

ASHINGTON TOWN COUNCIL
AGREED Minutes of the Finance & General Services Committee,
held at 6:00pm on Tuesday 12th March 2024
at Ashington Town Hall, 65 Station Road

COUNCILLORS PRESENT:

Cllrs. Lynne Grimshaw (Chair), Graeme Wright, Marjorie Chambers, John Tully, Caroline Ball, Sophie Robinson, Pauline Thompson, Matthew Cuthbert, Glyn Davies, Jim Lang, Paul Wright, Bob Walkinshaw.

ALSO, IN ATTENDANCE

Sarah Eden – Executive Officer and Responsible Financial Officer, Stephen Humprey – Assets and Facilities Officer, Alan Bunker – Allotments Officer and Gary Holmes – Administration Assistant.

FGS24/128 WELCOME BY THE CHAIR

Welcome by the Chair Cllr Lynne Grimshaw.

FGS24/129 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Cllrs Louis Brown and Victor Bridges.

FGS24/130 DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS

Cllr Graeme Wright agenda item 10 – Northumberland Citizens Advice.

FGS24/131 DISPENSATIONS

No dispensations were requested.

FGS24/132 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

There were no members of the public present.

FGS24/133 MINUTES OF LAST MEETING

It was **AGREED** to **RECEIVE** and **SIGN** as a true record, the minutes of the meeting held on Tuesday 13th February 2024.

The Chair sought agreement to move Northumberland Citizens Advice update to earlier in the meeting, to allow CEO Abi Conway to leave following. **It was AGREED.**

FGS24/134 Northumberland Citizens Advice

It was **AGREED** to receive a further update on work this year to date and to release the final instalment of annual funding.

The following report was presented by CEO Abi Conway, echoing the report provided with agenda papers.

Citizens Advice Wansbeck has expanded its services into GP surgeries around the Wansbeck area. The aim is to provide support to people before their issues become a crisis, thereby saving money, time, and resources. Citizens Advice staff are willing to discuss potential training opportunities with the practice managers or explore setting up operations at new locations. They currently work out of venues such as schools, food banks, and GP practices, with safety being the utmost priority.

A key focus is supporting the community in areas of poverty and social exclusion. Efforts are made to assist people in accessing the benefits, grants, and opportunities they are entitled to alleviate immediate financial distress.

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The main Citizens Advice hub is located at the Jubilee Industrial Estate, with a staff of around 70 including those doing face-to-face consultations. The organization expressed delight that thanks to support from Ashington Town Council, they can extend services to more residents. It was noted that over half of their clients have a disability or mental health condition.

A question was raised about what can practically be done by Citizens Advice to assist residents with the cost-of-living crisis. Specific concerns were voiced about energy problems and whether British Gas is the worst provider for delaying tactics that increase balances owed. Citizens Advice confirmed they can provide support to residents struggling with energy company issues.

Citizens Advice explained that due to the core grants they receive, they can leverage additional funding to have dedicated teams, including a benefits advice team to assist those needing help accessing entitlements. They are focused on increasing community outreach, such as the new services within GP surgeries, to help alleviate demand. However, safeguarding referrals have increased quite drastically in recent years.

It was asked if ATC could support by promoting Citizens Advice in this particular regard (benefits) on the website and Facebook page. Northumberland County Council has purchased a low-income tracking tool.

On smart meters, Citizens Advice stated that newer generation meters are an improvement, but those installed externally are causing issues for some households.

Regarding demonstrating value for money, Citizens Advice uses a cost calculator to estimate savings to the NHS and other services by dealing with residents' issues. More detail is provided in their annual report. They utilise data aggregation to make the case for policy changes, such as on energy issues, though they feel more impactful at a regional versus national level currently.

Ashington Town Council thanked Citizens Advice for their valuable work supporting residents in Ashington and across Northumberland.

FGS24/135 CLERK AND OFFICER UPDATES

The following update was **RECEIVED** which had been sent out in advance of the meeting.

Allotments Action Week

We had our first Allotments Action Week. This is a programme of quarterly events programmed into the work schedule of NSO's to tackle the jobs that need doing at Allotments. Having a week of dedicated action helps with scheduling, not being pulled away from other work, and it allows us to record and celebrate what is a big push on actions.

