

AGENDA 6, Enc i) ASHINGTON TOWN COUNCIL, AGREE Minutes of the Finance and General Services Committee held at 6:00pm on Tuesday 10th March 2026, at North Seaton Community Centre, Manley View, Oakville, Ashington, NE63 9TE

CLLRS PRESENT:

Cllrs Lynne Grimshaw (Chair), Kerry Davison, David Coyle, Marjorie Chambers, Louis Brown, Bob Walkinshaw, Caroline Ball, Jessica Appleby, Melanie Fox, John Tully, Paul Wright.

ALSO, IN ATTENDANCE

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

FGS2526/135 WELCOME BY THE CHAIR

Welcome by Cllr Lynne Grimshaw.

FGS2526/136 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Cllrs Jim Lang, Scott Amery, Mark Purvis, Glyn Davies, Sonia Simm and Steven Roberts.

FGS2526/137 DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS

Cllr Coyle disclosed an interest in the discussion of the Small Grants as part of Parkhead and Wansbeck Powersports Club.

FGS2526/138 DISPENSATIONS

Cllr Coyle requested a dispensation to stay in the room.

FGS2526/139 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

There was one member of the public present.

Two questions had been received from a member of the public via email in line with the Council's Standing Orders for public questions. The Executive Officer read the questions which were:

1. Will ATC put pressure on NCC to build homes on brownfield sites?
2. What's the goals for the Council to make sure all community parks in Ashington are well looked after and funded?

It was **AGREED** that Executive Officer would respond in writing, noting the following:

Housing and Brownfield Development

The Council's position is that it will engage with Northumberland County Council wherever possible to encourage the delivery of homes where they are needed and where they can be delivered. The Council is mindful of current government planning reforms and the drive for more housing, and will engage constructively with NCC in its capacity as the planning authority.

Community Parks and Play Areas

The Council maintains a dedicated Asset Reserve Fund to ensure the long-term upkeep and renewal of the play areas for which it is responsible, namely those at Alexandra Road, Seaton Vale, Epsom Drive, Aintree Close, North Seaton Colliery, People's Park, and Paddock Wood. Each facility has been assessed in terms of its expected lifespan and funding is accumulated accordingly to enable replacement at the appropriate time. The most recent redevelopment was completed at North Seaton Colliery, with Paddock Wood identified as the next priority. Members

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noted that a number of play areas within the town fall outside the Council's responsibility and are maintained by Northumberland County Council.

FGS2526/140 DRAFT MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the previous Finance and General Services Meeting held on Tuesday 10th February were **RECEIVED** and **AGREED** and a true record.

FGS2526/141 CLERK AND OFFICER UPDATES

Town & Parish Council Conference

The event last Thursday was very well attended. Sarah was there on behalf of SLCC but will share slides as they are received.

IT & Asset Management – Looking Ahead

As part of our ongoing commitment to running the council as efficiently and effectively as possible, I am beginning to explore a modernisation of our IT systems. Our current package is not serving us as well as it should — in particular, the lack of integration between councillor tablets and calendar functionality continues to cause frustration and doesn't appear to have a fix. This is symptomatic of a broader picture where our systems are not working cohesively. At the same time, I am looking at dedicated asset management solutions — sector-specific products exist that would bring together our asset register, mapping, inspections, and job management into a single, joined-up platform; this is something we lack. Similar to the decision to move to a dedicated accountancy package, I believe the time is approaching to take the same step with our wider IT provision, especially with the deadlines requirements of WCAG 2.2 accessibility standards (Assertion 10).

Christmas Lights Contract

I have a meeting this week to discuss the replacement of the artificial cone tree with an artificial Nordic sustainable Christmas tree. [NORDIKA, SUSTAINABLE CHRISTMAS TREE - Blachere Illumination](#)

Neighbourhood Services

Play Areas

Repairs and maintenance continue across all play areas following each site having a RoSPA Play Safety inspection. Kompan have been booked to spend a day in People's Park with Ryan Appleby to carry out more involved repairs, do some training on shackles, gates and bearings, and to replace the track rider.

Repainting and resurfacing are a priority consideration for the spring. North Seaton Colliery Play Area is complete apart from the basketball net, and some internal verge works. The contractor has not confirmed when this will be carried out – the invoice will not be paid until fully complete.

