

AGENDA 6, Enc i) ASHINGTON TOWN COUNCIL, DRAFT Minutes of the Finance and General Services Committee held at 6:00pm on Tuesday 13th January 2026, at Ashington Town Hall, Council Chamber, 65 Station Road, Ashington, NE63 8RX

CLLRS PRESENT:

Cllrs Lynne Grimshaw (Chair), Karl Green, Kerry Davison, David Coyle, Marjorie Chambers, Louis Brown, Glyn Davies, Scott Amery, Bob Walkinshaw, Caroline Ball, Jessica Appleby, Melanie Fox, Louis Brown, Steven Roberts, John Tully, Paul Wright.

ALSO, IN ATTENDANCE

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

FGS2526/106 WELCOME BY THE CHAIR

Welcome by Cllr Lynne Grimshaw.

FGS2526/107 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Cllrs Mark Purvis and Jim Lang.

FGS2526/108 DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS

Cllr Brown disclosed an interest in any topics including Allotments

Cllr Wright disclosed an interest in discussing Citizens Advice Northumberland

FGS2526/109 DISPENSATIONS

Cllrs Brown and Wright requested dispensations, which were agreed.

FGS2526/110 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

There was one member of the public present, but no questions.

FGS2526/111 DRAFT MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the previous Finance and General Services Meeting held on Tuesday 9th December were **RECEIVED** and **AGREED**.

Cllr Davison enquired whether there had been any update regarding the financials from Wansbeck Valley Foodbank. The Executive Officer confirmed that no update had been received, but the scheduled evaluations forms had been issued. The Annual Report for 2025 is usually available from March of the following year.

FGS2526/112 PRE-BUDGET REPORT 2026/27

It was **AGREED** to formally receive the report sent out in December. The EO advised that this was sent by email and had been included again for formal receipt.

FGS2526/113 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 was **ENDORSED** and there were **NO** questions received.

c) Bank Reconciliation

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The bank reconciliation dated 31st December 2025 was **RECEIVED**

FGS2526/114 WANSBECK VALLEY FOODBANK AND CITIZENS ADVICE NORTHUMBERLAND (*placed on the agenda by Cllr John Tully*)

Cllr Tully thanked the Council for allowing the motion to be placed on the agenda. He expressed that it was sad and disgraceful that in the sixth most wealthy country in the world, foodbanks were needed, stating that what was required was a good social security system like the one that previously existed. He acknowledged that unfortunately there remained a need for foodbanks and Citizens Advice, and that the two organisations being asked to receive additional funding represented an investment. He noted that the foodbanks dealt with the most vulnerable and neediest within Ashington, and that Citizens Advice provided a great return on investment in terms of benefits, advice and help for the people of Ashington. Cllr Tully mentioned he disagreed entirely with the Working Group who had put the cap in place. Cllr Grimshaw noted a point of order than the cap had been brought to Council and was agreed.

Cllr Tully stated he believed the Council had lost its direction in terms of the budget and the ceiling of £5,000, emphasising this was not a question of favourites but of priorities. He mentioned that using the underspend demonstrated there was currently a large underspend, which highlighted another issue from the Council.

Cllr Amery stated he did not doubt that both organisations did fantastic work but had an issue with using the entire underspend on two organisations when the foodbank had a substantial reserve, greater than that of the Council. He felt there were many good causes in Ashington that could have used the money, and that this set a dangerous precedent. He suggested this should be opened up to give other organisations the opportunity to apply for additional funding if that was an agreed use of the balances.

Cllr Green mentioned he thought there had been discussions about using the money from the climate change budget for solar panels for the unit.

Cllr Brown mentioned he had attended an AGM for the foodbank where it was noted there was £200,000 in the bank, which was needed due to expenses for vans and a warehouse costing £100,000 per year. He stated that for the ten years the foodbank had been operating and the £500,000 they had spent within Ashington, they were a fantastic organisation and deserved the extra help. He noted that £60,000 worth of food was given in Ashington last year, and the representatives he spoke with were unaware of the fifteen-minute discussion. Cllr Grimshaw made a point of order that this had been addressed previously and closed the matter.

Cllr Brown continued that they gave £60,000 worth of food, most of which went to the Hirst Ward. He mentioned that Citizens Advice provided a free service of advice for the most vulnerable and marginalised, focusing on those in greatest need such as low income, disabled, lacking skills, without internet access or unemployed. In the previous year, 2,600 people were from Ashington, and many were classified as disabled. With the addition of the phone line, they now offered visits and web chat services.

Cllr Davison mentioned she was waiting for the most up to date figures from the foodbank, for 2025. She stated the cash in the bank was £314,000 and they worked with another twenty benefactors to receive this money. She acknowledged that the amount of food was expensive but questioned how much of said food was donated. On Northumberland Citizens Advice she noted their income for the year was £5 million, with £2.2 million in restricted funds that was

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spent, but they still had £1.6 million as part of Citizens Advice Bureau. Cllr Davison stated the Council needed to see the figures from the foodbank, including demographic information, the process and how much activity was within Ashington.

She noted that Citizens Advice Bureau was across Northumberland, not just Ashington, and was supported by many other organisations. She continued that the cap was put in place to stop the favouring of organisations and ensure the Council's generous grants budget was shared.