The work carried out is as follows:

- ✓ Seaton Hirst Allotment Site – Repair to Fence and Removal of Tree. A programme of improvement work is also planned in coming weeks.
- ✓ High Market Allotment Site – Repair to Boundary Fence / 5 taps repaired.
- ✓ Nursery Park Allotment Site – Litter pick / Removal of fly tipping / tap repaired.
- ✓ Green Lane Allotment Site – 5 taps repaired.
- ✓ North Seaton Colliery Allotment Site – 'pigeon plot' road repaired with plannings / Litter pick / Removal of fly tipping / Hedging cutback
- ✓ Woodhorn Road Allotment Site – Litter pick of part of site.

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- ✓ Hirst East End Allotment Site – Repairs to fencing following arson attack in 2022.

Hirst East Allotment Site Arson Attack – 5th March 2024

Following this incident which you are aware. All plot holders have been written to, advised of the crime reference number, and encouraged to report anything they know. The windows to the burned-out hut have been boarded, and the fence repaired. CCTV will be installed in the coming weeks. All costs will be taken from the resource available from Hirst East End Allotments.

Allotments (Capital Works)

The new water system at Woodhorn Road Allotment Site has been completed. The agreed roadway works have been put back from 11th March to 25th March following advice from the contractor considering recent wet weather.

Work to install the new water system at Seaton Hirst Allotment Site, as agreed from the 2024/25 budget, at a cost of £16,889 will commence in late April/early May.

Ashington Town Centre CCTV

Preparatory works are underway in developing the new CCTV system for the town centre. Our contractor Assetwatch will install equipment to the Town Hall roof and liaise with NCC regarding the installation of the new system.

ATC Neighbourhood Services

Neighbourhood Services staff have recently undertaken a clean of town centre bus shelters. In the coming months a programme to clean bus shelter roofs will also take place, as part of the cleaning process, removing moss and algae. The Assets & Development Manager will also be meeting with the Town Council's bus shelter contractor in planning the replacement of 4 shelters in the town w/c 11th March.

During Play Area action week, works to improve the town's play areas has taken place including edging and the cleaning of equipment.

Work to replenish town centre planting will be carried out in coming weeks using recycled shrubs from the winter troughs on Station Road. A number of more robust shrubs will also be purchased to supplement town centre planting, mainly to the west end of the one-way section. Due to poor drainage in the area works will also take place to reduce the size of the bed on the A197 Wansbeck Hospital entrance feature. Again, the plants will be recycled to compliment town centre and entrance feature planting.

Two aging litterbins will be replaced on Laburnum Terrace to complete the works for this financial year. A new order of litterbins will be placed for 2024/25 in coming days. Following repairs and the purchase of new batteries, all the town's 15 speed awareness signs are in working order.

Jack Charlton Statue

The contract for maintenance has ended and we are now responsible for this area. The area will be visited monthly for routine maintenance, following some enhancements suggested by our NSO's.

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Tree Planting

Tree planting, as agreed in the Seaton ward was completed w/c 4 March in the the Hillcrest and South Side area with the planting of 8 trees.

The tree planting schemes to be carried out in the Haydon ward, organised by Northumberland County Council, with support from ATC staff will also take place w/c 8 April.

Further to report received, the meeting heard. A big thank you was expressed to Northumberland County Council staff for their assistance during Allotment Week.

It was reported that there are disused 28 allotment plots in Seaton Hirst. Next week, a mini action day is planned to work on reopening 2 of the plots, with the goal of eventually reopening all of them.

An update was provided on the need for additional commando sockets at the allotment sites. The cost is £450 per commando socket, with 3 more required at an estimated total of £1,350. The specific email with further details had not come through prior to the meeting.

A question was raised about why Ashington Town Council would need to cover the cost of the commando sockets, since a survey was already conducted when the 5-year allotment contract was signed.

It was AGREED to negotiate the quoted cost for the commando sockets, but not to allow this to significantly delay progress on the allotment project

Stephen Humphrey and Alan Bunker left the meeting at 19:03.

