

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

**COUNCILLORS PRESENT:**

Cllrs. Lynne Grimshaw (Chair), Cllr Mark Purvis, Cllr Louis Brown, Cllr Pauline Thompson, Cllr John Tully, Cllr Caroline Ball, Cllr Jim Lang, Cllr Sophie Robinson, Cllr Glynn Davies, Cllr Paul Wright, Cllr Matthew Cuthbert and Cllr Graeme Wright.

**ALSO, IN ATTENDANCE**

Sarah Eden – Executive Officer and Responsible Financial Officer, Stephen Humphrey – Assets and Development Manager, Alan Bunker – Allotments Officer and Gary Holmes – Administration Assistant.

**FGS24/035 WELCOME BY THE CHAIR**

Welcome by the Chair, Councillor Lynne Grimshaw.

**FGS24/036 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies for absence were received from Cllr Bob Walkinshaw, Cllr Victor Bridges, Cllr Marjorie Chambers and Cllr Gemma Hemsley.

**FGS24/037 DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS**

Cllr Louis Brown, Cllr Mark Purvis and Cllr Jim Lang declared an interest in FGS24/045 ALLOTMENT RENT INCREASE

**FGS24/038 DISPENSATIONS**

Cllr Louis Brown requested dispensation to speak on the item FGS24/045 ALLOTMENT RENT INCREASE, **it was AGREED.**

**FGS24/039 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION**

There were 30 members of the public present.

The Clerk passed the Chair a list of those persons wishing to speak on item 11, Allotment Rent Increase.

Prior to inviting speakers, the Chair took the opportunity to clarify a point that it had come to the Clerk's attention may have been misinterpreted.

The recommendations relating to allotment rent were for an increase of £4, commencing April 2025, and for the Council to agree a longer-term strategy that they would not increase allotment rent more than £5, but not that it proposed to agree £5 for each subsequent year.

Five members of the public spoke with the following concerns:

- Concern about the rent increase, expected to be £4, then £5 annually.
- Allotments are seen as hobbies that help counteract stress and social issues.
- Concerns over the financial impact on those with horses, as they face higher costs for feed and farriers, as well as multiple plots.
- Many plot holders are pensioners or on benefits, raising affordability concerns.
- Questions on how the rental income from allotments will be used.
- Allotments are used to grow food for families, with surplus sometimes donated to foodbanks.
- The rent increase is expected to negatively impact families and others.
- Site conditions criticised, including issues with rats, pigeons, dumping, and the impact of recent work on water systems and roadways.

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- Residents fear the Council may be looking to run down the allotments and sell the land for housing.
- Concern that rent increases will lead plot holders to give up their plots, leaving the Council with vacant plots to manage.
- Previous promises from the Clerk that rents wouldn't increase was mentioned.
- Residents state that those with more plots or livestock would face greater financial burdens, and they are doing Council a favour having the plots.
- Clarification sought on the use of water rates, previously paid separately.
- Criticism that the Council has not acted on the building by a neighbouring house onto their allotment plot, which could raise a higher rent.

In direct response to questions, it was clarified that:

- Water costs are covered by the Council.
- Money from increased fees will be reinvested into the allotment budget.
- Overgrown rented plots will be addressed, and unrented plots will be prepared using rental income.
- Legal fees for pursuing rent from a house built on allotment land would outweigh the potential gain.

The Chair invited the Executive Officer/RFO to speak. In addition to the report that supported the agenda and recommendations, the Executive Officer spoke as summarised, a report of commentary was tabled.

- A refute that the Council wants to run allotments into the ground and sell the land for housing. But that the Council aims to improve allotments and make them self-sufficient, with incoming funds contributing more effectively to outgoing costs.
- Capital spending on allotments has been significant, despite budget priorities elsewhere, focusing on roadways, water systems, and tap upgrades.
- Major projects are still pending including the Nursery Park Water System and roadway improvements at Woodhorn Road, Seaton Hirst, and High Market, as well as boundary fence works across several sites.
- An Allotment Officer has been appointed, making progress on improvements and managing historical issues.
- Positive developments include signed tenancy agreements, enforcement of rules, and scheduled inspections, leading to positive feedback from allotment holders.
- Since 2017, around £348k has been spent on allotments, while income from all sites over the same period was only £50k.
- Prior to this year, ATC received only £7.50 per plot, with additional rent held by the allotment association for maintenance and management. The rent set in 2013 did not increase with inflation, as expected, and there is no formal record of this being brought to the Council.
- The Council is required to review rents annually to comply with financial management, legal, and governance standards, though this does not necessarily mean rents must increase each year.
- The Accounts and Audit Regulations emphasise sound financial management and internal controls, ensuring that allotments do not strain other resources.
- The Council has the power to manage allotments and adjust rent levels to cover associated costs, ensuring rents are fair in relation to market conditions and upkeep costs.

