

ANNUAL ASSEMBLY OF THE TOWN MEETING

WEDNESDAY, 22ND MAY 2024

Minutes of the proceedings of the **ANNUAL ASSEMBLY OF THE TOWN MEETING** for the Parish of Great Aycliffe, held in the Council Chamber, Council Offices, School Aycliffe Lane, Newton Aycliffe, on **WEDNESDAY, 22ND MAY 2024** at **7.15 p.m.**

PRESENT **Councillor Joanne Jones (Chairman / Deputy Mayor)**
and there were 18 Electors present.

The Chairman (Deputy Mayor) of the Council opened the meeting by welcoming everyone to the Annual Assembly of the Town Meeting. The Deputy Mayor read out a statement of how the meeting would proceed and possible involvement by members of the electorate.

1. NOTICE OF MEETING

The Notice convening the Meeting was taken as read.

2. MINUTES

It was proposed by Jed Hillary, seconded by Carl Robinson and

RESOLVED – that the Minutes of the proceedings of the Annual Assembly of the Town Meeting, held on the 24th May 2023, be confirmed as a correct record and record and signed by the Chairman.

3. PRESENTATION FROM GREEN ARTS

A representative from Green Arts, who are based at the Moore Lane ECO Centre, gave a presentation and a question-and-answer session afterwards.

The Chairman thanked them for the presentation.

4. CHAIRMAN / MAYOR'S ANNUAL REPORT

The following copy of the Chairman / Mayor's Annual Report was given on behalf of the Mayor, Councillor John Clark and was taken as read.

Good evening and welcome to this Annual Assembly of the Town Meeting for the Parish of Great Aycliffe.

My name is Councillor John Clark and I am the newly appointed Mayor of the Town Council.

It is my honour to deliver this annual report on the work of the Town Council during the last twelve months and looking ahead at our plans for the forthcoming year.

During 2023/24 the Council has continued to provide many valued services, facilities and events to the residents of Great Aycliffe.

The Town Council will face significant challenges over the coming years as it deals with likely grant funding cuts and budget pressures as a result of the ongoing economic difficulties which are causing particular strain on the Council's Revenue Budget.

The Council will always strive to support the community and protect and maintain important services including our cemeteries, allotments, green open space and environmental areas, parks, play areas, pre-school, community events, football pitches, and sports and golf complex.

However, the Council will need to review the services it currently offers, how they are delivered, and seek more efficient ways of running services to ensure that they are providing the best value for money possible whilst also ensuring that the services provided align with community needs and priorities.

I will now provide an overview of the many services that the Town Council has planned to provide to the community of Great Aycliffe during this coming 2024/25 year.

Environment

The Town Council takes great pride in the green environment of the town and provides a number of services in support of this. This includes the provision of:-

Allotments

The Town Council provides over 220 allotment sites located at:

- Clarence Chare
- Finchale Road
- St. Oswald's
- Aycliffe Village and
- Byerley Park

In addition to the allotments gardens, the Town Council also offers facilities for keeping pigeons and poultry, as well as beekeeping plots at specific allotments sites. The Council provides a home at Clarence Chare Allotments for the recently reformed Great Aycliffe Garden Guild, who are now running a not-for-profit allotments shop and community room on site.

Cemeteries

The Town Council provides, maintains and undertakes burial services at its two cemeteries at West Cemetery and Stephenson Way. We also provide a burial service for St. Andrews Church in Aycliffe Village.

Grounds Maintenance

The Town Council undertakes grounds maintenance e.g. the provision of flower beds, grass cutting and tree planting and maintenance, on all Council owned land and facilities.

Environment and Green Open Space

The Town Council carry out environmental management of a number of nature and conservation areas including the Great Aycliffe Way and other green open space across the Parish including the Great Aycliffe Way, Woodham Burn, South Agnew Plantation, Cobbler's Hall Plantation, Simpasture Railway Walk, Aycliffe Nature Park, School Aycliffe Wetlands and Byerley Park Nature Area.

The Town Council is also the custodian of Aycliffe Village Greens.

We deliver a comprehensive programme of environmental activities for schools, community groups, environment events, and deliver an Environment Week, which involves visiting the primary schools in the town to give an interactive presentation on litter and then offering the opportunity for the children to take part in a litter pick in their local community.

