

AGENDA 10, Enc vii) PARTNERSHIP BOARD UPDATE REPORT AND REPORT OF ASHINGTON PARTNERSHIP BOARD MEETING HELD ON 21st JANUARY 2026

Background and Context

Following NCC's presentation to Council on 3rd June 2025, the Partnership Board has been engaged in comprehensive review of the Enhanced Neighbourhood Services Partnership. This has included:

- Detailed memo to NCC in September 2025 proposing shift from cleansing to environmental enhancement priorities
- NCC response on 24th September 2025 supporting the principle but indicating budget constraints
- Two further meetings in October with frank discussions about priorities and feasibility
- Comprehensive follow-up communication requesting full resource picture, cost breakdowns, and trial approach

The Partnership Board met with Northumberland County Council officers on 22nd October 2025 to progress discussions on the proposed shift from cleansing focus to enhanced grounds maintenance and kerb appeal priorities.

This report details the outcomes of the Partnership Board meeting held on 22nd October 2025 to progress these discussions.

Key Points from 22nd October Meeting

- NCC has agreed in principle to reconfigure workforce, moving 5 Partnership-funded operatives from cleansing to grounds maintenance work
- Trial programme will commence early December 2025 in 2-3 streets per ward plus one key town entrance
- Impact of reduced cleansing capacity will become visible during trial period
- Service Level Agreement model discussed (would increase costs due to contingency requirements)
- Next Partnership Board meeting scheduled for 24th November 2025 to review trial proposals

Action Required

- Council to receive the report
- Members invited to raise questions for Partnership Board members
- No decisions required at this stage

Next Steps

- Councillors to submit trial street suggestions by early November
- NCC to provide full trial details by 17th November 2025
- Partnership Board to meet 24th November to agree trial commencement
- Trial to run December 2025 through to March 2026, providing evidence for budget decisions

AGENDA 10, Enc vii) PARTNERSHIP BOARD UPDATE REPORT AND REPORT OF ASHINGTON PARTNERSHIP BOARD MEETING HELD ON 21st JANUARY 2026

- Full recommendations will come to Council following trial completion and evaluation

Report of Ashington Partnership Board Meeting Held on Wednesday 21st January 2026

Present

Ashington Town Council

Cllr Marjorie Chambers (Chair), Cllr David Coyle (Vice-Chair), Cllr Louis Brown, Cllr Kerry Davison, Sarah Eden (Executive Officer)

Northumberland County Council

Stephen Wardle (NCC Divisional Manager Neighbourhood Services) Peter Bowman (NCC Area Manager, South East Neighbourhood Services), Chris Mordue (NCC Senior Team Leader)

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Cllr Jim Lang. The Board sent their best wishes to Cllr Lang.

2. DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS AND DISPENSATIONS

No disclosable pecuniary interests or dispensations were declared.

3. PREVIOUS MEETINGS

The Board received and agreed as a true record the report of the Partnership Board meeting held on 21st October 2025.

The Board also received the NCC presentation on the Partnership Kerb Appeal Trial that was presented on 24th November 2025 and positively agreed at that meeting.

4. KERB APPEAL TRIAL; INTERIM PROGRESS REPORT

The Board received an interim progress report from NCC on the kerb appeal trial which commenced on 1st December 2025. The report included an overview of trial areas, work completed to date, operational observations, resident and Councillor feedback, and photographic evidence demonstrating the transformation achieved.

Overview and Progress

Chris Mordue provided a detailed update on the trials progress. Work had been completed in Bothal, Haydon, Seaton, and Hirst wards, with the College and Central wards currently underway. Chris Mordue noted that College and Central are significantly larger areas that had been scheduled to commence after the Christmas break to allow for adequate time and resources.

Chris Mordue acknowledged that during the first area - Haydon ward - he had deployed additional resources to ensure an excellent start to the trial. This strategic decision proved highly beneficial as it allowed the operatives to see firsthand what could be achieved through this focused approach. The visible results generated tremendous job satisfaction among the teams, which was further enhanced by positive interactions with residents.

