AGENDA 6, Enc i) ASHINGTON TOWN COUNCIL, DRAFT Minutes of the Finance & General Services Committee, held at 6:00pm on Tuesday 11th February 2025 at Ashington Town Hall, 65 Station Road

COUNCILLORS PRESENT:
Cllrs. Lynne Grimshaw (Chair), Cllr Graeme Wright, Cllr Paul Wright, Cllr Pauline Thompson, Cllr Caroline Ball, Cllr Jim Lang, Cllr Victor Bridges, Cllr Louis Brown, Cllr Marjorie Chambers, Cllr Matthew Cuthbert, Cllr Mark Purvis, Cllr Glynn Davies and Cllr John Tully.

ALSO, IN ATTENDANCE
Executive Officer Eden – Executive Officer, and Gary Holmes – Administration Assistant.

FGS25/104 WELCOME BY THE CHAIR
Welcome by the Chair, Councillor Lynne Grimshaw.

FGS25/105 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE
Apologies for absence were received from Cllr Bob Walkinshaw, Cllr Gemma Hemsley, Cllr Sophie Robinson.

FGS25/106 DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS
Cllr Caroline Ball declared an interest in FGS25/112 SMALL GRANTS FUNDING – FEBRUARY 2025 – Ashington Community Woodlands parkrun, Bomarsund Welfare Cricket Club, and Wansbeck Gymnastics and Trampolining Club.
Cllr Jim Lang declared an interest in FGS25/112 SMALL GRANTS FUNDING – FEBRUARY 2025 – AFC Newbiggin Juniors Football Club
Cllr Louis Brown and Cllr Mark Purvis declared an interest in FGS25/115 HIRST EAST END ALLOTMENTS FIRE.

FGS25/107 DISPENSATIONS
Cllr Louis Brown requested a dispensation to be permitted to take part in the discussion on allotments. The Chair requested the reason for the dispensation. Cllr Louis Brown offered that he was able to speak on the item which was to for allotment discussion, and it was **AGREED**.

FGS25/108 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION
There was one member of the public present.

A plot holder at Hirst East End Allotment site was present. The Chair invited the member of the public to speak.

The member of the public thanked the Council for allowing him to speak, explaining he has been part of the former Hirst East End Allotment Association since 1980, stating that financial accounts have been provided and audited each year. He explained that he had worked with Council officials many times to provide costly projects such fencing, internal water systems and laying of roads for the allotment site, allowing for vehicles and pedestrians.

He mentioned that there have been 5 fires on the Hirst East End Allotment site, although speculation cannot be made as to who or what has caused them, but would like to focus on the fire from on 12th January 2025, in his own plot.

The contents of the plot have been destroyed, and the plot itself is currently unusable due to the fire, and the damage that it has caused.

The plot holder sought the Council to make the fire plot useable and to fix the damage that has been caused, as they have done before. Specifically, to clear the plot of the building, break up the concrete base on the plot so the plot can be restored and become useable again.

The Chair thanked the member of the public for the information and advised that the matter would be dealt with in item 12 on the agenda.

Cllr John Tully requested that the Chair bring the matter forward on the agenda. The Chair declined to do so.

FGS25/109 MINUTES OF LAST MEETING
It was AGREED to RECEIVE and **SIGN** as a true record, the minutes of the meeting held on Tuesday 14th January 2025.

FGS25/110 CLERK AND OFFICER UPDATES
The following update was given:

Neighbourhood Services

Bus Shelter Cleansing
Routine bus shelter cleansing, which is continually delayed due to competing priorities, has now been successfully completed. Neighbourhood Services Officers (NSO's), Mark and Ryan have provided a comprehensive record reminiscent of traditional time and motion studies, and Gary has produced a better-looking asset map using what3words system to identify locations. This is much appreciated as we work toward operational efficiencies, and it will significantly enhance our strategic planning capabilities.