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- The current report proposes a manageable adjustment to allotment rents, not addressing past rent freezes but offering gradual increases over five years, with a cap of £5, to provide tenants with security.
- The lowest tolerable rent increase is proposed for this year, considering social and political factors, while addressing discrepancies in rents at Nursery Park.
- If rents on Council-managed sites remain much lower than those on association-managed sites, there is a risk that associations may opt to hand management back to the Council, diminishing the value of volunteer efforts, and putting further strain on the Council.
- The estimated cost of pending capital works is nearly £40k, with funds required either from increased allotment rents, raising the precept, or cutting the budget in other discretionary areas.
- The proposed approach seeks to balance the need for improvements with financial sustainability, ensuring that allotment rents contribute adequately without placing undue pressure on other budget areas or taxpayers.
- The Allotment Officer is responsible for managing allotments, progressing capital improvements, and bringing disused plots back into use, which requires an appropriate budget.
- Adjustments to allotment rents are aimed at maintaining and improving facilities while keeping them manageable for tenants.
- Officers have the interests of the sustainability of allotment sites as a priority.

It was **AGREED** to bring **FGS24/045 ALLOTMENT RENT INCREASE** forward due to the public present.

The Chair asked if members of the public would respect that this was now the part of the meeting where Cllrs had the opportunity to debate.

**FGS24/040 ALLOTMENT RENT INCREASE**

Following extensive discussion and consideration of public comments, it was **AGREED** to **DEFER FGS24/045 ALLOTMENT RENT INCREASE** until after a consultation with allotment holders, which would be achieved following an agreement to terms of reference for this purpose.

The proposal to defer was proposed and seconded. The voting results were as follows:

- In favour of deferral: 9
- Against deferral: 1
- Abstentions: 1

Cllr Caroline Ball left the meeting at 19:12.

Cllr Lynne Grimshaw made a closing statement regarding council procedures. She emphasised that in future meetings, all Council members need to thoroughly read the reports sent to them prior to the meetings. This practice would enable councillors to answer questions more effectively, come to proper decisions based on full information, and avoid putting Officers in the position of being "on the spot" during meetings. Cllr Grimshaw stressed that this approach would lead to more informed discussions and decision-making processes in future council meetings.

Allotment Officer Alan Bunker left the meeting at 19:31.

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**FGS24/041 MINUTES OF LAST MEETING**

It was **AGREED to RECEIVE** and **SIGN** as a true record, the minutes of the meeting held on Tuesday 9<sup>th</sup> July 2024.

**FGS24/042 CLERK AND OFFICER UPDATES**

The following update was **RECEIVED**. In view of the lengthy debate, members were encouraged to send any questions on the report to officers.

***Allotments (General)***

First recycling day at North Seaton Colliery, with assistance from plot holders, metals were collected and recycled. We hope to roll this out at Nursery Park next.

Plans to trial our first glass collection at Nursery Park in October with assistance from NCC, plot holders will be advised on the weekend before the collection, I will be on site on the following Monday to dispose of any glass collected from each plot. We will look to roll this out across all sites in the future if the Nursery Park trial is successful.

Contact made with a regional company with regards to recycling window frames, minimum of 10 frames to be collected free of charge, these must be deglazed. Windowpanes to be recycled at the Suez site with the use of the Town Council van and permit obtained, however there is a limit, further research to be carried out. We hope to trial this at our North Seaton site in November/December.

We would like to have a glass, metal, and window frame collection once per site each year. We hope to reduce the amount of waste going to landfill.

Locks are now on the Nursery Park gates, I have visited the site on a few occasions, only one occasion whereby the gates were left open.

Hedge cutting is in full swing at Woodhorn Road, on walkabouts it has been noted that hedges are more than 10ft tall, these will be cut back in September after bird nesting season has finished. I have already had positive comments about the work.

New locks installed on the Woodhorn road emergency gates, Northumberland Fire and rescue have 2 copies.

New plot holders at HEE, massive improvements already with weeds, new gates and fences erected.

Work has now been completed on the Hirst East End site; we hope to get the plot allocated asap. Further work on the site to be completed on our allotment action week.

