

AGENDA 7, Enc ii) ASHINGTON TOWN COUNCIL, DRAFT Minutes of the Combined Full Council meeting, and Finance and General Services Committee held at 6:00pm on Tuesday 10th June 2025, at Ashington Town Hall, Council Chamber, 65 Station Road, Ashington, NE63 8RX

CLLRS PRESENT:

Cllr Mark Purvis (Chair), Cllr Jim Lang, Cllr Paul Wright, Cllr Steven Roberts, Cllr David Coyle, Cllr Caroline Ball, Cllr Pauline Thompson, Cllr Bob Walkinshaw, Cllr Lynne Grimshaw, Cllr Marjorie Chambers, Cllr Karl Green, Cllr Scott Amery, Cllr Victor Bridges, Cllr Glynn Davies, Cllr Louis Brown, Cllr Kerry Davison, Cllr John Tully

ALSO, IN ATTENDANCE

Sarah Eden – Executive Officer, Gary Holmes – Administration Assistant and Alan Bunker – Allotments Officer

FC2526/022 WELCOME BY THE CHAIR

Welcomed by Cllr Mark Purvis.

FC2526/023 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Cllr John Allen.

FC2526/024 DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS

Cllrs Mark Purvis, Jim Lang, Louis Brown and Marjorie Chambers declared an interest in FC2526/010 ALLOTMENT RENT REVIEW FOR DIRECTLY MANAGED SITES

FC2526/025 DISPENSATIONS

Cllr Marjorie Chambers requested a dispensation to discuss FC2526/010 ALLOTMENT RENT REVIEW FOR DIRECTLY MANAGED SITES

FC2526/026 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

There were eleven members of the public present.

FC2526/027 DRAFT MINUTES OF PREVIOUS FULL COUNCIL MEETING

The minutes of the last Full Council meeting held on 20th May 2025 were **RECEIVED** and **AGREED**.

FC2526/028 DRAFT MINUTES OF THE CLIMATE CHANGE AND ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE

The minutes of the last Climate Change and Environment Committee meeting held on 18th February 2025 were **RECEIVED** and **AGREED**.

FC2526/029 REPORT FROM THE CIVIC HEAD OF ASHINGTON (CLLR PAULINE THOMPSON)

A verbal report from Cllr Thompson was **RECEIVED**.

Cllr Pauline Thompson reported on her recent community engagement activities. She had planned to attend Full Circle Food's "Scone for a Song" event; however, this was cancelled, and she was unable to participate.

On Friday, Cllr Thompson visited Heart of the Hirst where she met with the Blossoming Communities craft group, which maintains close associations with Escape Family Support. The visit proved to be productive, with Cllr Thompson spending approximately two hours engaging in discussions with group members and participating in their craft activities. She reported that it was a positive and worthwhile day of community engagement.

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FC2526/030 FINANCIAL OVERVIEW 2024/25

A financial report for year ending March 2025, including 2025/26 budget overview was **RECEIVED** having been sent out with papers.

The Responsible Financial Officer (RFO) presented the Financial Overview Report as part of the Annual Governance and Accountability Return for 2024/25.

The RFO highlighted that the Council ended the year with a small deficit of £2,148, reflecting careful management of resources despite pressures from pay awards, insurance premiums, ICT, and technical adjustments to the Partnership Agreement with NCC.

Efficiencies had been achieved by bringing work in-house, reducing reliance on contractors, and implementing improved procurement practices. Some budgets were overspent, while others delivered savings, with the overall position regarded as sound and resilient.

Reserves had been reviewed and re-allocated, with £72,161 earmarked for key priorities including play areas, allotments, youth, and memorials, alongside £16,665 ward funds carried forward. In addition, the Council retains access to external funding streams such as the Scottish Power Renewables Windfarm Fund.

Looking ahead, the RFO noted that the 2025/26 budget had been set prudently, balancing modest precept increases with investment in staff, climate commitments, youth initiatives, and community safety.

The report confirmed that the Council remains in a strong financial position, with a forward-looking approach to reserves and a continuing commitment to transparency, accountability, and value for money.

There were no questions.

FC2526/031 UPDATED FINANCIAL AND MANAGEMENT RISK ASSESSTMENT, JUNE 2024

The updated documents were **RECEIVED** and **APPROVED**.

Cllr Lynne Grimshaw emphasised the critical importance of monitoring items marked in red on the risk assessment due to the significant risks they represent. When Cllr Paul Wright enquired about the frequency of reviewing high-risk items, the RFO explained that report is presented to Council each quarter but reviewed continually. Actions would be scheduled according to agreement by Council when received. The RFO noted that Cllrs could review many changes over the RFO's appointment with risk that have been identified and either reduced or removed.