As soon as time allows we will commence discussion for the redevelopment of Paddock Wood play area with Ward Cllrs. It is suggested that we follow a similar format as North Seaton Colliery play area with ward Cllrs involved throughout, agreeing the procurement and process at FGS.

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Bus Shelters

As previous update - we are still waiting for funding information back in regards bus shelters. Progress is sought frequently; this has been outstanding since initially approved in January 2025. We are no different to other Towns and Parishes who are also waiting for the same information to proceed with orders.

Town Seats

Five Haydon ward seats have arrived. The exact locations for the three on Newbiggin Road need to be agreed with Ward Cllrs. Two replacements beside the level crossing on Black Close Bank will be made, with the two insitu offered to NCC Green Spaces for QEII Park following an approach by Cllrs for more seats in this area; we are awaiting a response on this.

Horticulture

Weed spraying started at the end of last season has been completed, with all assets and play areas now sprayed.

February visits were carried out on all horticultural features and this has commenced again for March. Soon we will move to more frequent visits for high season.

Costs are being sought for red and white seasonal planting which we hope will inspire great support for England in the World Cup during the summer.

Wall repairs surrounding the Woodhorn Gateway feature were carried out promptly by a local contractor.

Events and Engagement

Keep Britian Tidy - Spring Clean

We have planned to facilitate KBT Spring Clean inspired stalls at the Ashington Market on Tuesday 17th March. This will include relevant partners including NCC Recycling & Waste Management, Green Dog Walkers, Ashington Community Litter Pickers, and Northumbrian Water. We will also be offering up litter picking equipment to anyone who wants to take part in litter picks around the town – litter pickers, gloves, bin bags, and we will liaise with NCC for their removal.

***Youth Engagement - Northumberland College Roadshow Thursday 12th February 2026
Engaging with students and sharing community opportunities***

Ashington Town Council participated in its first 2026 Northumberland College roadshow event on Thursday 12th February, connecting directly with students to raise awareness of local services and opportunities available in the town.

The event was expertly coordinated by Carla Thompson, Northumberland County Council's Community Coordinator, and Vanessa Jones, Head of Student Services bringing together a diverse range of organisations serving the Ashington community. Participating groups included ESCAPE Family Support, Pride Action North, Northumberland Thriving Together, Health Trainers, Northumberland Young Carers, Bernicia and the Hirst Strategic Team, creating a vibrant information marketplace for students.

The Town Council's stall proved popular with students, who enjoyed trying their luck on a tom-bola featuring prizes including sweets, water bottles, charging cables, and power banks. Beyond

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the fun activities, students also had the opportunity to contribute to Ashington Town Council's youth survey, Gary Holmes, Administration and Communications Officer informed students that the purpose of the youth survey is to ensure their voices are heard in shaping local services. Information about the council-funded free-swimming sessions at Ashington Leisure Centre during the February half term was also distributed, promoting health and wellness opportunities available to young people in the community.

Sharon Parmley, Engagement and Events Officer for Ashington Town Council, reflected on the successful event: "Thank you to Carla for arranging this excellent opportunity. College roadshows provide students with a valuable chance to discover what services and support are available to them right here in Ashington. It was fantastic to engage directly with young people and hear their perspectives."

The roadshow represents part of Ashington Town Council's ongoing commitment to meaningful youth engagement and ensuring young residents are aware of the support networks, activities, and opportunities accessible to them locally.

Free Swim Sessions

The free swim sessions continue. Each session offers up to 80 slots on a first-come, first-served basis. No booking is required — participants simply turn up to take part. The programme supports the Council's goals of promoting active and healthy lifestyles, increasing access to leisure facilities, and inspiring the next generation of swimmers.

February Half Term – Session Report

Two free swim sessions were delivered during the February half term holiday. Both sessions were well-attended, demonstrating strong community demand for the initiative.

| Date | Day | Time | Attendance |
|--|-----------|------------|------------|
| 18th February 2025 | Wednesday | 1pm – 2pm | 39 |
| 21st February 2025 | Saturday | 1pm to 2pm | 37 |
| Total February Half Term Attendance | | | 76 |

A combined total of 76 residents attended across the two February sessions, reflecting the continued popularity and community value of the programme.