AGENDA 10, Enc vii) PARTNERSHIP BOARD UPDATE REPORT AND REPORT OF ASHINGTON PARTNERSHIP BOARD MEETING HELD ON 21st JANUARY 2026

Outstanding Resident Feedback

The response from residents has been exceptionally positive. Chris Mordue reported that people regularly stopped the operatives on the streets to thank them and comment on how well they were doing. He expressed regret that not everyone who provided positive feedback submitted formal comments, as the informal feedback had been overwhelmingly encouraging. There was unanimous agreement from Board members that the town was looking much better.

Cllr David Coyle confirmed there had been great feedback on the trial from residents across his ward. Cllr Louis Brown praised the visibility of the teams working together in areas, noting that both the work itself and the results were very visible to the community. Stephen Wardle added that he could certainly see a noticeable difference when he drove into town that day.

The Board emphasised the importance of trusting Chris Mordue's professional judgment when he reports positive feedback received directly by the teams, recognising that informal compliments from residents are just as meaningful as formal submissions. This street-level feedback demonstrates genuine community appreciation for the work being undertaken.

Team Motivation and Satisfaction

Cllr Coyle specifically asked whether the kerb appeal trial had been well received by the operatives themselves. Chris Mordue confirmed enthusiastically that it had been, noting that the teams were very keen to know if the Town Council was happy with their work. This demonstrated a genuine sense of pride and ownership in what they were achieving for Ashington.

When asked to elaborate on team morale, Chris Mordue explained that the visible nature of the work and the direct positive feedback from residents had created excellent job satisfaction. The operatives could see the tangible difference they were making, and this, combined with residents appreciation, had generated a very positive working environment.

Peter Bowan reported a very positive mindset shift among operatives throughout the trial period, extending beyond just the kerb appeal teams to the zonal teams as well. This cultural change was reflected in improved working practices and a more proactive approach to service delivery.

Cllr Coyle passed on specific praise for an operative he had observed who went beyond simply emptying a bin to also clear up the surrounding area. Chris Mordue confirmed this feedback would be passed on to the individual concerned. Cllr Brown also noted positively seeing an ATC operative at Doves Corner, commenting that it was good to see the visible presence of the partnership's work.

The Executive Officer highlighted the importance of team morale and job security, noting that when discussions about the potential ending of the partnership occur outside formal meetings, this inevitably impacts staff who worry about their employment. Chris Mordue confirmed that such uncertainty does affect the workforce, making it all the more important that the trial demonstrates the value and sustainability of the partnership for all involved.

Photographic Evidence

The Board reviewed comprehensive before-and-after photographs of the work completed across the trial wards. The visual evidence clearly demonstrated the significant transformation achieved through the kerb appeal approach. The photographs showed improvements to grass edging, pavement clearance, and overall street appearance that were immediately apparent.

AGENDA 10, Enc vii) PARTNERSHIP BOARD UPDATE REPORT AND REPORT OF ASHINGTON PARTNERSHIP BOARD MEETING HELD ON 21st JANUARY 2026

Cllr Chambers asked whether it would be possible to share these images with the Ashington Branch of the Royal British Legion, noting that they really were testament to the excellent work being achieved through ATC and NCC working together. This was agreed as an excellent way to showcase the partnership's success. The Executive Officer confirmed that all photographs had been shared with all Cllrs as received, and that today's presentation would also be shared but could easily be printed out for sharing elsewhere.

Operational Efficiencies and Skills Development

Chris Mordue emphasised that areas requiring attention had been hit hard and with focused effort, and he requested that Councillors begin thinking about where to focus next for maximum impact. The intention is to continue building on the momentum established during the initial trial phase.

Stephen Wardle highlighted an important benefit of the trial: that efficiencies would naturally develop as teams became more familiar with the work and refined their execution methods. This continuous improvement would enhance the value delivered over time.

Chris Mordue noted that grounds maintenance staff had been utilised on the kerb appeal trial alongside the dedicated Partnership team, demonstrating the benefits of having an interchangeable workforce with shared skills across different service areas. This flexibility allows for more responsive and efficient service delivery.