Mark and Executive Officer (Executive Officer) met the new bus ambassador for Northumberland. The meeting was very productive. We requested numbers for each bus stop so we can look into users, and identify any bus stops that are regularly used, especially by those with accessibility needs and elderly residents, without shelters or seats. It is expected to bring any plans to the Council, and that this would be based on priority use. Mark raised the lack of stand information at Ashington Bus Station. Following discussion, it was agreed we would install the stand information if it were provided, additionally we could replace broken timetable covers. This has been provided very quickly and will be scheduled asap. It is great to have a closer working relationship with NCC Officers who can respond to these issues so quickly, and they are very grateful that we can support with on the ground help.

Litter Bins
Newly agreed litter bins have been installed. Mark will soon be leading an assessment of bin suitability to identify locations where larger capacity bins may be beneficial, with a commitment to refurbishing existing bins to prevent waste.

Play Areas
Several ongoing but minor play area repairs have been completed following a concerted effort by NSO's to tackle everything on play area inspection reports provided by NCC. Additionally, NSO's have identified issues with roundabouts at both Epsom Drive and Alexandra Road. The Executive Officer raised these directly with the play provider and they will be repaired under warranty.

Executive Officer is meeting Rob Delap, NCC Parks Project Officer to progress a survey about the use of and play value of Bywell Road play area. The results of the survey will inform any future decisions. This play area is owned by NCC, but the hope is that ATC would formally take

responsibility. This has been under an informal arrangement in the past and is part of the ongoing legal issues that have been progressed for all play areas.

Speed signs

New batteries have been installed in those speed signs that were temperamental. We are keen to get the data from all speed signs, and to publish this like other authorities. Once NSO's have work devices, this will be prioritised.

Executive Officer mentioned that the speed signs project involves a collaborative funding arrangement between NALC and County Council, with County Councillors specifically covering the costs. While funding comes from these authorities, the Council maintains the signs through Neighbourhood Services Officer - Mark Air. Recent battery replacements have resolved reliability issues, and once NSOs receive their work devices, they will prioritise collecting and publishing speed data, following the practice of other local authorities.

Environmental

By the time of the meeting, all gateways, memorials, and plantings will have been visited and tidied in advance of spring. Watering will commence in the spring and equipment is being checked and tested with this in mind. There has been a lot of repair and maintenance work, not horticulture related, and Ryan is looking forward to focusing more on horticulture as the weather improves.

Allotments Capital

The Council approved funding for the water system at Nursery Park during the budget process, to be completed 25/26. While no other capital programmes were greenlit, prudent financial management throughout the year may enable us to carry forward revenue balances to address the outstanding roadways at Woodhorn Road, which remain our priority for capital works.

Allotment General

Allotment Officer Alan Bunker has adapted the tap systems at Woodhorn Road, North Seaton Colliery, Green Lane, High Market, and Nursery Park addressing previous infrastructure limitations. The new, more sophisticated fixings are designed to prevent operational issues during low-temperature periods, significantly improving the reliability of the water supply infrastructure. There is further work to be carried out.

A successful glass recycling trial at Nursery Park was completed, with the next UPVC recycling day scheduled for 17th February at North Seaton Colliery and Seaton Hirst. Administrative matters include anticipated notices to quit for three plot holders at North Seaton Colliery due to non-payment, and upcoming rent invoices for Nursery Park and Hirst East End plots ahead of 1st April 2025.

The team provided operational support and maintenance: Alan, Mark, and Ryan collaborated to secure the Hirst East End Allotment plot following a recent fire, repaired boundary fences damaged by Storm Éowyn at Green Lane and Nursery Park and addressed infrastructure needs including filling potholes at North Seaton using road planings. A number of plot holders enquired about the Council funding repairs to their own fences, as was done when storm Arwen hit the UK. All were informed that whilst we appreciate the Council did fund repairs in the past, due to having an underspend on events due to COVID-19, we have no budget to fund repairs this time. New tenants have been introduced to both North Seaton Colliery and Nursery Park sites, and Alan has procured hedge works for North Seaton Colliery.