Upcoming Sessions – Easter Holidays

Four free swim sessions are scheduled across the Easter holiday period. The Saturday sessions during the Easter holidays have a revised start time of 2:30pm – 3:30pm (rather than 1pm) due to existing pool commitments at the leisure centre.

| Date | Day | Time | Slots Available |
|-----------------|-----------|-------------------|-----------------|
| 8th April 2025 | Wednesday | 1pm – 2pm | 80 |
| 11th April 2025 | Saturday | 2:30pm – 3:30pm * | 80 |
| 15th April 2025 | Wednesday | 1pm – 2pm | 80 |
| 18th April 2025 | Saturday | 2:30pm – 3:30pm * | 80 |

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The Free Swim programme continues to make a positive impact with strong attendance during the February half term and four further sessions planned for Easter, the initiative is on track to provide accessible, free leisure opportunities to a growing number of local residents. Our own publicity of the free swim is high profile. We have requested that Places Leisure make the free sessions more visible, suggesting posters in the leisure and that screen display the opportunity. We have also recently reminded the organised youth groups, like Scouts and Guides that this opportunity exists.

The funding commitment has increased from £74/hour to £100/hour, still offering value for money at £1.25 per possible attendee. Ashington Town Council will continue funding and commitment to this initiative for 2026, which supports health and wellbeing across the community and encourages participants of all ages to learn to swim or develop their existing skills.

Allotments

We have new plot holders at Woodhorn following works to bring poor plots back into use. There are further plots to occupy following continued team effort and support from allotment holders to Alan.

Further tap repairs have been made.

Temporary repairs have been carried out on roads at Highmarket and Wansbeck Road using road planings.

Plans are in place to resurface roads at Woodhorn in the next couple of weeks, depending on weather. Several hedges have been cut back by plot holders at Woodhorn, opening the gardens up with very visible improvements.

A communal area has been cleared at North Seaton. This includes hedges cut back, rubble removed, materials separated for recycling, and weed spraying carried out. Alan was supported by some allotment holders with was hugely appreciated. NCC will chip the hedges, with chip-pings to be recycled by plot holders. In the future, this area will be levelled and road planings added so it can be used.

NCC have cut back the hedge line between Highmarket Allotments and the Holy Sepulchre church.

Woodland bird boxes have been installed at Green Lane and North Seaton Colliery.

Weed spraying on allotment sites has started, with Nursery Park complete.

Website and Social Media PR

Website

Widescope was contacted to add an extra slot to meetings to upload scanned copies of the signed agreed minutes of each meeting.

The Town Councillor page ([Ashington Town Council - Town Councillors](#)) has also been redesigned for better readability and easier reference of which Councillor is part of which committee.

The following items appeared on our website news page since the previous officer's report.

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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/>

| Article Title | Date |
|--|---------------------------|
| <u>Finance & General Services Committee Meeting on 10/03/2026</u> | 2nd March 2026 |
| <u>EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITY - DEPUTY CLERK</u> | 25th February 2026 |
| <u>Ashington Town Council Offers FREE Swimming Sessions This Easter Half Term</u> | 24th February 2026 |
| <u>Ashington Town Council Supports the Great British Spring Clean with Community Event at Ashington Market</u> | 24th February 2026 |
| <u>Ashington Town Council at Northumberland College Roadshow</u> | 16th February 2026 |

Facebook

Facebook has remained relatively stable over the past month, typical for this time of year as the post-Christmas excitement dies down. Looking ahead, the Easter Trail will run throughout the Easter half term from 30th March to 18th April, with over 20 shops participating once again, welcoming Aaron's Opticians as a new addition, alongside Modern Living returning for another year.

Analytics (10 Feb to 9 Mar 2026)

This period saw a dip across most metrics compared to the previous month. Views were 49,900, down 50.2%, with 13,618 unique viewers (down 34.4%). Content interactions totalled 244, down 36.1%, and page visits came in at 1,100, down 31.2%. The page gained 18 new follows against 5 unfollows, giving a net gain of 13 followers, though this is down 38.1% on the prior period. The one positive note is that non-follower views grew slightly by 2.5%, accounting for 53.4% of all views, indicating the content is still reaching beyond the existing audience.

