total of 8 play areas, prioritising their upkeep and adherence to safety standards. Looking ahead £53,000 is set aside to support further play area development, reinforcing our commitment to providing top-notch recreational amenities.

Ensuring the well-being and security of our community remains paramount. We continue to look after 12 public access defibrillators across Ashington. These life-saving devices are monitored and maintained by 7 dedicated local guardians, ensuring their readiness for emergencies. We extend our gratitude to the 6 County Councillors whose £14,817 in funding in 2022/23 enabled this vital initiative.



During the festive season, we brought joy and wonder to our town by installing 64 Christmas motifs and adorning 14 trees with 308 meters of twinkling mini drop lights. The centrepiece of our display was a magnificent 25-foot Christmas tree, resplendent with 200 meters of garland lighting, 22 meters of mini drop lights, and a stunning 3D star topper, creating a dazzling spectacle for all to enjoy.



Annual Report 2023/24

Promoting sustainable living and a connection to nature, we maintained and supported the maintenance of 8 allotment sites, providing over 700 plots for residents to cultivate. The appointment of a dedicated allotment officer will see further improvements across our sites.

Ward improvement projects received a £30,000 injection of new funding in 23/24, enabling our Ward Councillors to enhance their respective localities. Notably, the College Ward Councillors upgraded the College Shops area, while the Central Ward Councillors revitalised the Laburnum Terrace public space. Funding has been carried forward into the current year so reach out to Cllrs if you have any ideas on what would improve your ward.



Ensuring comfortable and accessible public spaces, we repaired, maintained, and replaced 89 public seats throughout Ashington.

Fostering a sense of security, we installed upgraded CCTV cameras in the town centre, complementing the 4 existing cameras in play areas. Moreover, we added 2 new interactive speed signs, bringing the total to 15. With funding from County Cllrs Lynne Grimshaw and Brian Gallagher, we were able to install these speed signs with no financial outlay by the town council. Providing shelter and comfort for bus users, we maintained 46 bus shelters across Ashington, installed 11 new shelters, and repaired 6 existing ones. This was bolstered by over £19,000 in funding from County Councillors Caroline Ball, and Lynne Grimshaw.

**ASHINGTON
TOWN COUNCIL**

**IMPROVING THE
ENVIRONMENT
BY PROVIDING
A PLEASANT
AND SAFE
PLACE TO LIVE**

**For more
information**
ashingtontowncouncil
.gov.uk

The graphic features the Ashington Town Council logo at the top left. Below it, the text 'IMPROVING THE ENVIRONMENT BY PROVIDING A PLEASANT AND SAFE PLACE TO LIVE' is displayed in bold, black, uppercase letters. To the right of this text are three icons: a stylized sun, a tree, and a bench. At the bottom right, there is a circular inset image of a large water wheel in a park setting. The text 'For more information' is followed by the website address 'ashingtontowncouncil.gov.uk'.



EVENTS

10 events organised.
5,000 attendees.
10 engagement initiatives.
15 volunteer supported events.



LITTER BINS

36 new bins.
£4,480 funding from 2 County Cllrs.
424 litter bins servicing the town.



DEFIBS

12 defibrillators looked after with help of 7 local guardians.
£14,817 funding from 6 County Cllrs.



GRANTS

19 small grant applications supported to sum of £9,250.
15 annual grants awarded totalling £79k.



CARBON LITERATE

8 Cllrs & Officers achieved carbon literacy qualification.
Over 10 climate-inspired initiatives championed.



PLAY AREAS

2 newly designed accessible play areas.
8 play areas maintained with NCC support.
£53k fund set aside for further development.



CCTV CAMERAS

14 upgraded CCTV cameras in town centre.
4 CCTV cameras in play areas.
2 new interactive speed signs, making 14 in total.
£6k funding from 2 County Cllrs.



PARTNERSHIPS

6 additional operatives, and 3 caged vehicles with NCC Partnership.
75 contractors working with us (65 local/NE based)



ENVIRONMENT

52 tubs & planters.
17 sustainable beds.
14 hanging baskets.
3 memorials/gardens.
4 entrance features.
2,115sqm wild flowers.
869sqm spring bulbs.
8 allotment sites, with over 700 plots.