We run an Eco Centre at Moore Lane Park which is currently occupied by Green Arts who run arts programmes, activities and events from the building.

We also assist a number of community groups such as Great Aycliffe Tidy Team, local scouts and guides groups.

The Town Council has also declared a Climate Emergency and is working towards reducing its carbon footprint and becoming carbon zero by 2050. Ongoing projects include the investigation of the installation of solar panels and electric vehicle charging points at Council facilities and significant tree planting across the Parish.

Street Equipment

The Town Council provides public seating, bus shelters, and litter and dog bins on Town Council owned land.

Recreation

Leisure facilities and community events have formed a major part of the Council's service provision over the years. This includes the provision of:-

Parks and Play Areas

The Town Council owns and operates eight very different parks, all with their own individual character. These are found around the town at:

- Moore Lane Park
- St. Oswald's Park
- Town Park
- Horndale Park
- Simpasture Park
- West Park
- Byerley Park
- Woodham Park

We provide modern and well-maintained play equipment at all of these parks, as well as specific play areas at the following sites:-

- Oakleaf Sports Complex
- School Aycliffe
- Aycliffe Village
- Scott Place
- Cobbler's Hall

The Town Council also provides five multi-use games areas at Moore Lane, Simpasture, Horndale, Woodham and Cobbler's Hall, as well as a skate park in the Town Park, a scoot track at Horndale Park and a BMX track at Woodham Park.

Park Patrol Service

The Park Patrol Service provides an out of hours service to monitor and safeguard the Council's parks, other facilities and their users.

Oak Leaf Sports Complex

The Oak Leaf Sports Complex provides an indoor bowls green, a multi-use sports hall, four squash courts, a function room and bar and catering facilities.

The sports complex is also home to an indoor bowls club, squash club, running club and archery club, and provides a number of coaching and activity sessions for both adults and children, including an activity programme for children during school holidays.

In recent years, a programme of events has been developed at the sports complex including school sports events, junior football coaching, Comic-Con type events, pantomimes, open mic nights, crazy golf, dog shows and craft markets.

Oak Leaf Golf Complex

The Town Council also manages and operates the Oak Leaf Golf Complex, comprising an eighteen-hole golf course, 18-bay floodlit driving range, golf shop and changing rooms.

Football Pitches

The Town Council provides eight football pitches, including junior football and six a side pitches at three sites:

- Sports Complex
- Simpasture
- Moore Lane

Community Events

The Town Council runs a programme of annual community events including:-

- Senior Citizens' Excursions
- Fireworks Display
- Fun in the Parks
- Santa Tours and Santa Letters
- Christmas Lighting Display

The Senior Citizens' Trips for 2023 were once again very popular, with around 860 local residents visiting destinations including Keswick, Whitby, Harrogate, South Shields and Beamish. The trips are again taking place in 2024, with this year's venues York, Whitby, Skipton, the Lake District and Whitley Bay. A total of 1,000 places are available and have all been taken up.

The Fun in the Parks for 2023 were extremely busy, with numbers of attendees exceeding expectations at all parks. For 2024 we have another full programme of Fun in the Parks scheduled for the summer holidays.

Last year the town marked its 75th Anniversary and the Council held a celebratory event in the Town Park on Sunday 2nd July to mark the occasion. Local community groups, singers and performers came along and had a great day looking back on our town through the decades.

We also curated a collection of historical photographs and memories which were displayed around the town and on our website and undertook a number of other initiatives, including the planting of 75 Oak trees.

The Council provided a grant and use of Council land at the Oak Leaf playing fields to an outside events company for the inaugural Ayclife Music Festival at the end of July. The event was a great success and is taking place again this year, with non-financial support from the Town Council.

The Council also funds and helps facilitate the Big Brass Bash in the Town Park which takes place in July.

The Council also provides finance and support to events run by local organisations including the following events:-

- Remembrance Day Parade
- Girls Can Football
- Cyclocross Event
- Tri-Golf Schools Event
- Aycliffe Bus Preservation Society Vintage Bus Event
- Food Markets in the Town Centre

Other Services

Other services provided by the Town Council include:-

Pre-School Learning Centres

The Town Council provides a Pre-School Learning Centre located in St. Oswald's Park which is currently registered for 40 places for 3 and 4-year-old children.