Cllr Scott Amery asked about the possibility on an investment account. The RFO confirmed that enquiries have been made with CCLA Public Sector Investment Fund and time permitting this would be brought back to Council. The RFO also noted that having a payment card was another action to be taken forward to avoid officers paying for things and having to be reimbursed.

FC2526/032 INTERNAL AUDIT 2024/25

- a) The Annual Internal Audit Report for year ending March 2025 was **RECEIVED** and **APPROVED** with no matters brought for action.

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- b)** The Audit Report Checklist was **RECEIVED** and **APPROVED** with no matters brought for attention.

FC2526/033 ANNUAL GOVERNANCE AND ACCOUNTABILITY RETURN (AGAR) YEAR ENDING MARCH 2025

The RFO advised that any newly elected Cllr could if they thought appropriate **ABSTAIN** from agreeing the accounts for the previous year which they had not been part of in full.

- a)** The Chair read out each of the statements in the Annual Governance Statement, to which Members **AGREED**. The Chair and Executive Officer both **SIGNED** the document.
- b)** The End of Year Bank Reconciliation was **RECEIVED** and **APPROVED**.
- c)** The Accounting Statement was **RECEIVED** and **APPROVED**.
- d)** The submission of the AGAR for year ending 31st March 2025 was **APPROVED** for submission and to be published on the Town Council website.

FC2526/034 NOTICE OF PUBLIC RIGHTS AND PUBLICATION OF UNAUDITED ANNUAL GOVERNANCE AND ACCOUNTABILITY RETURN

The dates set for the period for the exercise of public rights were **APPROVED** as commencing on Thursday 12th June 2025 and ending on Wednesday 23rd July 2025.

FC2526/035 INTERNAL AUDIT 2025/26

It was **AGREED** to re-appoint Mrs Susan Saunders as the Internal Auditor for 2025/26, and it was **AGREED** that the Executive Officer sign the terms of engagement.

FC2526/036 GOVERNANCE

It was **AGREED** for Cllrs Kerry Davison and Caroline Ball to be responsible for undertaking routine checks.

Cllr John Tully asked if it had to be a specific Councillor, Sarah said two councillors would be best and they could not be signatories.

FINANCE AND GENERAL SERVICES COMMITTEE

FC2526/037 ELECTION OF CHAIR

It was **AGREED** to appoint Cllr Lynne Grimshaw as chair.

FC2526/038 ELECTION OF VICE-CHAIR

It was **AGREED** to appoint Cllr Louis Brown as Vice-Chair.

FC2526/039 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

There were thirteen members of the public present.

Davy Street (Site Representative for Woodhorn Road Allotments) expressed appreciation to the councillors and Sarah for organising the allotment liaison meeting, describing it as productive. They presented a book to the council demonstrating the financial difficulties faced by allotment holders, illustrating how they must defer purchases of basic items such as hen food until they

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can afford it. They also challenged comments by Cllrs suggesting that those who cannot afford the costs should vacate their allotments.

Another member of the public raised concerns about her allotment situation, explaining that due to physical limitations she can only manage plant pots and inquired whether this would result in eviction.

The Executive Officer responded that while the preference is for active cultivation and the agreement stipulates that two-thirds of the plot should be cultivated, the plot holder was encouraged to discuss the matter with the Allotment Officer, Alan Bunker separately to find a suitable resolution.

FC2526/040 URGENT ITEM – ASHINGTON TOWN FORUM

It was **AGREED** that Cllrs Kerry Davison, Pauline Thompson, Jim Lang and David Coyle be appointed to the Ashington Town Forum as representatives of the Council.

FC2526/041 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

It was **AGREED** to **APPROVE** the minutes of the meeting held on Tuesday 8th April 2025 as a true record.

FC2526/042 CLERK AND OFFICER UPDATES

Neighbourhood Services

Workers Memorial Project

The Workers Memorial project in St Johns Churchyard was successfully completed in time for Workers Memorial Day on 28th April. Despite the timing coinciding with a period of heightened sensitivity, we maximised publicity opportunities when appropriate, and the project has been very well received by the community.

Ashington Cricket Club Project

The Ashington Cricket Club project was a great success, as evidenced by the video compilation. Mark and Ryan provided invaluable assistance throughout this project, and Steve at the Cricket Club expressed considerable gratitude for the Council's involvement. Notably, the Council contributed time rather than financial resources to this project, which proved to be an effective approach.