Cllr Chambers asked if these two organisations had requested any further funding. The Executive Officer confirmed that there had been no approach from Northumberland Citizens Advice, and Wansbeck Valley Food Bank was as presented at the previous meeting.

Cllr Coyle motioned to move to the vote, as this matter had been on four agendas. Cllr Ball seconded the motion, noting that everybody knew of the amazing work both organisations did for Ashington. She noted the Council had a grants process in place and was worried that asking for more money via motions could cause a breakdown in relations with other organisations, as a proper grants panel existed.

Cllr Davis mentioned that in the papers they received on the budget it was explained that NCC would soon be agreeing a decision on council tax relief, which would affect the poorest people in Ashington, and at their own admission they would be working with Citizens Advice Bureau. He noted that a few months ago, £20,000 was given to the Project Shield and no balance sheets had been received from them.

Cllr Tully responded that there had been a few points raised on why this should not go forward but stated the Council should be doing this as it was the right thing to do, and he did not care about the process or who else gave them money. He expressed his concern about what this Council did and what it stood for, stating it should stand for supporting the people of Ashington and the organisations who helped and supported the people of Ashington.

Following the discussion, a vote was taken.

THREE voted in **FAVOUR** while **THIRTEEN** voted **AGAINST**.

The motion fell and was **NOT AGREED**.

FGS2526/115 YOUTH SERVICES COLLABORATION MEETING

The report of the meeting held on 1st December 2025 was **RECEIVED**.

Cllr Ball reported that a lot was happening around Ashington in terms of youth groups and activities. She mentioned the swimming activities over Christmas and exciting events planned for Easter. She stated that some of the activities within the Welfare Centre had been a huge hit and a lot of people had turned up to the event.

FGS2526/116 EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC

It was AGREED that the press and public be excluded from the meeting during consideration of the following two items, permitted under Section 1 (2) LGA 1960, due to the confidential nature of the business being transacted.

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Cllr Wright left the meeting at 18:38.

FGS2526/117 COUNCIL UNIT FOR OPERATIONAL WORKS

A confidential feasibility report was **RECEIVED**.

Cllr Brown mentioned that discussions were taking place about the changing room at the proposed new unit and asked where the vans were going to be parked. The Executive Officer mentioned there were more parking spaces available than the current unit. Cllr Brown raised security concerns, and the Executive Officer mentioned there were ways around it. Cllr Brown stated he required a visit to get to grips with the situation.

Cllr Coyle mentioned everyone was asked if they wanted to visit and as far as he was aware no one took this up, but he had been himself. Cllr Coyle commented that this was a needed to allow the Council to grow and to make the town better.

Cllr Brown mentioned he had read a report from the Clerk stating that to get it turned over to the Council would take a year to eighteen months, and because of this he did not feel the need to visit right now. He stated that if this was serious, for £40,000, a visit was required before anything was agreed upon for the building.

Cllr Davis asked if it was expected that the car park was part of the deal. The Executive Officer said no, it was only the building included in discussions up to now. He also asked why the surveyor could not look at the store, and the Executive Officer mentioned this was due to it being locked, but that it was very small.

Cllr Amery mentioned that some Cllrs were being a little bit short sighted as the rent for the current unit would go up and go up quickly once the agreement was over. He stated that if the Council could get this new unit on the terms proposed it was a steal, and the amount invested into it would be roughly nine years' worth of rent on the current unit, and the workers needed the bigger space. He emphasised this was an investment and an asset.

Cllr Simm mentioned the location was very good and it was overlooked in terms of security as there was CCTV, the car park and other features.

Cllr Ball mentioned that if the Council was going to do it, it needed to be done now due to the way County Council were asset stripping. She stated this would pay for itself quickly when considering the return on investment and this was a good thing for the Council and the town.

A vote was held and **ELEVEN** voted in **FAVOUR** while **ONE** voted **AGAINST** and **TWO** **ABSTAINED**.

It was **AGREED**.

The Administration and Communications Officer and The Allotments Officer left at 18:50.

FGS2526/118 PERSONNEL – WORKFORCE MATTERS

It was AGREED to receive and SUPPORT the recommendations of the Personnel Committee meeting held on 16th December 2025 regarding proposed workforce structural changes and to recommend budget allocation for 2026/27.

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The Administrative Officer and Allotments Officer entered at 19:08.

FGS2526/119 DRAFT BUDGET 2026/27

Cllr Tully mentioned the process and noted that in the past there had been informal meetings with The Executive Officer. He asked if the Council agreed the budget that evening, could the Councillors have one or two informal meetings with The Executive Officer to deep dive into the budget.

With the permission of the Chair, the Executive Officer commented that since December when the pre-Budget report went out the offer of informal meetings had been made, but not taken up, other than discussions with three Cllrs.

Following a lengthy discussion about the ample opportunity of Cllrs to address questions on the budget with the Executive Officer, Cllr Grimshaw sought any concerns from the floor.

Cllr Amery moved to go to a vote, as this had been out with ample time and Councillors had plenty of time to look at it and to come back with any questions.

Cllr Grimshaw moved to the vote, the Draft Budget was **APPROVED** by a majority of those present and voting.

FGS2526/120 DATE, TIME AND VENUE FOR THE NEXT MEETING

Tuesday 10th February 2026, 6:00pm, Council Chamber.

The meeting ended at 19:19