

ASHINGTON TOWN COUNCIL

Minutes of the Full Council Meeting held at 7:00pm on Thursday 17 December 2020, on-line via Zoom.

PRESENT:

Councillors:	Mark Purvis (Chair)	Eleanor Armstrong
	Victor Bridges	Marjorie Chambers
	Nicola Chambers	Avril Chisholm
	Matthew Cuthbert	Stephen Fenwick
	Brian Gallacher	Lynne Grimshaw
	Jim Lang	Liam Lavery
	Pauline Thompson	Bob Walkinshaw

IN ATTENDANCE:

Mike Slaughter – Town Clerk & Responsible Finance Officer
Sharon Parmley – Senior Administration Officer (minute taking)
Members of the Public – 2

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION.

Member of the public, Mr McGregor attended the meeting and asked the following questions;

1. *Why does the Town Council think reducing the number of parking spaces in the Laburnum Terrace is necessary, how it helps businesses in town to thrive offering services and employment opportunities to local residents and how it fits in with a wider review of parking provision in the town.*

2. *Specifically what does the council think of the fact that residents of properties very near to the car park are not able to purchase a residents parking permit although they have used that parking space for several years and there is ample space there outside business hours.*

On behalf of the Town Council, the Town Clerk explained that the Acacia Terrace residents parking proposals and consultation had been undertaken by Northumberland County Council (NCC) further to a request by Councillor Tom Wilson, the Northumberland County Council member for the Central Ward.

The Town Clerk informed Mr McGregor that on behalf of the Town Council, he had expressed concerns to the Highways Programme Team that not all local residents in Laburnum Terrace and no local businesses had been consulted or made aware of the proposals as expected. This was a concern, particularly given that the parking bays had for many years primarily and historically been used by visitors and shoppers accessing services on Laburnum Terrace shops.

Members were also aware that there had also been an expectation that all resident parking proposals in the vicinity of the town centre were to be held in abeyance until the strategic review of town-wide parking had been assessed.

The Town Clerk informed the meeting that, further to discussion, Cllr. Wilson had agreed that Laburnum Terrace businesses should be given the opportunity to respond and that their views should be taken into consideration. Regrettably, it appeared as if this had not happened and NCC had subsequently approved the residents parking scheme in response to consultation with Acacia Terrace residents only and a limited number of residents on Laburnum Terrace.

Mr McGregor thanked the Town Clerk for the detailed response and outline of the background; he also expressed disappointment and frustration with the NCC decision, lack of transparency and limited responses from residents on such an important matter.

The Town Clerk suggested that Cllr. Wilson may wish to formally respond to the questions raised and to look into the consultation process.

Mr McGregor agreed to this course of action.

C20/911 1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE.

Apologies for absence were received from Cllrs. Lawrence Henderson, Kris Lavery, Ken Parry and Tom Wilson.

C20/912 2. DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS.

There were no disclosures of interest from members present.

C20/913 3. MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING.

The minutes of the last meeting held on the Tuesday 6 October 2020, were agreed and signed as a true record.

C20/914 4. MATTERS ARISING FROM THE LAST MINUTES.

C20/905 4. NORTHUMBERLAND RAIL LINE.

The Town Clerk informed members that the consultation process had now been completed and thanked all Councillors for taking the time to complete the consultation online questions. The Town Clerk reported that a decision regarding future staged funding was likely early in the New Year.

C20/906 5. REPORT OF THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL.

Ashington Entrance Features – Cllr. Gallacher thanked all members and staff involved in the Entrance Feature project and reported that he had received excellent feedback from residents.

Remembrance Sunday – Cllr. Gallacher thanked all involved in the organisation of the Remembrance Sunday Service (8 November). Due to Covid-19 the Service had been recorded in advance of the day and shown on the Town Council's website and social media.

C20/915 5. REPORT OF THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL.

Ashington Entrance Features – Work to install the two new entrance features was completed in November (located on the B1334 (North Seaton roundabout entrance) and A196 (Stakeford Bridge entrance). The features appear to be generally well received by residents.