Events and Engagement

February Half Term

As part of the ongoing half term programmes brought by the Youth Advisory Committee two free swim sessions have been booked for Wednesday 26th February and Saturday 1st March, both sessions 1pm to 2pm.

A further 4 free swim sessions are arranged for the Easter holidays. Free gym sessions are being looked at in partnership with Sculpt Gym. These would be for 16-18 year olds, proposed Tuesday 25th February and Thursday 27th February.

Animating Ashington

Key points from the Positive Friends Group meeting on Tuesday 4th February 2025

- Light Night events – the events were a huge success, attracting 3000 people over two days
- Torch Lit Procession - 109 people signed up for torch lit procession, with a target of 300 torchbearers
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Upcoming events include:

- James Brunt's art project in schools (large-scale painting in Ashington)
- One Amazing Day on 31st May (featuring wrestling ring, pyrotechnics, circus performance)
- James Brunt will also be hosting a workshop at the ECO Fair on Friday 25th April, which will be funded by Walk the Plank.

Staffing Updates - Gary Taylor and Faye Parker introduced as new trainees and Reemer Bailey is leaving the council on 14th February.

Walk the Plank Action Items:

- ✓ Distribute social media pack for torch lit procession
- ✓ Find additional nominees for procession (schools, scout leaders)
- ✓ Secure locations for artwork (potential sites: cinema, cricket club fencing)
- ✓ Circulate professional photos from events

Notable Event Details:

- Free soup and bread for procession participants
- Working to involve local talent in performances
- Positive community engagement and support noted throughout

The meeting reflected ongoing enthusiasm for community arts and cultural development in Ashington.

Northumberland College Health & Wellbeing Roadshow

The Communications and Engagement Officer will be attending the event at Ashington college on Thursday 13th February. As well as information about Ashington Town Council being given out Sharon will also be promoting the February half term free swim sessions and free gym sessions, along with the upcoming ECO Fair and Easter activities.

Dukes World of Work Day

The Communications and Engagement Officer will be attending the World of Work Day event on Tuesday 4th March 9:45am at Dukes Primary School.

The school are delighted to have representation from Ashington Town Council, any councillors wishing to attend must contact Sharon as soon as possible to arrange security passes.

Hirst Working Group Meeting notes

Carla Thompson, NCC Locality Co-ordinator, provided these meeting notes:

Actions by Ian Stephenson:

- Coordinate possible change of meeting time/date
- Contact Gemma about emergency housing property
- Cascade links/info from Rachel
- Link DWP into armed forces and veterans works
- Perform demo on social value tool in March meeting
- Link with LR about employability and equality

Project Horizon:

- Partners to contact Wayne about prevention works for repeat offenders
- Housing identified as a priority

Other Key Actions:

- Rachel to connect group with ambassadors
- Caz to share info with college and youth providers
- Wayne to update on mini op impacts throughout year
- Gemma to share info on Bernicia social action days in March
- Neil to organise session with SH in mid-late March, inviting wider partners
- YMCA to set up Hirst youth forum (Caz to discuss with SP)

Projects

Ashington Cricket Club

Trees are being delivered on Tuesday 11th February and planted on Saturday 16th February. As per Stephen's previous arrangements, Mark and Ryan are working on Saturday 16th February to support the works being undertaken by contractors.

Ashington Community Woods

Following the Council's agreement to use funding to support the Project Development Phase of Ashington Community Woods, the work has been ordered, and a press release issued.
The investment, combined with additional funding from Ward Councillors' Environment Enhancements budget, will support comprehensive consultation, steering group management and the preparation of funding applications.
https://www.ashingtontowncouncil.gov.uk/news/news.php?s=2025-02-06-ashington-town-council-pledges-support-for-community-led-enhancement-of-ashington-community-woods

DRAFT

FGS25/111 BUDGET AND EXPENDITURE 2024/25

a) Updated Budget Report

The updated budget and expenditure report was **RECEIVED**.