CHRISTMAS LIGHTS

64 lighting motifs.
14 live trees dressed with 308m mini drop lights.
25-foot Christmas tree dressed with 200m garland lighting, 22m mini drop lights, 3D star topper.



PUBLIC SEATS

89 public seats repaired and maintained.
2 new memorial seats.



BUS SHELTERS

46 bus shelters maintained.
11 new bus shelters.
6 bus shelters repaired.
Over £19k funding from 2 County Cllrs



Annual Report 2023/24

Summary

This past year, Ashington Town Council has made significant strides in addressing our core priorities of keeping our streets clean, taking climate action, supporting the community, and improving the environment. Through innovative initiatives, dedicated partnerships, and harnessing the power of volunteerism, we have achieved remarkable progress across multiple fronts.

However, our efforts have not been without challenges, as evidenced by the concerning rise in fly-tipping incidents and the staggering amount of littered waste collected. In response, we have launched awareness campaigns and implemented proactive measures to combat these issues, fostering a sense of community pride and environmental stewardship.

As we look ahead, the Council remains committed to building upon these successes while addressing the areas that require further attention. The forthcoming financial summary reflects our prudent allocation of resources to drive meaningful change and ensure a prosperous future for Ashington.

Financial Overview

Summary

Prudent financial management has been a guiding principle for Ashington Town Council, ensuring that our resources are strategically allocated to deliver maximum impact in line with our priorities. The following summary provides an overview of our financial position during the 2023/24 which has informed our Annual Governance and Accountability Return.

The Council's opening cashbook balance on 1st April 2023 was £424,584.

We received payments totalling £1,000,457; this included £836,861 in Precept, £90,736 VAT repaid, and £72,859 other incomes.

We made payments of £1,160,143; this included NET payments of £827,161, Employment Costs of £257,244, and VAT paid £75,738.

The Council's closing cashbook balance on 31st March 2024 was £264,898.

Income

Our primary source of income as always was the Precept paid by the taxpayers of Ashington, amounting to £836,861. Additionally, we received £90,736 in VAT repayments and £72,859 from other revenue streams, bringing our total income to £1,000,457. Notably, we secured £25,000 in funding from Scottish Power Renewables, which contributed to the cost of developing new play areas at Epsom Drive and Aintree Close. Furthermore, we received funding from our County Councillors' Members Local Improvement Scheme (MLIS) to support initiatives such as the installation of litter bins and speed signs.

Other County Cllr supported schemes crossed over financial years, so whilst they are included in the report, income received has been removed from the year's figures as is proper practice.



Annual Report 2023/24

We secured £8,619 in allotment rents and contributions, though this figure was nearly £3,000 lower than the previous year due to reduced contributions from allotment associations towards projects. As we move forward, with direct control over allotments at Woodhorn, Hirst East End, North Seaton Colliery, and Nursery Park, we will receive 100% of rent payments while assuming full responsibility for associated costs.

Expenditure

Our total expenditure for the year amounted to £1,160,143, which included £827,161 in net payments, £257,244 in employment costs, and £75,738 in VAT paid.

Management and Support

We allocated £324,000 for management and support, with the majority of expenditure dedicated to employment costs (£257,244). Other expenses included office and administration (£45,000), vehicle and equipment maintenance (£14,000), and training and development (£3,500).

Recreation & Leisure Services

With a budget of £208,000, our spending in this area increased to £261,000. This included £32,000 from Earmarked Reserves and the Scottish Power Renewables grant, which facilitated the redevelopment of play areas at Epsom Drive and Aintree Close. While spending on events, community engagement, and recreation was lower than anticipated, we maintained our commitments to Christmas lights (£26,346) and play area maintenance (£7,723).

Additionally, we contributed £23,680 to Northumberland County Council for the maintenance of Hirst Park, an expenditure not supported in the current year as the Council focuses spending on our own assets.

Environmental Services

Our most significant expenditure, totalling £406,025, was dedicated to environmental services. This included £236,700 towards our Partnership Agreement with Northumberland County Council, as well as investments in litter bins (£11,800), seats (£1,588), bus shelters (£55,581), environmental contracts and improvements (£59,210), and climate initiatives (£33,199).

Grant Funding

We allocated £120,000 for grant funding but spent £16,000 less due to fewer small grant applications received and supported. However, we anticipate an increase in requests during the current year.