***ATC Neighbourhood Services***

***Bus Shelters*** - Work to install new seating will take place this week with new seating at two shelters on Briardene (Campion Way and Alderwood).

***Public Seats*** – a number of seats have been painted and repaired during the summer.

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**Play Areas** – Vandalism at Alexandra Road Play Area – currently closed due to damage to soft pour. CCTV coverage passed to Police. Sarah has commenced an insurance claim. Damage and wear and tear to other equipment during summer season which NSO's have addressed.

**Station Road Planting** – Work taking place this week to planting, commence some pruning for the winter season.

**Flower Towers & Planters** – New winter planting will be installed by Wansbeck Garden Centre in early October.

**Bulb Planting & Wildflower Schemes** – meeting with our contractor WL Straughan and NCC staff, on 23 September, to look at 7 potential bulb planting sites across the town, thank you to members for their suggestions, and wildflower planting scheme at the Football Club.

**Allotment Action Week** – NSO will support this w/c 16 September.

**Bus Shelter Action Week** – NSO will lead on this w/c 30 September – deep clean of shelters around the town.

### **Projects**

#### **Ashington Memorial Garden**

Meetings have taken place with Sarah & Stephen, Rachael & Karen, of NCC, regarding proposed connectivity works as part of the redevelopment of the Wansbeck Square area. The aim is to enhance access, visibility, and the overall aesthetic of the memorial garden linking to the new development.

Work requested to include.

- New robust paving and associated works from new public realm, from existing Memorial recognising conflicts after 1945 and around existing War Memorial, to current entrance to the Memorial Garden on Kenilworth Road. This will create a smooth and durable connection between the newly developed public realm and the Memorial Garden.
- Resurface of existing Resin Bonded Gravel path around Garden the area which will be accessible and attractive, enhancing the visitor experience while maintaining the natural charm of the garden.
- Tidy & Reduction of North and South border hedging to approximately 1.5m in height and East border hedging (Next to Wansbeck Square) to 1m in height.
- New planting around Memorial recognising conflicts after 1945 (as part of connectivity to new public realm).
- The introduction of new plants in the two borders near the east border, as well as refreshed planting around the memorial recognising post-1945 conflicts, will beautify the space while considering the existing tree canopy. This will soften the transition between the garden and surrounding spaces, providing a more cohesive environment.
- Refresh and Improvements to two borders that adjoin Kenilworth Road. Enhancing the planting in these borders will create a welcoming entrance to the garden, improving its visual appeal from Kenilworth Road and making the memorial more engaging for passersby.

Stephen is attending Ashington RBL meeting on 11<sup>th</sup> September to discuss the proposals.

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

Funding applications have been sent and we are awaiting a number of replies from local trusts. £13,000 committed to the project, to date. Thank you to all six NCC County Councillors for their support. The funding target is approximately £20,000. The next Steering Group meeting is on 11<sup>th</sup> September.

***Ashington Community Woods Improvements***

The first Steering Group meeting of the Ashington Community Woods Improvements Project will take place on Thursday 3<sup>rd</sup> October, at Ashington Town Hall.

The formation of a steering group, made up of users of the woodland (FACWs / Ashington Running Club / Park Run / NCC Officers), to discuss and plan improvements and for the Town Council to assist in developing external funding bids with partners, as and when required. The initial focus on addressing drainage issues, improving the Miners' Meadow area and looking to increase positive usage of the woodland through developing walking trails etc.

***Skate Park Project***

A meeting took place in July with Shred the North, who are the leading skating organisation in the NE and who are working with Blyth Town Council on their proposed new skate park. Sharon and I have visited the site in Blyth. Work with Bothal Ward Councillors in moving forward giving consideration to any possible location and design.

***Town Twinning Update***

Work is continuing for Town Twinning Civic Day on Friday 25<sup>th</sup> October, which members are all invited to attend, more details will follow at next meeting.

***Events and Engagement***

***Hirst Family Fun Day and Walking Footie – Wednesday 3rd July 2024***

The event was well attended and featured various activities. ATC communications and engagement officer hosted a tote bag decorating activity, where over 20 bags were made and taken home. The event was also attended by Councillors Marjorie Chambers, Gemma Hemsley, and Civic Head Councillor Caroline Ball.

Both parents and local residents appreciated having such a fantastic event in their community, especially enjoying the free activities provided. With it being the summer school holidays, this was a great opportunity to entertain the children.

The walking football festival was a tremendous success, raising £2,109.50 for the British Heart Foundation and the Stephen Carey Fund.