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

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

FGS25/112 SMALL GRANTS FUNDING – FEBRUARY 2024

In response to a question from Cllr Pauline Thompson about the status of Wansbeck Gymnastics and Trampolining Club, and that they are a company, the Executive Officer confirmed that the club is a CIC with charitable aims and constitution has been shared.

In response to a question from Cllr John Tully, the Executive Officer confirmed that Bomarsund confirmed that 60% of their members resided in Ashington.

The Chair confirmed that Wansbeck Community Links was included on the agenda in error, as they have received a small grant in the current financial year.

The Executive Officer confirmed that two groups that expressed interest in applying had been referred to Thriving Together as they were lacking the required governing documents.

It was proposed, seconded and agreed to approve grant funding at applied amount for those groups presented:

a) Ashington Community Woodlands parkrun

The application from parkrun was **RECEIVED**, and it was **AGREED** to award £500.

b) Blossoming Communities

The application from Blossoming Communities was **RECEIVED**, and it was **AGREED** to award £500.

c) Bomarsund Welfare Cricket Club

The application from Bomarsund Welfare Cricket Club was **RECEIVED**, and it was **AGREED** to award £500.

d) Butokokan Judo Club

The application from Butokokan Judo Club was **RECEIVED**, and it was **AGREED** to award £500.

e) Evergreens Over 60's Club

The application from Evergreens Over 60's Club was **RECEIVED**, and it was **AGREED** to award £164.95.

f) Wansbeck Gymnastics and Trampolining Club

The application from Wansbeck Gymnastics and Trampolining Club was **RECEIVED**, and it was **AGREED** to award £500.

g) AFC Newbiggin Juniors Football Club

The application from AFC Newbiggin Juniors Football Club was **RECEIVED**, and it was **AGREED** to award £500.

h) Talking Marras

The application from Talking Marras was **RECEIVED**, and it was **AGREED** to award £500.

FGS25/113 FESTIVE LIGHTING PROCUREMENT

The draft documents for Festive Lighting Procurement (preferred supplier) were **RECEIVED**, and it was **AGREED** to approve the actions recommended by the Executive Officer and list the opportunity on Contracts Finder.

FGS25/114 YOUTH ADVISORY COMMITTEE

The report of the meeting held on 21st January 2025 was **RECEIVED**, and actions were **ENDORSED**.

FGS25/115 HIRST EAST END ALLOTMENTS FIRE - EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC

It was proposed and seconded that the Council exclude the public for the consideration of the following item due to the confidential nature of the matter, and that discussion could be prejudicial to public interest.

The resident in attendance left the meeting.

The matter placed on the agenda was to receive any available update on the fire at a single plot at Hirst East End Allotments, and to consider the Council's responsibility in regards clearance and remedial works to reinstate the plot and allow it to be cultivated. The plot holder addressed the Council as part of public participation.

Members received a report marked Confidential on Hirst East End Allotments. The Chair allowed a 10-minute recess to allow members to read the report. The report addressed operational, financial and conflict risks. The key points being:

Financial Impact:

2024/25: Over £15,000 spent on CCTV installation and site clearances following fires
2022/23: £2,200 spent on fire damage repairs to sheds and fencing

Current Situation:

Recent fire damage to plot requires Council decision on reinstatement
Ongoing community tensions relating to previous allotment management decisions
CCTV installed but incidents continue to occur

Key Risks Identified:

Financial: Substantial costs with minimal return (£31 annual plot rental)
Staff: Potential exposure of officers to increased hostility and pressure regardless of Council decision
Council: Political sensitivity of decision may impact Council members
Community: Impact on affected tenant and potential escalation of existing tensions

The report noted that regardless of decision to reinstate or not, significant risks remain and recommends clear Council position to support officers implementing any decision made.