The Council also provides a setting for two-year olds called 'Tots in the Park', offering 12 places, morning and afternoon, 5 days per week.

Both pre-schools have recently been classified as Outstanding by Ofsted.

Grants and Donations Fund

The Town Council operates a grants and donations fund offering financial support to community organisations and local charities.

Community Recognition Scheme

The Council operates a Community Recognition Award Scheme to provide a means of recognising and acknowledging the dedication, commitment and outstanding contribution that nominated individuals make to improve and promote the Parish of Great Aycliffe.

Civic Events

The Town Council hold a number of civic events including Mayor's at Home and the Annual Charity Civic Dinner.

Newsletter

The Council produces four newsletters each year to keep the public advised of current activities, services, and events. Most newsletters are now published electronically.

Investment in Community Assets

The Council has continued to develop its Asset Management Plan in order to plan investment in Council and community assets such as buildings, vehicles, machinery, play equipment and street equipment.

The Council's Capital Programme makes budget provision each year for an ongoing programme of investment in these assets and significant investment has been made in recent years in new community assets such as play equipment, multi-use games areas and skate parks.

Last year, due to spending restrictions linked to the difficult budget situation, capital expenditure was limited to essential investment including building works, replacement vehicles and machinery, information technology improvements, play

area safety surfacing, bus shelter repairs, footpath repairs and drainage improvements.

However, the Council also undertook a refurbishment of Byerley Park Play Area using Section 106 Agreement monies and also secured external grant monies for the History of a Newton Town exhibition boards and public seating and bins.

This year planned investment includes further essential investment in building works, machinery, play area safety surfacing replacement and footpath repairs.

Council Finances

Despite the challenges created by the economic difficulties and cost of living crisis over the last year, the Council ended the 2023/24 year in relatively strong financial health, having delivered a saving on its Revenue Budget and maintained its balances and reserves at a level of around £2 million.

The majority of the savings last year were as a result of the planned top-up of capital reserves, the unused contingency sum, and significantly increased income at St Oswald's Pre-School as a result of very high attendance numbers, and at the Sports Complex due to the increased usage and sales. There have also been savings in running costs from the fall in the rate of inflation and staff turnover and vacancies.

The positive financial position has also been helped by the Council's decision to put spending restrictions in place on the Revenue and Capital Budgets and by the prudent budget management of all service managers which has resulted in savings across most budget areas.

The Council has also continued to deliver efficiency savings across all services and deliver value for money to local taxpayers.

This healthy financial situation, combined with the identification and delivery of various efficiency savings, meant that the Council was able to set a 2024/25 Revenue and Capital Budget that will enable all current services, facilities, and events to be provided to the usual standards this year, continued capital investment in community assets, and the replenishment of Council reserves.

A small below inflation increase of 2.65% was made to the Town Council Tax to offset inflationary budget pressures on staff pay and running costs, while a further increase of 1.73% was required to offset a cut to the Council Tax Support Grant by Durham County Council.

This resulted in a total increase in the Town Council Tax of 4.38%, which increased the Band A Town Council Tax by £8 this year, taking the yearly bill to £191 per year or £16 per month. This equates to 11p in every £1 of the total Council Tax bill.

The Council also achieved another unqualified external audit report in relation to its Annual Governance and Accountability Return last year. This was a very pleasing outcome and provides independent assurance that the Council's accounting statements present fairly its financial position, and that its financial management, governance, and internal audit arrangements are all sound.

Looking further ahead, the Council continues to face significant financial challenges, including further cuts to the Council Tax Support Grant funding, pressure on staffing costs linked to increases in the National Living Wage and pay awards linked to the cost-of-living crisis, and continued inflationary pressure on running costs.

The Council also faces potentially significant capital investment commitments over the medium to longer term and this will result in the depletion in the Council's balances and reserves.

However, the Council has strong foundations in place due to its healthy financial position and will seek to manage the future challenges faced via the forthcoming update of its Medium-Term Financial Plan.

That concludes my Annual Report.

Thank you for listening.

5. QUESTIONS

There was no prior receipt of questions and the Deputy Mayor, Councillor Joanne Jones asked the electors in attendance if they had any questions, that they would like addressed which was declined.

The Chairman thanked everyone for attending.

CHAIRMAN.