In-House Planting Programme

Our decision to carry out planting in-house has been very well received. The planters and towers already look better than they ever have before, even prior to the plants coming into full bloom. We ordered the same quantity of plants as in previous years, and unexpected surplus plants have been strategically placed in other suitable locations throughout the town where ground conditions permitted.

Play Area Maintenance

New signage will be installed by the end of this week, beginning of next at the latest. Scheduled repairs are planned for People's Park and Alexandra Road facilities.

At Paddock Wood play area, one piece of equipment has been removed due to a high risk rating that cannot be repaired. We will consider a replacement item for future budget

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consideration. Our objective is to transition towards conducting these asset inspections ourselves as soon as practicable.

Fleet Management Review

There is an urgent need to review our fleet arrangements and improve how this is presented and managed going forward. The Executive Officer needs to prioritise finding time to address this matter comprehensively.

Currently, we are hiring a small van from Northumberland County Council following the fire incident involving our electric vehicle. This arrangement is in addition to the flat bed vehicle that is included as part of our existing Partnership Agreement. The ideal solution would be to include both vehicles within the NCC arrangement, as they benefit from economies of scale through their fleet management that can be passed on to us. This approach would provide fully inclusive arrangements covering all insurance and associated costs. There are also vehicle requirements for the Allotment Officer addressed later in this report.

Green Lane Industrial Unit

Councillors have been made aware of the significant rent increase proposal for our Green Lane Industrial Estate unit, where both Neighbourhood Services Officers work from and have tools and equipment. The new landlord, Northmount Property, has proposed increasing the rent from £2,398 to £5,175 per annum. We have strong legal protections under our existing tenancy agreement and are under no obligation to accept this increase. A meeting with the landlord's agent has been proposed involving the Executive Officer, Mark Air, and Council chairs. The Chair and Vice Chair of both the Council and Finance and General Services Committee need to advise their availability for this meeting.

Play Areas and Recreation

North Seaton Colliery Play Area

The procurement process is being repeated. We anticipate the agreement of a supplier being presented to the July Finance and General Services meeting.

Play Area Lease Agreements

We have successfully completed lease agreements for play areas at Paddock Wood, Alexandra Road, People's Park, and North Seaton Colliery from Northumberland County Council. This was an ongoing priority from the Clerk's appointment as there were previously no legal agreements in place. Likewise, transfers from developers for Epsom Drive, Aintree Close, and Seaton Vale from December 2023.

The play area at Bywell Road was not included in the lease agreement and remains the responsibility of Northumberland County Council; it is not considered fit for purpose in its current condition. Officers and councillors are expected to meet to discuss the way forward, with a joint survey proposed to establish current usage and assess potential future development. Any assumption of responsibility by Ashington Town Council would require significant development investment by the owner to bring the facility to acceptable standards.

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Christmas Lights

Following a very successful Christmas Lights tender process, we have much to anticipate for both the switch-on event and throughout the Christmas period. The new lighting display will be of exceptional quality, and we have planned to bring forward the switch-on date by one week (Thursday 13th November) to maximise the benefit and enjoyment from the installation. YMCA is not available for inside activities, so Sharon is exploring alternatives.

Allotment Management Report

Staff Development and Equipment Challenges

Our Allotment Officer Alan has recently completed significant professional development training, including PA1 and PA6 certifications, bush cutter and strimming qualifications, Level 2 plumbing, and chainsaw and pole pruning certification; this is a huge achievement in such a short space of time and to be commended in terms of proactivity and the ability to make a practical difference on allotments. This investment in skills development demonstrates our commitment to professional service delivery.

However, we face significant operational challenges that prevent us from maximising the benefits of this training. The Allotment Officer currently operates without a dedicated service van, which severely limits the scope of work that can be undertaken. This constraint means that many practical tasks requiring equipment transportation cannot be completed efficiently or at all. Additionally, the current arrangement requires the officer to use their personal vehicle for site visits and equipment transport, with fuel costs being reclaimed as expenses - an arrangement that is both inefficient and places an unfair burden on the individual.

We urgently need to conduct a comprehensive review of our vehicle fleet, for Mark and Ryan also, to ensure proper utilisation of staff skills and training. A dedicated service vehicle for Alan would enable more effective site management, safe equipment transportation, and timely response to maintenance issues across all allotment sites. The Executive Officer will complete this asap for the first Personnel Committee meeting.

Recycling Initiatives and Waste Management

North Seaton Colliery

North Seaton Colliery continues to excel in their recycling programs. Both metal and UPVC collection days are now well-established and operating successfully. Building on this momentum, we are collaborating with Northumberland County Council (NCC) to introduce the first glass recycling day at North Seaton Colliery, scheduled for later in June. This initiative follows a successful trial at Nursery Park and represents a leap into recycling and an expansion of first trials.