Ashington Town Council supported the event with a £2,000 contribution, which covered activities such as first aid, room hire, and 3G pitch hire.

[Ashington Town Council](http://www.ashingtontowncouncil.gov.uk)

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***Summer Activities on Tuesday Market***

Pride Action North, Northumberland Wildlife Trust, Mortal Fools, BREAK.NE, and Central Northumberland Family Hubs all played a role in participating in a lively summer activity schedule at Ashington Market.

Mortal Fools' animation workshop was particularly popular, and councillors can watch the final clip on the ATC YouTube channel under the title "Tuesday Market Community" [Tuesday Market Community \(youtube.com\)](#)

The sessions ran from 10am to 2pm and were well attended, with both adults and children participating in various crafts and activities, including breakdancing workshops. The first session, hosted by Pride Action North, attracted over 40 adults and children throughout the day, a much better turnout than the Saturday activities held last summer.

The budget for the activities was set at £2,000, but the total cost ended up being just £910.00. Both Pride Action North and Central Northumberland Family Hubs offered their services free of charge.

Additionally, NCC provided two market stalls for each session at no cost, and Northern Carpet Supplies donated vinyl for the breakdancing workshops free of charge.

Due to the popularity of the summer activity sessions plans are already underway for October Half Term, where it was agreed by the Youth Advisory Committee to arrange to have four market stalls at the Tuesday market on 29<sup>th</sup> October, these will facilitate Halloween crafts for children during the half term break. There are also plans to have a Halloween Trick or Treat Trail that same week and we already have 21 shops signed up to the Trail.

***Free Swim Sessions***

The free swim sessions agreed and funded by the Youth Advisory Committee have been hugely successful seeing 37 adults and children attend the first session on Saturday 17<sup>th</sup> August. A fantastic result considering the sessions were only advertised three days previously. Another 60 adults and children at the second session on Saturday 23<sup>rd</sup> August, with final week to be updated.

Plans are already in place to organise free swimming for the October Half Term.

***Small Grant Fund***

The third round of the small grant fund was launched on Monday 2<sup>nd</sup> September 2024. The closing date for the fund is Friday 27<sup>th</sup> September with decisions being made in the October Finance and General Services meeting on Tuesday 8<sup>th</sup> October 2024.

[Ashington Town Council](#)

***Opportunities Fair***

The communication and engagement officer will be attending an Opportunity Fair on Monday 16<sup>th</sup> September at the Hirst Welfare.

Sharon will be present at the Fair to recruit volunteers to help in the planning, organising and delivering of ATC town events.

Sharon will also take the opportunity to promote the Youth Forum.

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The event organised by Northumberland Communities Together, bringing together employers looking to hire, volunteer groups looking to recruit and training providers.

***News Items***

There have been so many news stories since the last FGS Meeting. Members were shared the headlines and links <https://www.ashingtontowncouncil.gov.uk/news/>

Members also received data relating to posts on Facebook, which were most popular from a sharing and comments perspective.

**FGS24/043 BUDGET AND EXPENDITURE 2024/25**

***a) Updated Budget Report***

It was **AGREED to RECEIVE** the updated budget report. There were no questions asked of the Responsible Financial Officer (RFO).

The RFO advised that with the permission of the Chair, a half-year review would be placed on the agenda of the September Full Council meeting. This would highlight the Council's spending against the budget, calculating any expected underspend.

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

It was **AGREED to RECEIVE** a schedule of accounts paid and to be paid; accounts paid were **ENDORSED** and those to be paid since 1<sup>st</sup> July 2024 were **AGREED**

**FGS24/044 ANNUAL GRANTS 2024/25**

***a) Feedback from Annual Grant Applicants***

Feedback from two Annual Grant Applicants was **RECEIVED**.

The committee received feedback from two Annual Grant Applicants regarding the current grant aid process.

Members discussed the benefit of receiving feedback, although challenging, and also the very difficult decisions the Council has to make when agreeing grant aid.

It was agreed that changes could be made to the process, and also it might be appropriate to introduce an upper cap on awards. This would give applicants more realistic expectations and could alleviate the strain on ongoing financial support.

There was a focus in the current year on achieving a more equitable distribution of funding, but it was acknowledged that when project based, agreeing a contribution could be problematic.

The RFO assured members that groups that applied for project funding but did not receive the full amount have either secured additional funds or obtained support from other sources to ensure their projects move forward. Alternatively, they have sought permission to redirect the funds to a different purpose. The RFO emphasised that there is a clear paper trail, confirming that the grant money was either used for its intended purpose or was redirected with formal agreement.