Previous Council involvement in historic disputes were noted as a complicating factor in resolution, and longer term recommendations included consideration of external mediation services and review of security measures, while acknowledging limits to Council's ability to prevent future incidents.

It was proposed and seconded not fund the reinstatement of the fire-damaged plot, but instead offer an alternative plot, while seeking external professional support for conflict resolution at the site.

7 votes in favour/4 votes against.

It was proposed and seconded to refer the matter to the Allotment Advisory Committee, where representatives from all allotment sites could discuss the issue and make a recommendation to the Finance and General Services Committee, bringing all parties together.

6 votes in favour/7 votes against.

Having heard an appeal from the plot holder, and considered the confidential report regarding the fire-damaged plot at Hirst East End Allotments, and after deliberation of the proposals presented, the Council has resolved to:

NOT proceed with funding the reinstatement of the fire-damaged plot at Hirst East End Allotments, given:

- The significant costs already incurred (over £17,200 in recent years)
- The ongoing risk of further incidents
- The need for responsible management of public funds
- The unsustainable nature of repeated reinstatement costs against rental income

To again offer the affected plot holder an alternative plot at a suitable location, ensuring they have the opportunity to continue their allotment gardening activities.

Engage an external conflict resolution provider to work with all parties involved, acknowledging:

- The historical context of tensions at the site
- The Council's previous involvement in past decisions
- The need for independent mediation to help resolve ongoing disputes

Actions

- ✓ Communicate this decision to the affected plot holder
- ✓ Identify and offer suitable alternative plot options
- ✓ Document all communication regarding this matter
- ✓ Identify and engage an appropriate external conflict resolution service
- ✓ Establish clear parameters for the conflict resolution process
- ✓ Report back to Council on progress

- ✓ Issue a clear statement outlining:
  - The Council's decision and rationale
  - The support being offered to the affected plot holder
  - The commitment to addressing broader site issues through independent mediation
- ✓ Provide full support to Council officers in implementing this decision, including:
  - Ensuring all communication comes from the Council as a collective
  - Protecting officers from undue pressure or criticism
  - Maintaining clear lines of responsibility and authority
- ✓ Review and enhance site security measures in consultation with local police.

This decision reflects the Council's commitment to:

- Responsible financial management
- Fair treatment of all allotment holders
- Supporting officers and Councillors in their duties
- Addressing underlying tensions through appropriate professional support

The Council acknowledges the impact of this decision on the affected plot holder and commits to ensuring they receive appropriate support in transitioning to an alternative plot.

FGS25/116 PLAY AREA SIGNAGE
An image of proposed new play area signage was **RECEIVED** and it was **AGREED** to delegate to the Executive Officer to place an order and oversee installation of appropriate signage in town council managed play areas.

FGS25/117 PEOPLE'S PARK
The Executive Officer advised that over several years the Council has created a temporary opening in the fencing at People's Park to allow ease of access and egress during Fair Day. This has been created and reinstated at a cost to the Council each year. The proposal, which has been passed by Northumberland County Council Green Spaces and Parks Officer, is to create a permanent vehicle access gate off the car park, therefore reducing these annual costs in place of a one-off cost. It was **AGREED** to install a permanent vehicle access gate off the car park, and to delegate to the Executive Officer.

FGS25/118 EV VAN INSURANCE UPDATE
The offer from MS Amblin Insurance for Pre-Accident Valuation of Citroen eDispatch of £18,128.00 was **RECEIVED** and the offer was formally **CONSIDERED** and it was **AGREED** to accept the offer.

Councillor John Tully echoed the Executive Officer's frustrations regarding the insurers withholding the engineers report that supported the pay-out and confirmation of this being the fault of the battery, and it was agreed to continue to pursue this.

FGS25/119 DATE, TIME, AND VENUE FOR THE NEXT MEETING
Tuesday 11th March 2025, 6:00pm, Council Chamber.

Meeting ended 19:23pm