Upcoming Meetings & Events

- Great British Spring Clean – 17th March, 10:00am
- Wansbeck Valley Foodbank AGM – 23rd March, 2:00pm
- Partnership Meeting – 24th March, 2:00pm
- Full Council Meeting – 31st March, 6:00pm
- Ashington Town Forum – 1st April, 3:00pm (held at Bernicia Headquarters) with site tour of new college beforehand at 1:30pm.
- Grants Advisory Meeting – 8th April, 6:30pm

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FGS2526/142 BUDGET AND EXPENDITURE 2025/26

a) Updated Budget Report

The updated budget and expenditure report was **RECEIVED** and there were **NO** questions to the RFO.

b) Accounts Paid and to be Paid

The schedule of accounts paid was **RECEIVED** and those accounts paid since the last meeting were **ENDORSED** and there were **NO** questions received.

c) Bank Reconciliation

The bank reconciliation dated 28th February 2026 was **RECEIVED**

FGS2526/143 SMALL GRANTS – FEBRUARY ROUND

The report of those Small Grant applications received and awarded was **RECEIVED**.

Overview

Closing Date: 18th February 2026

Total Applications: 3

Successful Applications: 3

Unsuccessful Applications: 0

Successful Applications

The following organisations met the full criteria checklist for small grants:

1. 1st Hirst Scout Group

Awarded £500 to cover costs of a trip to the cinema, swimming sessions and refreshments.

2. 5th Ashington Brownies

Awarded £500 towards the cost of transport for a residential trip (pack holiday) to Seahouses, where they will stay for two nights in the Seahouses Hostel.

3. Junior Parkrun

Awarded £500 towards the costs of setting up a Junior Parkrun. The money is ring-fenced/committed for them and will be paid over following confirmation that they have achieved their funding target required of £4,800.

Total Awarded: £1,500

All successful applicants have been asked to supply dates for filming to add to the filming schedule currently being completed by Luk Luk Productions for Ashington Town Council funding.

FGS2526/144 YOUTH COLLABORATION MEETING

It was **AGREED** to receive a report of the meeting held on 16th February 2026, and address any questions to the Cllrs present

Cllr Ball expressed her appreciation for the continued efforts of all organisations operating across the town, personally thanking each of them for their outstanding contributions. She encouraged all residents to support these organisations and to take the opportunity to learn more about the work they do.

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FGS2526/145 PROJECT SHIELD – ACTIVITY REPORT AND FUNDING RELEASE

The report detailing Project Shield activity was **RECEIVED** and the release of the £20,000 previously allocated within the 2025/26 budget was **APPROVED**.

Members were not minded to consider a proposal for additional funding for 2026/27; noting that no provision currently exists within the 2026/27 budget.

Cllr Brown reported that he had attended the Project Shield meeting and expressed concern that the project may no longer continue, following a reduction in funding from the Police Crime Commissioner. He noted that the cost is £55,000 per person, per annum, and that the Council had contributed £20,000 in support of the project in the current financial year.

Cllr Ball echoed these concerns, describing the potential closure as a significant loss. She requested that Ashington Town Council formally extend its heartfelt thanks to the Project Shield team and acknowledged that it was unfortunately not possible for the combined Town and Parish Councils to fund the shortfall, given the limited time available to secure the necessary budget. **It was AGREED.**

Cllr Green entered the meeting at 18:12.

Cllr Wright requested that a press release communication be issued by the Council to thank the Project Shield team and to clarify that providing the required level of financing was beyond the Council's capabilities. **It was AGREED.**

FGS2526/146 HIGHWAY IMPROVEMENTS (placed on the agenda by Cllr Coyle)

Cllr Coyle moved the motion to write to Northumberland County Council to formally request that Ashington is strongly considered when decisions are made about where highways funding is directed. Cllr Coyle repeated that Ashington's roads have been in a poor and deteriorating state for many years, causing daily frustration and inconvenience to residents, and in some cases presenting genuine safety concerns. This significant injection of central government funding presents a real opportunity to address problems that have long been felt across our town.