Hirst East End

Hirst East End successfully launched their metal recycling program with encouraging results. The inaugural metal recycling days have already resulted in the removal of two trailer loads of metal from the site, significantly improving the site's appearance and safety. We plan to introduce UPVC recycling days at this location as our next initiative.

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Garden Waste Management

To address ongoing waste management challenges and reduce the risk of allotment fires, Alan has contacted NCC regarding the introduction of garden waste collection services (brown bin collection). We plan to trial this service initially at Nursery Park before potential rollout to other sites.

Wood Recycling Innovation

Alan has established contact with a wood recycling centre in Newcastle and plans to visit their facility to assess potential collaboration opportunities. Additionally, we are exploring the possibility of using a chipper on-site with designated collection days for plot holders to dispose of hedging and branches. This initiative would provide an environmentally responsible disposal method while creating useful wood chip material for pathway maintenance - representing a sustainable circular approach to waste management.

Site-Specific Issues and Management

Fire Safety Concerns

Several fires have been reported at Highmarket, all of which have been investigated. We have initiated contact with the Highmarket Allotment Association to arrange a meeting to discuss preventive measures and ongoing safety concerns. If supported we may agree a temporary ban on allotment fires on this site during the summer months, this will be discussed with the association. The time responding to complaints by Council staff, and Association volunteers, as well as the perceived inaction following years of concerns being raised by residents points to this being seriously considered.

Plot Management and Occupancy

While we have welcomed several new plot holders across all sites, the high turnover rate remains a significant concern requiring ongoing attention. To address plot availability and potentially reduce waiting times, we are reviewing plots to determine where subdivision into smaller, more manageable plots might be appropriate.

Infrastructure Maintenance

Extensive tap repairs have been completed at Seaton Hirst, which should reduce ongoing maintenance requirements. The systematic numbering of taps across the site continues, with completion targeted before winter returns. This numbering system will enable more efficient identification and resolution of frozen tap issues during the colder months.

Financial Management

Plot rental collection remains generally positive. One plot holder at Hirst East End has been served notice for non-payment, while all other plot holders at both Hirst East End and Nursery Park are current with their payments.

Rents for Woodhorn Road Allotment site are collected from 1st July, being the last in this annual cycle. This represents a significant administrative and financial impact, even with the new package.

Rents under any newly agreed rate will commence from January 2026 for North Seaton Colliery, April 2026 for Hirst East End and Nursery Park, and July 2026 for Woodhorn Road.

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Financial Systems

Scribe Accounts Implementation

We have successfully transitioned to the Scribe Accounts system. While there have been some initial teething problems, as noted from the VOIDS on the accounts schedule, this supported system offers significant advantages for user interchangeability and succession planning.

Crucially, it ensures that if the Responsible Financial Officer is unavailable, the accounts remain accessible and comprehensible to other authorised users.

Governance and Administration

Elections and New Council Induction

The recent elections and establishment of the new Council requires considerable administrative attention, resulting in substantial work for the Executive Officer to catch up over the coming months. The Executive Officer has prepared a questionnaire for new councillors to complete, designed to identify potential improvements to the induction process for future new members. This will be distributed in September following initial meetings and settling in period.

We greatly appreciate councillors' cooperation in establishing their official email addresses and will continue to provide support in this area, as effective digital communication significantly improves our operational efficiency.

Events and Engagement

Events and engagement activities provide excellent opportunities for Cllrs to meet with residents at Town Council organised events and those we work in partnership with. Sharon invites all members to these events, though with limited time available she cannot send repeat reminders. Any Councillor interested in attending future events would be most welcome and should contact Sharon.

Easter Half Term Free Swim Sessions

The Free Swim Initiative, launched in 2024 as part of the Youth Advisory Committees half term holidays, has shown encouraging participation rates.

The Free Swim Initiative was developed in collaboration with Places Leisure at Ashington Leisure Centre to encourage families with children to engage in swimming activities that promote both physical and mental wellbeing.

Program Objectives

1. Improve mental wellbeing through accessible physical activity
2. Reduce barriers to participation in swimming activities
3. Create a supportive environment for children and young people
4. Establish consistent attendance patterns and community engagement
5. Promote the health benefits of regular swimming

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Attendance for the Easter holiday period – total 143

16/04/2025	Wednesday	36
19/04/2025	Saturday	39
23/04/2025	Wednesday	33
26/04/2025	Saturday	35

Eco Fair

Ashington Town Council was pleased to hold the town's first-ever ECO Fair, on Friday 25th April at the Ashington Hirst Welfare Centre; this was an overwhelming success. It was a sunny day, and although well attended, numbers were not high. Nevertheless, the event achieved its aim of raising awareness about environmental issues and promoting sustainable solutions within the local community, attracting residents eager to learn about eco-friendly practices.