Highways Collaboration

Cllr Brown enquired whether the neighbourhood team were working collaboratively with highways, having observed the gulley sucker in operation. Chris Mordue explained that an issue identified in Haydon ward relating to drainage had been passed to highways, and the communication had worked extremely well; the problem was being resolved that very day with a drain being installed.

The Executive Officer reminded the Board about the separate gullies initiative with highways that had received a very positive response and would be picked up directly with highways when their work was complete.

5. CLEANSING SERVICE IMPACT ASSESSMENT

The Board received and discussed NCC's assessment of the impact of workforce reconfiguration on cleansing services during the trial period.

Minimal Impact to Date

The Executive Officer confirmed that there had been no formal reports received regarding full bins or litter issues, with the exception of her own observation about Kenilworth Road. This was identified as a scheduling matter that the trial would help to reveal and address.

Analysis of Fix My Street reports showed only a few instances of full bins reported, with nothing dramatic or concerning. Stephen Wardle observed that the impact had not been as significant as initially feared, though he acknowledged this was during the winter period when fewer people were out and about. The seasonal nature of cleansing demands would need to be carefully considered as the trial progressed into spring and summer.

The Board agreed that further detailed analysis of cleansing impact and zone management would be undertaken by NCC, with findings brought back to the next Partnership Board meeting.

AGENDA 10, Enc vii) PARTNERSHIP BOARD UPDATE REPORT AND REPORT OF ASHINGTON PARTNERSHIP BOARD MEETING HELD ON 21st JANUARY 2026

Improved Zonal Working

Chris Mordue explained positive developments in how zonal operatives now manage their areas. Operatives driving the 5-tonne vans are now dealing with fly-tipping within their own zones, creating a more responsive and efficient service model. This represents a smarter way of working that maximises the capability of the workforce.

Cllr Coyle commented that this seemed to reflect the teams working smarter not harder which was agreed as an accurate assessment of the improvements being implemented.

Fly-Tipping Monitoring

The Board agreed that fly-tipping numbers would be brought to the next meeting to allow for year-on-year comparison. It was acknowledged that December is typically a challenging month for fly-tipping as people clear out items before and after Christmas. Despite this seasonal challenge, there was optimism that year-on-year improvements could be demonstrated.

The Executive Officer updated the Board on support provided to the Ashington Community Litter Pickers, confirming she had purchased a substantial stock of heavy-duty coloured bags. This resolved supply issues and, importantly, made volunteer-collected litter more distinguishable from fly-tipping through the use of coloured bags at collection points.

6. TRIAL REVIEW AND NEXT STEPS

The Board engaged in positive discussions about the trial's progress to date and the way forward.

Delivering Visible Improvements

There was unanimous agreement that the trial is delivering the visible improvements intended. The transformation in completed wards has been impressive, with clear evidence that the kerb appeal approach makes a tangible difference to how Ashington looks and feels.

The positive feedback from residents, the enthusiasm of the workforce, and the photographic evidence all demonstrate that this strategic shift is achieving its core objective of improving the town's appearance in ways that matter most to the community.

Next Phase of Trial Areas

Following completion of Central and College wards, the next phase will focus on additional streets selected by Ward Councillors. All Councillors have been asked to identify the next areas where they would like kerb appeal work to be concentrated, allowing the successful approach to be rolled out more widely across the town.

Cllr Coyle raised the question of whether a continuous cycle approach might be feasible; working in an area for approximately 10 days before moving to the next location and maintaining this rotation. This would maximise the positive impact of visible, concentrated effort across different parts of the town. This operational model will be explored as the trial develops.

Seasonal Considerations

Chris Mordue highlighted important seasonal factors that would need to be considered for the spring and summer period. He believed a hybrid model would be necessary that combines kerb appeal activities with enhanced cleansing, given that litter and cleansing demands increase significantly during warmer months when more people are outdoors.