The Town Council recognises that Ashington's County Councillors will already be making the case for investment in our area, and this letter is intended to add the Town Council's voice to that effort — demonstrating broad local support and the strength of feeling among residents.

Cllr Coyle identified road maintenance as a main priority, noting that he, Cllr Simm, and Cllr Davison had previously discussed the budget, which includes an additional £35 million in funding. He expressed serious concern regarding the condition of Ashington's roads, stating that the town is approximately 40 years behind in terms of road maintenance and that the current state of the roads is not fit for purpose. Cllr Coyle highlighted several specific areas of concern within his ward, including Newbiggin Road, the road between North Seaton Road and the back lanes of Coronation Terrace, which have been patchworked and require full resurfacing. He further noted that roads on the Jubilee Estate, installed 20 years ago, were left incomplete with two thirds of the estate yet to be finished. Additional concerns were raised regarding Ariel Street in the Hirst, where block paving has deteriorated; Rosalind Street, where a crack in the road is causing flooding; Woodhorn Road back lanes from Hirst Castle to the old people's home, where residents were promised road works 10 to 15 years ago and the wrong side of the road was

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subsequently completed; the main road along Woodhorn Road, where speed humps are mismatched between rubber and concrete; and Second Avenue, where brick planters are obstructing the flow of traffic. Cllr Coyle urged all Councillors to formally raise concerns regarding roads within their own wards.

Cllr Grimshaw acknowledged the tremendous stress experienced by County Councillors in attempting to resolve road issues in Ashington, noting that progress had consistently been hampered by financial and budgetary constraints.

Cllr Coyle proposed that the following questions be included in a letter to Northumberland County Council: What is the total amount of money allocated for roads? What percentage of that allocation will be directed to Ashington? How many roads and footpaths in Ashington are currently recorded as Amber or Red; how long have those roads and footpaths been recorded at those ratings? and whether the JCB Pro system is to be implemented in Ashington?

Cllr Tully stated that he did not believe any Councillor would oppose this motion and noted that the issue had persisted for many years, dating back to the time of Wansbeck Council. He highlighted that the core issue is the allocation of resources, and pointed out that Ashington, alongside Blyth, is among the only areas that supplements Northumberland County Council's funding for services that should already be provided. Cllr Tully said he has without success tried to ask similar questions about spending and resources and had not received any worthwhile response.

The Executive Officer advised that questions could be asked by the Council, or they could be submitted as a Freedom of Information request, as this would legally require a response within a set number of days.

Cllr Ball stated that any letter sent should be more firmly worded, and further proposed that County Council representatives be invited to attend a Town Council meeting to explain their rationale directly to both the Council and the public.

Cllr Coyle expressed support for inviting County Council representatives and members of the public to attend a meeting, providing residents with the opportunity to put their views directly to County Council.

Cllr Fox suggested that, should County Council representatives be invited to a meeting, Councillors should actively promote the event through social media and Council communications.

Cllr Grimshaw advised that, if the Council intended to mobilise public participation, consideration should be given to securing an alternative venue capable of accommodating a larger audience.

The Executive Officer asked whether the Ashington and Blyth Community Partnership, chaired by Cllr Caroline Ball, was not a more suitable format for public questions about County Council services. Furthermore, is it appropriate to put NCC Officers in this position at a meeting of the Town Council, specifically if invited to answer questions of elected members.

Cllr Brown called upon the County Councillors present to collaborate and make a strong case at County Council level, noting that Ashington had received no meaningful investment in roads or road maintenance for 16 years.

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It was **AGREED** that the Executive Officer would write to Northumberland County Council on behalf of the Council, setting out members' concerns regarding the condition of the highway network in Ashington and the allocation of highways funding across the county. The letter would include a formal invitation to senior NCC representatives to visit the town, offering to accompany them on a tour of locations of particular concern, to enable elected members to speak directly with NCC about community concerns, and to seek clarification on how roads are assessed and funding decisions are made. NCC would be asked to respond by 6th April 2026.

FGS2526/147 DATE, TIME AND VENUE FOR THE NEXT MEETING

Tuesday 14th April 2026, 6:00pm, Council Chamber.

The meeting ended at 18:43

DRAFT