The enthusiasm from both participants and visitors truly showcased our community's commitment to the environment.

The ECO Fair featured an impressive lineup of nearly 30 exhibitors, including:

- **Ashington WI** offering clothing alterations and repairs
- **AkzoNobel Ashington** sharing their climate change initiatives
- **Bedlington and District Red Squirrel Group** promoting conservation efforts
- **Groundwork NE & Cumbria** providing information on their environmental projects

Visitors particularly enjoyed the interactive elements of the fair:

- **Northumberland Wildlife Trust's** wildflower seed bomb making workshop
- An outdoor art workshop with renowned environmental artist **James Brunt**
- **Cycle4Everyone's** free bicycle repair service

The event was further enhanced by a stellar musical lineup provided by Guerilla PA and Event Hire, featuring performances from local talents:

- Liam Carr
- Trey Jackson
- Charlie Whyte
- Jo McGarry
- Daniel Burnett

These performers entertained attendees throughout the day, creating a vibrant atmosphere despite the modest turnout.

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Local Produce Market

The Local Produce Market proved especially popular, with stalls offering:

- Northumberland Seaglass creations
- Locally produced honey from Hedgley Honey
- Handmade jewellery from Asma Begum
- Eco-friendly compost from Greenleaf Recycling Ltd

Educational Talks

Educational talks were also well-received by attendees:

- Doug Mitchley's session on conserving energy
- Dr. Wendy Fail's presentation on waste management across the North East

The council's free raffle, which offered prizes including Ninja Air Fryers, Russell Hobbs Slow Cookers, and Water Butts, was a highlight for many attendees.

A video capturing the day's activities, produced by Jimmy Fance from Luk Luk Productions, is available here; [Ashington Town Council](#)

Animating Ashington

Key Updates and Discussions from the meeting held on Thursday 1st May.

Seeding the Future Project Success James Brunt's large-scale artwork in People's Park has been a major success, featuring an 80-meter-wide installation that incorporated community input including conifers, a mining circle, ash trees, and football elements. The project attracted 100 visitors daily and has gained significant media attention with 12,000 Instagram views and BBC interest. Children who worked with James in schools visited the site with their parents during creation, creating strong community engagement.

Artwork Installations The group reviewed artwork panels created by local children, including town planning discussions and an Ashington montage. These will be installed around town at 10:00 and 11:00 (timing kept private for safeguarding), with school children and YMCA involved in the unveiling.

One Amazing Day Event (31st May) The event featured wrestling, acrobatics, vintage fairground attractions, and large-scale installations including a giant golden bird cage and hippopotamus. Mortal Fools provided activities with their youth theatre members participating.

Powering the Future (6th July) Plans are progressing for the Town Fair day featuring a pedal-powered "Horse Train" with 6 pedallers and a 60ft environmental education installation offering 6 daily shows for up to 30 children each. Planning is underway for the project's finale featuring a parade with the Stephenson Rocket, including dance school butterflies and stilt-walking performers. The parade will proceed along Station Road, along Park Road and into People's Park where it will join Ashington Community Fair.

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Legacy Planning A formal legacy event is planned for 7th July to gather feedback and discuss the programme's future impact. The group discussed continuing elements like a scaled-down parade for the Christmas lights switch-on and collecting feedback from participating schools.

Get Active Family Fun Day & Walking Football Festival

Event to be held on Saturday 2nd August

The event partially funded by Ashington Town Council will take place on Saturday 2nd August 2025, from 10:00 AM to 3:00 PM at the Hirst Welfare Centre. This free entry community event has evolved to focus on health and fitness themes, including mental health awareness.

Key Features

- **Walking Football Festival:** A charity tournament organised by Ashington Walking Football Groups
- **Traditional Sports Day:** Traditional games and activities for all the family
- **Health and Fitness Theme:** Activities and information promoting physical and mental wellbeing

Building on last year's event, there will be a focus to emphasise:

- Physical fitness activities for all ages and abilities
- Mental health awareness and support resources
- Community wellness initiatives
- Inclusive sports opportunities like walking football
- Family-oriented health and fitness activities

The event demonstrates Ashington's commitment to promoting community health, bringing together sport, wellness, and local pride in an accessible, welcoming environment.

Field of Remembrance

Field of Remembrance Project summary:

Overview Ashington Town Council has been invited by Northumbria Royal British Legion to participate in a regional North East Field of Remembrance initiative scheduled for late 2025.