AGENDA 10, Enc vii) PARTNERSHIP BOARD UPDATE REPORT AND REPORT OF ASHINGTON PARTNERSHIP BOARD MEETING HELD ON 21st JANUARY 2026

Chris Mordue suggested that during spring and summer, the Council may wish to focus efforts on weed control rather than grass edging, as edging work is better suited to the autumn and winter months. This flexible, seasonal approach would ensure that resources are deployed most effectively throughout the year, responding to the changing priorities and environmental conditions of different seasons.

Future Evaluation and Decision-Making

A further Partnership Board meeting will be held in March 2026 to conduct a comprehensive evaluation of the trial. This will include:

- Complete assessment of work delivered across all trial areas
- Detailed analysis of cleansing service impact and any adjustments needed
- Evaluation of operational efficiencies and workforce benefits
- Consideration of seasonal hybrid models for different times of year
- Comprehensive review of resident feedback and community impact
- Recommendations for the future direction of the partnership

Following this evaluation, recommendations will be presented to the Council's FGS Committee for formal decision-making about how the partnership proceeds beyond the trial period.

7. PARTNERSHIP FLEET AND VEHICLE CHARGING ARRANGEMENTS

The Board received an update on discussions regarding vehicle costs within the Partnership Agreement. NCC confirmed the figures for the Council's small van and pick-up truck used by ATC's own workforce.

It was agreed that these vehicle costs are more appropriately shown within ATC's own vehicle cost codes rather than within the Partnership budget, providing greater transparency and more accurate financial reporting for both organisations.

The Executive Officer requested Board support to remove the £9,000 vehicle costs from the Partnership cost code and add them to ATC's vehicle costs, whilst maintaining the Partnership budget heading at the capped £236,000 (rather than reducing it by £9,000). This would provide some flexibility to accommodate pay deal costs which are not yet confirmed. Members agreed to this approach, with Cllr Brown adding that he did not disagree but would consider in the round.

8. BUDGET IMPLICATIONS FOR 2026-27

The Board noted that the Council will set its budget on 27th January 2026, and the current cap of £236k has been applied to the draft budget presented for approval.

The Board discussed the likely impact of the budget cap on future partnership staffing numbers, acknowledging that this will need to be carefully managed to ensure service delivery can be maintained at the levels expected by both the Council and residents.

Investment Balance Concerns

Cllr Brown commented that matters regarding the partnership budget would need to be discussed in the round. He expressed concern about the balance of investment between ATC and NCC in

AGENDA 10, Enc vii) PARTNERSHIP BOARD UPDATE REPORT AND REPORT OF ASHINGTON PARTNERSHIP BOARD MEETING HELD ON 21st JANUARY 2026

Neighbourhood Services. He noted that the Town Council's investment of almost a quarter of a million pounds, which previously represented a smaller proportion of total investment in Ashington's neighbourhood services, appeared to be increasing as a percentage as NCC's own investment reduced. Cllr Brown requested that NCC provide figures regarding their investment in Ashington's Neighbourhood Services to allow for proper comparison and understanding of the overall funding picture.

9. SCHEDULE OF REMAINING MEETINGS

The Board confirmed that the next meeting would be held in March 2026 for the final trial evaluation. The exact date will be confirmed once all partners have been consulted on availability.

CONCLUSION

This meeting marked an exceptionally positive milestone in the Enhanced Neighbourhood Services Partnership. The Kerb Appeal Trial has demonstrated tangible, visible improvements to Ashington's appearance that have been welcomed by residents, motivated the workforce, and validated the strategic shift toward environmental enhancement priorities.

The collaboration between Ashington Town Council and Northumberland County Council exemplifies what can be achieved when local authorities work together with shared goals and mutual respect. The enthusiastic response from both residents and operatives demonstrates that this approach is delivering meaningful benefits for the town.

While operational and financial considerations will continue to require careful attention, the trial has proven that the kerb appeal approach works. The partnership is successfully delivering what the Town Council and residents want to see; a visibly better Ashington that takes pride in its appearance.

As the trial moves into its next phase with additional wards, and as seasonal considerations are explored for spring and summer working, the foundation has been firmly established for a sustainable, effective partnership model that serves Ashington well within the resources available.

The March 2026 evaluation will provide the evidence base for informed decision-making about the partnership's future, building on this very encouraging start.