Events and Engagement

Work Experience

A student from Buzz Learning started on Friday 8th March - 9.30am to 2.30pm. Maddie is doing a media course at Northumberland College and will be working with Sharon producing flyers and posters until mid-July.

Green Social Prescribers

Sharon attended a Green Social Event on Monday 4th March at Full Circle Food. The Event was presented by Natural England and Northumberland Wildlife Trust focused on green social prescribing – the remarkable practice of supporting individuals in engaging with nature-based activities to improve their mental and physical well-being.

As part of this exciting initiative, the Green Social Prescribing Team are initially working with Ashington, Blyth, and their surrounding areas. The event aimed to collaborate and form a network of organisations providing opportunities and sharing expertise in environmental, community, and health and well-being spheres.

Visit [Ashington Town Council](#) to read more about the event and the Green Social Prescribing Service.

Hirst Working Group Meeting

Sharon attended a meeting for the re-establishment of the working group on Wednesday 6th March at Hirst Welfare.

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Meeting Summary:

- ✓ A video link was shared about social enterprise schools' awards in London.
- ✓ A directory PDF was added that is not public yet. Final comments due by March 20th, public release on April 15th.
- ✓ Updates were given on community cohesion initiatives like a new radio segment on Coast Radio "New Life" highlighting music/cultures of asylum seekers and refugees.
- ✓ Overview provided on the "Get on Side" program, including the new playzone update.
- ✓ Discussed police issues: motorbikes, substance abuse, youth disorder, retail crime.
- ✓ Identified a gap in opportunities for neurodivergent youth.
- ✓ Seeking group to manage new playzone/activities.

International Women's Day Event

Sarah and Sharon received an invitation to attend the event on Wednesday 6th March from Full Circle Food. We had a lovely time at Full Circle Food for a special event honouring the strength, resilience, and contributions of women from all walks of life!

There was a delicious luncheon cooked by talented refugee and asylum-seeking families. The flavours were amazing and different! Many got creative at the Flower Pot Decorating and Planting Activity, taking home beautiful pots of flowers.

It was a remarkable event spending time with our vibrant community. The atmosphere was filled with joy, empowerment, and appreciation for the incredible women in our lives and around the world. [\(9\) Facebook](#)

Meeting with The Key+

The Key is a charity committed to inspiring young people to believe in themselves; especially those residing in deprivation and facing challenging circumstances.

Sarah and Sharon met with Leah from The Key+ [About Us | The Key \(thekeyuk.org\)](#) on Wednesday 6th March to discuss funding for youth projects.

Leah agreed to put together a proposal for Ashington Town Council and The Key to work in partnership to deliver a much-needed opportunity for young people.

The proposal will come to the Finance and General Services meeting in April.

Youth Providers Gathering

The focus was on organising upcoming events and initiatives as well as discussing funding opportunities.

Key action items included:

- Carla will organise a youth providers roadshow at the College, Dukes School, Ashington Academy, and a public event.
- Sharon will forward the NCC funding bulletin to the group going forward.
- The group will collaboratively explore funding options for potential projects.
- Participants will continue sharing information, events, and cross-promotion opportunities.
- Any reports regarding crime, safety concerns, or areas of concern should go directly to Wayne and his team.
- Carla will share the directory with the group.

Updates and discussion points:

- Potential funding may be available for a detached youth worker position from ATC.

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- Ashington Town Council exploring youth project funding.
- The college's student council will be invited to a future meeting.
- At the next meeting, NUF will present an overview of their work in Hirst.
- A significant gap in weekend provision for youth activities was identified.
- The Ashington triangle area remains a hotspot for youth disorder and anti-social behaviour.

Bunny Hop Easter Egg Hunt

The Bunny Hop is launching soon, with 26 shops taking part including shops on Milburn Road and Hawthorn Road. Childre will have three weeks to collect stickers and complete their cards before collection an Easter egg and certificate at Ashington Library on Friday 12th and Saturday 13th April.

Christmas Lights Displays

We are seeking input from both the lighting contractor and NCC regarding failed lights in the displays in 2024. It appears the failure is due to water getting into the commando sockets. Although the connections are attached to NCC lamp standards, as they are there to support our festive lighting features, they are our responsibility. The features have been tested by Gala lights and were fully working. We aim to remove any uncertainty well before the 2024 displays.