Key Details The Field of Remembrance will be established on 31st October 2025, with a commemorative service on 1st November, followed by a two-week public viewing period. Councils across the North East are being asked to contribute commemorative items that clearly identify their community.

Council Actions The Communication and Engagement Officer is working with RBL Ashington Branch and Ashington WI to coordinate the development of a commemorative item.

Community Involvement Plan Working with Ashington WI and women across the town who are knitting poppies to create a wreath approximately 3 feet by 2 feet. The centre of the wreath will feature an engraved plaque from the town of Ashington.

Mark Air will make an A Frame stand for the wreath, which will fold flat for easy transportation.

Timeline and Resources The project spans from April to October 2025, with key milestones for outreach, progress review, and finalisation. Financial implications include materials, plaque, and

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transportation costs, though specific amounts are yet to be determined these should not exceed more than £200, which will be taken from the events and engagement budget.

Website and Social Media PR

The following items appeared on our website news page since the previous officers report. Members are reminded that we maintain active Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn pages to promote Council activities and engage with our community. You can read them in full by visiting the website.

<https://www.ashingtontowncouncil.gov.uk/news/>

Festive Lighting Contract Award 2025

The Council awarded the festive lighting contract to Blachere Illuminations UK Ltd following a comprehensive tender process. The contract included supply, installation, maintenance and emergency response services with an increased annual budget of £41,000.

North Seaton Colliery Play Area Tender

The Council invited experienced developers to design and install a new accessible play space at North Seaton Colliery. The two-stage procurement process was expected to conclude with supplier appointment in June 2025, this is delayed to July 2025.

Spring Displays

Vibrant spring displays brightened the town with daffodils, crocuses, and flower towers at Hirst Park and town entrances. A video captured by Ashington Camera Club showcased these seasonal scenes.

City Nature Challenge 2025 Participation

The Council promoted local participation in the global City Nature Challenge, encouraging residents to document wildlife sightings using the iNaturalist app between April 25-28.

LOVE Northumberland Awards 2025

The Council promoted applications for the 14th annual LOVE Northumberland Awards, celebrating environmental efforts across the county. The ceremony will be held on 10th July at The Alnwick Garden and it would be wonderful to see some Ashington groups represented.

Sea Cadets Grant Presentation

Then Civic Head Cllr Caroline Ball presented the annual grant to Ashington Sea Cadets at their awards evening in April, supporting youth activities for ages 10-18.

Inaugural ECO Fair Success

The town's first ECO Fair was held on April 25th at Hirst Welfare Centre, featuring over 20 local organisations, workshops, and sustainable living demonstrations. The event was declared a success with plans to make it annual.

Casual Vacancy - Hirst Ward

Sophie Robinson's resignation created a councillor vacancy. As this occurred within six months of May 2025 elections, no election was triggered and the position could be filled by co-option but wasn't due to nearing 'all out' elections.

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Easter Holiday Free Swimming Success

Free swim sessions at Ashington Leisure Centre recorded 143 child participants during Easter holidays, with the busiest session seeing 39 swimmers. The programme continued into May school holidays and will again throughout the summer holidays.

Northumberland Line Milestone

The railway line celebrated over 250,000 passenger journeys since reopening in December 2024. Newsham Station opened in March, and a photography exhibition ran at Ashington Leisure Centre until 23rd May.

May 2025 Elections

The Council held contested elections in five of six wards. New and returning Councillors signed their Acceptance of Office prior to the Annual Meeting on 20th May 2025.

Mental Wellbeing Support Promotion

The Council promoted Northumberland Recovery College's free mental health and wellbeing sessions available across the county.

Memorial Garden Regeneration

Ashington Memorial Garden closed temporarily from 12th May for 4-6 weeks for comprehensive improvements including new paving, granite kerbing, and woodland planting, reopening by end of June.

Workers Memorial Garden Transformation

The Workers Memorial Garden at St. John's Churchyard was transformed with community collaboration, featuring bespoke elements from reclaimed mining materials. Ian Lavery MP led the wreath-laying service on 26th April.

Grace Northumberland Support

The Council promoted Grace Northumberland Rape Crisis services, providing free, confidential support and counselling for women and girls over 13 affected by sexual violence.

Great Big Green Week Event

A free climate action event was held at Ashington Market today, featuring local sustainability organisations, gardening advice, and energy-saving guidance.

Old Police Station Asset Status

The Old Police Station at 104-108 Station Road was listed as an Asset of Community Value, triggering legal protections and community purchase opportunities following the owner's intention to sell.