Bywell Road Play Area – new swings and safety surface works were now completed.

Paddock Wood Play Area & Park – 3 heavy-duty cast-iron bins have been installed around the Paddock Wood Play Area. A new seat had also been installed for parents supervising children. The vandalism issues are continuing and these issues have again been raised with Northumbria Police and Northumberland Fire & Rescue Service.

Wansbeck Riverside Park - The new piece of equipment for Wansbeck Riverside Park 'the Mars Rover' had been installed earlier this month. The new equipment supported wider improvements that were taking place to the County Council's strategic park.

Remembrance Day 8 November - Due to Covid-19 restrictions the Remembrance Day Service was significantly different this year. Town Council staff supported the Ashington Branch of the Royal British Legion and Ashington Churches Together in providing a pre-recorded service (led by the Reverend Chris Grocock) which was available to view on Remembrance Day via the Town Council's website and social media platforms. The Royal British Legion were very grateful for the support of the Town Council in organising the Service.

Ashington Christmas Lights - The Christmas Lights were installed on 24 November and included 8 new lighting features this year, designed by Ashington schoolchildren, through the Town Council's annual competition. The features were placed on the one-way section of Station Road. The Leader expressed thanks for the support of the town's schools in running the competition.

Winter Support Fund - The Town Council had made grants available to organisations working to address need in the town during the winter months and Christmas period.

Northumberland Rail Line

The Town Council had actively encouraged residents to take part in the consultation on the reintroduction of a rail passenger service in Northumberland, led by the County Council. The consultation was promoted on the town council website and social media up to the closing date last week.

C20/916 6. ANNUAL GOVERNANCE & ACCOUNTABILITY RETURN 2019/20.

The Town Clerk reported that the Auditor's Report on the 2019/20 Accounting Statements and Annual Governance return had now been received.

Members were informed that, based on the External Auditors review, the information in the annual return was in accordance with proper practices and no matters had come to attention giving cause for concern that the relevant legislation and regulatory requirements had not been met.

Cllr. Grimshaw thanked the Town Clerk, on behalf of the Town Council, for the thorough and detailed work undertaken in managing the Town Council's financial accounts and systems.

Resolved:

That further to the completion of the external audit review by PKF Littlejohn LLP of the Annual Governance & Accountability Return (AGAR) for Ashington Town Council for the year ended 31 March 2020,

Full Council resolve that:

- (i) The Annual Return for the financial year 2019/20, including the External Auditor report and certificate, be approved, and accepted,**
- (ii) The Council formally note that there were no matters giving cause for concern that relevant legislative and regulatory requirements had not been met; and that**
- (iii) The Council formally note that there was another matter not affecting the audit opinion, needing to be drawn to the attention of the Council in that:**

“it did not comply with Regulation 15 of the Accounts and Audit Regulations 2015, as amended by SI 2020/404 the Accounts and Audit (Coronavirus)(Amendment) Regulations 2020, as it failed to make proper provision during the year 2020/21 for the exercise of public rights, since the period for the exercise of public rights was less than 30 consecutive days in length. As a result, the Council must answer “No” to Assertion 4 of the Annual Governance Statement for 202/21 and ensure that it makes proper provision for the exercise of public rights during 2021/22.”

C20/917 7. TREE REPLACEMENT PROJECTS – SEATON WARD.

Cllr. Lang requested that this item be deferred to the next Finance and General Services Committee meeting in the new year.

C20/918 8. DEVELOPMENT OF THE TOWN COUNCIL HORTICULTURAL SERVICE.

The Town Clerk presented a detailed report providing members the full opportunity to consider and discuss the further options for the development and delivery of the Town Council’s in-house Horticultural Service.

The Town Clerk reminded members that, with effect from 1 April 2019 and in accordance with a 5-year (2019-2024) Neighbourhood Services Partnership Agreement signed with Northumberland County Council (NCC) on 9 May 2019, Ashington Town Council became directly responsible for all floral presentations in the town, apart from some seasonal bedding displays within Hirst Park.