Other Services

This category included expenses for elections (£17,584), CCTV (£17,476), and interactive speed signs (£6,506).

The election expenses exceeded the allocated budget due to the occurrence of two by-elections during the year.



Annual Report 2023/24

Reserves

In 2023/24, we made a strategic decision to reduce our General Reserves and Contingency from £250,000 to £175,000, enabling us to achieve our spending plans and priorities without increasing the precept. An additional £13,537 was utilised from general reserves and contingency to support necessary unplanned expenditures.

Our Earmarked Reserves, dedicated to replacing and improving assets such as play areas, were reduced from £107,000 to £93,000 to align with our revised long-term plans following a comprehensive review of play area facilities.

Through this judicious management of our financial resources, we have ensured that every penny is invested wisely, delivering tangible benefits to our community while maintaining a strong financial foundation for the future.

Looking Ahead to 2024/25

As we move into the 2024/25 financial year, Ashington Town Council remains focused on delivering value and impact through strategic financial planning. Our total projected expenditure is £946,888, allocated as follows:

Management and Support: £354,481

Recreation & Leisure Services: £95,100

Environmental Services: £342,130

Grants & Subsidies: £100,000

Other Services: £55,177

After utilising £46,938 from balances, the precept requirement for 2024/25 was set at £899,950 to meet these planned expenditures. We will maintain £65,000 in Earmarked Reserves dedicated to asset replacements and improvements, while our General Reserves and Contingency has been maintained at £175,000.

This financial outlook demonstrates our ongoing commitment to pragmatic budgeting that aligns resources with community priorities. Environmental services and management support remain top investment areas, while allocations for recreation, grants, and other vital services ensure a balanced approach to enhancing Ashington's quality of life.

Through proactive planning and strategic financial stewardship, we are well-positioned to build upon the progress achieved in 2023/24 as we continue creating a better community for all residents in the year ahead.

Concluding Comments

The Council's Annual Governance and Accountability Return will be presented to Full Council on Tuesday 25th June. Following approval, the information will be made available on the Council's website and for public inspection, along with the Council's accounts.

If anyone has any questions about any of the information contained in this annual report, please contact me.

Kind regards, Sarah Eden (Executive Office/Responsible Financial Officer)



Annual Report 2023/24

Our Councillors BOTHAL WARD



Cllr Matthew Cuthbert



Cllr Lynne Grimshaw



Cllr Bob Walkinshaw

CENTRAL WARD



Cllr Eleanor Armstrong



Cllr Paul Wright



Cllr Caroline Ball

COLLEGE WARD



Cllr Liam Lavery



Cllr Mark Purvis



Annual Report 2023/24

HAYDON WARD



Cllr Marjorie Chambers



Cllr Graeme Wright



Cllr John Tully

HIRST WARD



Cllr Victor Bridges



Cllr Pauline Thompson



Cllr Sophie Robinson

SEATON WARD



Cllr Glyn Davies



Cllr Louis Brown



Cllr Jim Lang



Annual Report 2023/24

Our Officers



Sarah Eden
Executive Office/RFO



Sharon Parmley
Communications & Engagement Officer



Stephen Humphrey
Assets & Development Manager



Gary Holmes
Administration Assistant



Mark Air
Neighbourhood Services
Officer



Alan Bunker
Allotments Officer



Ryan Appleby
Neighbourhood Services
Officer



Annual Report 2023/24

Contacting us

Our offices are situated on the 2nd Floor of the Town Hall, Station Road. There is a buzzer system for entry, and a lift.

Council meetings are usually held in the historic Council Chambers and are open to the public. They are advertised the week before; the agenda is published on the Town Council website. www.ashingtontowncouncil.gov.uk

Officers can also be contacted by email or telephone.

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Your feedback and ideas matter to the Council. Please reach out with any questions, ideas, and concerns. Our team of dedicated Councillors and Officers are here to help and listen.

Ashington Town Council strives to keep all residents well informed and actively involved in community happenings. If you, or someone you know, would like to receive this annual report or any other communications in a different format or language, please let us know. We aim to ensure our information sharing is accessible to all. Please contact us if you or a loved one needs materials presented in a way that better suits specific needs or abilities.