Annual Meeting and New Leadership

The Council held its Annual Meeting on 20th May, re-electing Councillor Mark Purvis as Chair and John Tully as Vice-Chair. Councillor Pauline Thompson was elected Civic Head with Victor Bridges as Deputy.

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Community Fair Day Announcement

The Council announced the Community Fair Day for 6th July at People's Park, featuring the "Powering the Future" parade with a full-size Stephenson's Rocket replica, fairground rides, and entertainment.

Portland Park Site Update

Following resident concerns, the Council raised questions with NCC regarding the Portland Park site, that asbestos-containing materials found during groundwork were safely removed with no ongoing health risks. The site remains fenced until grass establishment.

Employability Scheme Success

Mortal Fools' CONNECT: Future Ready project successfully supported 111 young people aged 14-30 from April 2024 to April 2025, achieving Bronze Arts Awards and improving employability skills.

Christmas Lighting Partnership

The Council confirmed Blachere Illuminations as the new festive lighting partner, introducing eco-friendly decorations made from recycled materials. The Christmas Lights Switch-On is scheduled for 13th November 2025.

Miners' Memorial Service

The annual Northumberland Miners' Picnic including a Memorial Service is being held on 14th June at Woodhorn Museum, led by Ashington Churches Together to honour our mining heritage.

In-House Floral Displays

The Council's Neighbourhood Services team successfully planted summer floral displays in-house for the first time, sourcing plants from Wansbeck Garden Centre and reducing costs while maintaining quality. The results are amazing, well done to Mark and Ryan.

FC2526/043 BUDGET AND EXPENDITURE 2025/26

a) Budget Report 2025-26 (June)

The updated budget and expenditure report was **RECEIVED**. There were no questions to the RFO.

b) Bank Reconciliation

The latest Bank Reconciliation, month ending 31st May 2025 was **RECEIVED**. There were no questions to the RFO.

c) Schedule of Accounts Paid

The schedule of accounts paid and to be paid was **RECEIVED** and the accounts paid were **ENDORSED**.

Cllr John Tully raised the matter of the payment for the van lease, which the Executive Officer clarified represented the balance due following insurance settlement. Cllr Tully asked whether a

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report had been provided regarding the incident involving the van fire. The Executive Officer explained that following a very long drawn out process, an engineer's report was finally received which was returned as inconclusive. The insurance company paid out on the vehicle and with no party that could be proven to 'blame' the matter was considered closed.

Cllr John Tully also addressed payment 76 concerning the unit rent at Green Lane and the proposed rent increase. The Executive Officer confirmed that the rent increase had not yet taken effect. In response to Cllr Tully's question about contingency plans should the rent increase prove excessive, the Executive Officer noted that the Council had a contingency for the purpose. Alternative Units were being explored.

Cllr Scott Amery questioned whether gap insurance should be considered for the van moving forward. The Executive Officer agreed that would have been appropriate had it been known or advised when the council purchased the van, but it was not. It would be preferred to lease via NCC in the future as there are economies of scale as well.

Cllr John Tully asked about payment 100 regarding for Independent Professional Fees, questioning whether this matter could have been resolved internally. The Executive Officer declined to comment and advised that any questions or responses on this matter would require the Council going into private sessions and members of staff would also be required to leave. Cllr Tully withdrew his inquiry.

Cllr Karl Green asked about payment 97 concerning Places Leisure and whether a refund was expected for the cancelled sessions. The Executive Officer confirmed that the amount had been credited to the council's account, to be off set against future sessions.

FC2526/044 NCC NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES PARTNERSHIP MEETING, 15th April 2025

To receive and note the report, and address any questions to Board Members, noting that all Cllrs were invited to attend a subsequent meeting held on 3rd June 2025

Cllr John Tully reported that he had attended the meeting on the 3rd but was unable to propose any motions due to not being a member of the committee. He emphasised that the council lacks a dedicated presence on the high street and argued that maintaining a visible presence is important for the people of Ashington. He requested that this matter be referred to the partnership meeting for future consideration.

Cllr Marjorie Chambers responded that all councillors should convene to discuss this matter together and reach a unified agreement. She also commended the current appearance of the street and praised NCC for their hard work in maintaining cleanliness at present.

Cllr Scott Amery criticised NCC's approach when road sweepers were not operational, expressing concern about the lack of replacement arrangements. He proposed that the board should write to NCC requesting that they maintain standby road sweepers and provide additional time allowances for sickness and equipment breakdowns.

Cllr Caroline Ball emphasised that the issue was not about personnel numbers but rather service quality. She cited an example from the Brilliant Day NCC event where NCC staff lacked proper equipment and had to call for additional personnel, while other NCC employees were

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unaware the event was taking place. She questioned why such lapses were acceptable given the substantial payments made for these services and called for improved standards.