Members were reminded that further to the commissioning of a full condition survey and appraisal report for floral displays and presentations, the Town Council Finance & General Services Committee considered the full options available for the delivery of horticultural services in the town. Further to full discussion, Finance & General Services Committee had resolved to:

- (i) Formally accept the details and findings of the Station Road Condition Survey and Option Appraisal Report as the basis for developing a formal work improvement programme for floral presentation and displays,*

(ii) Seek to appoint a Full-Time Horticultural Officer, initially on a two-year fixed-term contract, to oversee and manage all aspects of the floral improvement work and all other botanical and horticultural issues for the Council; and that

(iii) the funding for the improvement work and resource costs, including the new employee, be met from the existing Environmental Enhancements budget and be discussed as part of the 2019-21 budget process.

Members were reminded that, further to a full recruitment and interview process, Richard Timson was duly appointed to the position of Horticultural Officer initially on a two-year fixed-term contract and commenced work for the Town Council on 6 January 2020.

Due to the timing of the officer appointment and the major work involved in the re-design and planting of Station Road, it was agreed at that time that the 2020/21 maintenance service continue to be provided and delivered by NCC via a further service Level Agreement (SLA). Members had agreed that the SLA would run for the inclusive period of 17 February until 30 October 2020 and included the provision of a seasonal NCC employee, hired vehicle, all tools and equipment and the supply and planting of all identified and agreed floral displays at smaller locations.

Members were reminded that at a Finance & General Services Committee meeting held on 1 December 2020, they considered the need to address the funding and provision of the Horticultural Service moving forward with a view to properly considering the option of a full in-house service. Members were supportive of that option.

The Town Clerk reported that it had been clear that elected members wished to see the development of the service and floral presentations and continual improvements as a key part of the Town Council's service provision moving forward.

Members were reminded that the SLA with NCC dealt primarily with essential seasonal maintenance and required watering of all presentations including all planters. The Town Clerk reported that while the SLA had operated as agreed, it was nevertheless a sizable sum from the Town Council budget and did present some limitations; namely that the Town Council had little control over the appointment and were subject to NCC operating hours that did not always sit with the town council operational requirements.

The Town Clerk reported that the appointed officers had also been NCC general street cleansing operatives with limited horticultural

knowledge and experience; while they had worked to the best of their abilities, it did mean that additional supervisory work was required. The Chair advised that there was an onus on the Council to review and examine all SLA's for both value for money and service provision and that there was also a requirement to look at all options and to properly examine both cost and service benefits.

As indicated to the Council, there was a clear option to look to bring the employee element of the current SLA in-house through the possible creation of a Trainee Horticultural position within the Town Council. Members agreed that the option of looking at an apprenticeship or trainee role was something that the Council had positively mentioned on previous occasions but had not been in a position to properly consider.

Members were reminded that the Horticultural Officer position was currently on a two-year fixed term contract and was due to end in December 2021. Members accepted that any decisions regarding in-house service and appointment of a trainee firstly required that the current contract of the Horticultural Officer and available options be properly reviewed.

The Chair advised that any decisions made at this stage would be in-principle only and would of course be subject to all subsequent financial considerations in the preparation of the 2021/22 budget and a separate resolution of the Council.

Resolved:

1.1 That: That Full Council agree “in principle” that:

- (i) As part of the 2021/22 budget process, the position of Horticultural Officer and the current contract terms and duration be properly reviewed,**
- (ii) As part of the 2021/22 budget process, due consideration be given to the creation of a new post of Trainee Horticultural Officer,**
- (iii) The Council look to renew and negotiate the Service Level Agreement for Horticultural Service with Northumberland County Council based on vehicle hire and related costs only, together with the maintenance of specified and agreed locations;**
- (iv) The Town Clerk be requested to prepare detailed costings for consideration of the Council as part of the 2021/22 budget and precept setting.**

C20/919 9. DATE, TIME AND VENUE FOR THE NEXT MEETING.

The next meeting of the Full Council was agreed for 7:00pm, Tuesday 26 January 2021. (on-line via Zoom).

The meeting closed at 8:45pm