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Some members commented that feedback suggested there was impropriety on the part of Cllrs, and this was strongly refuted.

Cllr Jim Lang left the meeting at 19:48.

***b) Enhancing Grant Allocation – Analysis of Feedback and Recommendations for Improvement***

The report from Executive Officer/RFO was **RECEIVED**. There were no questions on the proposed actions and recommendations.

In response to a question about grant aid, the Executive Officer informed the Council that discussions on the process could begin at any time. As long as the total grant budget is agreed upon during the budget process, any changes to the grant aid process, spending limits, or other details can be decided later. While the Council typically launches annual awards in April, this could be done later in the year. It's important to note that some groups are often awaiting decisions from other grant sources, and a later launch by ATC may allow these groups to have that information in hand.

It was noted that the Council could change the grant aid process, but this would not necessarily result in different amounts being awarded as members were mindful at the time that they took decisions based on the information available, and what they thought was fair.

***c) Response and Agreed Actions***

It was **AGREED** to respond to the applicants who provided feedback, that the Council **AGREED** to implement the recommendations in the report in advance of Grant Aid process next year.

Cllr Jim Lang entered the meeting at 19:53.

**FGS24/045 2025-26 LOCAL TRANSPORT PLAN PROGRAMME CONSULTATION**

***a) Request for Priorities and Guidance***

A letter requesting the Council's top three highways and transport priority issues for this area was **RECEIVED**.

***b) Last year's priorities and feedback***

A note of the priorities agreed by Ashington Town Council last year, and the feedback received from Northumberland County Council on these priorities was **RECEIVED**. One of the three priorities identified has been included in the programme has been **ACKNOWLEDGED**.

***c) Record of NCC requests contained in Directory Database***

The requests submitted by residents to NCC Highways throughout the year, which have been sorted into wards, alongside concerns raised directly with our Council was **RECEIVED and NOTED**.

Cllr Sophie Robinson left the meeting at 20:09.

***d) Highways and Transport Priority issues***

Following a discussion of the traffic and road issues in Ashington, it was **AGREED** to highlight the following as the Town Council's top three priorities:

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**1. A197 Morpeth Road**

Pedestrian safety is a concern when crossing the road, most specifically between the garage and KFC, this is due to the volume of traffic and the speed at which vehicles are travelling. The Council supports the public petition for a pelican crossing here.

**2. Newbiggin Road Roundabout** <https://maps.app.goo.gl/zpyLGE2BGSLMt4mF7>

The condition of the road entering and exiting at all four directions is in serious need of repair.

**3. Highfield Drive** <https://maps.app.goo.gl/NHaqtKPsqRPi7V8p8>

The entirety of Highfield Drive is used as a rat run with a high volume of traffic travelling at excessive speeds.

**FGS24/046 PLANTERS AND HANGING BASKETS**

The Council reviewed the report on the Annual Floral Planting on Station Road and Station Bridge, focusing on hanging baskets and troughs. The current 3-year contract with Plantscape/Idverde Ltd, due to expire after the 2024 summer season, was discussed.

Key considerations included:

- The sustainability of the planting, noting that the floral displays require significant water and maintenance and do not align with the Council's focus on more sustainable planting.
- Resource implications, as maintaining these plantings requires around four hours of staff time weekly and over 1,000 litres of water, especially in hot weather.
- Issues with vandalism and damage to the plantings over the last three years, despite the introduction of a new CCTV system in the town centre.
- The planned redevelopment of Wansbeck Square provides an opportunity to include sustainable planting in future public realm designs. As well as the closeness of ongoing works to the current displays.

The Council agreed with the report's recommendation to not renew the annual floral planting contract at this time. It was decided to focus on sustainable planting initiatives instead, with a possibility of revisiting the issue after the redevelopment of Wansbeck Square.

**It was AGREED** not to renew the floral planting contract.

**FGS24/047 TOWN AND PARISH COUNCIL CONFERENCE**

It was **AGREED** that Cllr Pauline Thompson and Cllr Louis Brown would attend the Town and Parish Council Autumn Conference that will take place on Thursday 3rd October 2024 at County Hall, from 5pm until 8pm

**FGS24/048 DATE, TIME, AND VENUE FOR THE NEXT MEETING**

Tuesday 15<sup>th</sup> October 2024, 6:00pm, Council Chamber. **Meeting ended 20:15pm**