Cllr Pauline Thompson raised concerns about vehicle deployment, noting that she had monitored activities around the Hirst area where tracking systems showed street coverage but not time allocation. She reported not having seen a street sweeper in the Colliery Rows since 2016 and observed that cleaning appeared to focus primarily on bus routes.

Cllr John Tully stated that despite four years on the council, he remained uncertain whether the arrangement represented value for money and expressed that it did not.

Cllr David Coyle reported that road sweeper activity had decreased by 40% and referenced previous meetings where Brian Gallagher had raised similar concerns with Glen Sanderson regarding issues with weeds and maintenance. He challenged that the same problems persisted without resolution.

Cllr Marjorie Chambers clarified that weed spraying fell under county responsibilities rather than partnership duties.

FC2526/045 ALLOTMENT RENT REVIEW FOR DIRECTLY MANAGED SITES

Cllrs Jim Lang and Louis Brown left the meeting at 19:10.

The report on rent increases for directly managed allotment sites, and ground rent for self-managed sites, was **CONSIDERED**.

Cllr John Tully opened the discussion by expressing gratitude to all participants in the recent meeting, which he described as both positive and professional. He reported that the meeting had addressed a proposed rent increase from £31 to £35 per year, which had been accepted for implementation. The meeting acknowledged that each area of the town faced distinct challenges and consequently agreed to implement a three-year freeze on rent increases following the initial adjustment.

Cllr Marjorie Chamber objected to the proposed freeze, arguing that it would create unfairness for plot holders at other sites and failed to account for rising supply costs and other operational expenses, using water costs as an example. She emphasised that it would be a bad decision to burden Ashington taxpayers with subsidising allotment operations if rental income could not keep pace with increasing costs.

Cllr Paul Wright seconded Cllr Chamber's amendment, citing financial risk concerns and highlighting the current problematic situation stemming from the failure to implement regular annual rent increases as should have been standard practice. He expressed concern that delaying increases for three years would inevitably lead to another significant rent adjustment and associated controversy when the freeze period expired.

Cllr Tully responded to Cllr Chamber's concerns about fairness to other allotment sites, confirming that this matter had been thoroughly discussed during the meeting and that the proposed approach had received acceptance from the participants present.

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A vote on the amendment was taken and fell.

A vote on the original proposal was taken and **it was AGREED to:**

- ✓ to increase annual rent from £31 to £35 per plot per year for directly managed sites – Hirst East End, North Seaton Colliery and Woodhorn Road.
- ✓ to maintain ground rent for self-managed sites at £10 per plot per year – Green Lane, High Market, Seaton Hirst, and Wansbeck Road.
- ✓ to maintain rent at Nursery Park at £65 per plot per year.
- ✓ To freeze the rent increase for allotment sites managed by Ashington Town Council for 3 years.

Cllrs Jim Lang and Louis Brown re-entered the meeting at 19:21.

FC2526/046 ANNUAL AND SMALL GRANTS POLICY REVIEW - TASK AND FINISH GROUP

A Task and Finish Group was **ESTABLISHED**, and it was **AGREED** this would include Cllrs Caroline Ball, Kerry Davison, Karl Green, Lynne Grimshaw and Marjorie Chambers. **It was AGREED** the group would work with officers to review and develop a comprehensive Grants Policy and Guidelines for both Annual and Small Grants to ensure our grant allocation processes are transparent, fair, and effective for the benefit of our community organisations.

FC2526/047 COUNCILLOR TABLET PROVISION

Following discussion, **it was AGREED** to purchase tablets for Councillors who wish to conduct all Council business on dedicated Council devices, ensuring 100% compliance with data protection requirements. The tablets would operate using Wi-Fi connectivity, relying on the Council's Wi-Fi network at Council premises and Councillors' personal broadband connections at home, rather than purchasing separate data plans.

Based on the information provided **it was AGREED** to purchase tablets from Widescope for those Councillors who will actively use them. This approach provides the best value for money by ensuring devices are pre-configured and ready to use, while avoiding unnecessary expenditure on devices that would remain unused. Tablets would be added to the Council's Asset Register for insurance purposes.

Those Cllrs indicating active use and not otherwise provided with a device were agreed as Cllrs David Coyle, Marjorie Chambers, Kerry Davison, Pauline Thompson, and John Tully.

FC2526/048 DATE, TIME AND VENUE FOR THE NEXT MEETING

Full Council Meeting – Tuesday 29th July 2025, 6:00pm, Council Chamber.

The meeting ended at 19:37