News Items (with links)

The meeting was provided with data on the engagement via the website and facebook.

FGS24/136 BUDGET AND EXPENDITURE 2023/24

a) Updated Budget Report

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

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

It was **AGREED to RECEIVE** a schedule of accounts paid and to be paid; to endorse those accounts paid, and agree those to be paid, since 25th January 2024.

FGS24/137 NORTHUMBERLAND MINERS PICNIC EVENT

To consider the Council's contribution towards this annual event from the Events and Community Engagement budget, in view that the event had a surplus of £6,000 in 2023.

It was proposed and seconded to agree funding of £10,000.

5 votes in favour
 5 votes against
 2 abstentions

With the vote tied, the Chair cast a deciding vote against the £10,000 allocation.

It was proposed and seconded to offer a reduced sum of £5,000.

5 votes in favour
 5 votes against
 2 abstentions

With this vote also tied, the Chair cast the final deciding vote in favour of the £5,000 allocation.

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Therefore, it was resolved to approve a £5,000 budget allocation based on the Chair's casting vote.

Cllr Sophie Robinson left the meeting at 19:20.

FGS24/138 ANNUAL GRANT AID FUNDING UPDATES

a) Wansbeck Valley Food Bank

It was AGREED to receive further update on work this year to date and to release the final instalment of annual funding.

Members noted that the report highlighted the continued growth in demand for emergency food aid, with a 12.6% increase in the number of people supported in 2023 compared to the previous year. Additionally, the value of food provided in 2023 requiring significant financial resources to meet this growing need.

While the report noted a slight decline in the number of individuals fed in January 2024 compared to January 2023, the overall trend remains concerning, and members also noted that donations of food have not returned to pre-pandemic levels, further exacerbating the challenges faced by the food bank.

The report mentioned the food bank's temporary relocation due to the redevelopment of the Northgate Hospital site and the ongoing search for a suitable permanent location, and members hoped a permanent home would be known soon.

The meeting recorded thanks for the dedication to serving the community during these challenging times.

FGS24/139 DETACHED YOUTH WORK DELIVERY

a) Funding

It was AGREED to set aside £20,000 from the Community Support budget towards youth delivery.

b) Formation of Working Group

It was AGREED to form a task and finish working group that will clarify the intended objectives of the work, and present recommendations in respect of delivery model, procurement, and funding parameters for delivery of detached youth work in Ashington.

It was AGREED that the following Cllrs would make up the working group: Cllr Lynne Grimshaw, Cllr Matthew Cuthbert, Cllr Caroline Ball, Cllr Graeme Wright, and Cllr Louis Brown.

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FGS24/140 ANNUAL AND SMALL GRANT FUNDING

a) *Small Grant Funding (throughout the year)*

It was AGREED to receive the Council's small grant guidance and application form, with recommended amendments, alongside the calendar, and agree any action or necessary changes.

Members noted and agreed the changes in respect of the Public Sector Equality Duty. It was discussed that the Council should follow to the letter the need for groups to have the necessary compliance policies and accounting records, to ensure the Councils due diligence and avoid any impropriety.

It was AGREED that the office would not present grant applications from groups who did not have the required policies and records but would continue to offer support to achieving them.

b) *Small Grant Funding Figure*

It was **AGREED** to set aside £10,000 from the Community Support budget for small grants throughout the year. This would allow the Council to support five groups each quarter.

c) *Annual Grant Aid Funding*

It was AGREED to receive and approve the Council's Annual Grant Aid guidance and application form.

Members were advised of the timetable in view that presentations would be given by those applying for £3,000 or more.

d) *Annual Grant Funding Figure*

It was AGREED to set aside £70,000 from the Community Support budget for Annual Grants.

FGS24/141 PLAY AREA UPDATE

There was no update at this time.

FGS24/142 DATE, TIME, AND VENUE FOR THE NEXT MEETING

Tuesday 16th April 2024, 6:00pm, Council Chamber.

Meeting ended 7.55pm