

ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE

WEDNESDAY 27TH NOVEMBER 2024

Minutes of the meeting of the **ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE** held in the Council Chamber, Council Offices, School Aycliffe Lane, Newton Aycliffe, on **WEDNESDAY, 27TH NOVEMBER 2024 at 7.20pm**

PRESENT

Councillor Ian Gray (Chairman) and

Councillors: Eddy Adam, Tony Armstrong, Martin Ashcroft, Lindsey Aston, Arun M Chandran, John Clark, George Gray, Brian Haigh, Phillip Hawkins, Andy Hill, Jed Hillary, Wendy Hillary, Brian McAnaney, John Moore, Carl Robinson, Michael Stead, Anne Woodward and John Woodward.

OFFICERS

Mr Dan Austin (Town Clerk)

Mr Steve Cooper (Works and Environment Manager)

Mr Lee Williams (Grounds Maintenance Services Co-ordinator)

Mrs Vikki Anderson (Corporate Assistant)

IN ATTENDANCE

Two members of the public were in attendance.

50. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Peter Bergg, Dorothy Bowman, Neil Collinson, Sandra Haigh, Joanne Jones, Neville Jones, Sandra Kirby and Ken Robson.

51. MEMBERS' DISPENSATIONS

No applications for dispensations had been received.

52. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor Eddy Adam declared a non-pecuniary interest in Agenda Item 9 – A167 Lights Service Level Agreement as a County Councillor.

53. PUBLIC QUESTIONS

A member of the public advised that they had been asking for access to the gulleys at the back of the Silkin Way houses to be investigated, as there continues to be issues with rats. Whilst acknowledging that this is not on Town Council land, they asked if Councillors could try to get something done.

Councillor Eddy Adam explained that the issue is between Durham County Council and Livin, who are in disagreement over who owns the land. The latest update was that Livin will be taking responsibility, but this may take time. The expectation is that during the winter there will be more capacity to look at the issue. County Councillors will continue to try and resolve the issue.

Councillor Arun M Chandran suggested that the Town Clerk also send a letter to Livin, due to the number of residents who have raised concerns.

54. MINUTES

It was proposed by Councillor Andy Hill, seconded by Councillor Martin Ashcroft and:

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the meeting of the Environment Committee, held on 16th October 2024, be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

55. ALLOTMENTS ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING NOTES

Members received the notes of the Allotments Annual General Meeting held on the 19th November 2024.

Councillor Ian Gray advised that the meeting had gone very well and that the Great Aycliffe Garden Guild was doing well.

RESOLVED – That the notes of the meeting of the Allotments Annual General Meeting held on 19th November 2024, be received.

56. ENVIRONMENT REPORT

Members considered a report from the Works and Environment Manager, providing an update on issues relating to the environment for the six weeks ended 17th November 2024.

The Works and Environment Manager added a verbal update for members advising that the Christmas lights have now all been installed over the weekend, despite the challenging weather conditions.

Councillor Carl Robinson referred to the item regarding the Christmas tree planted on Aycliffe Village green reiterating that negative feedback had been received from village residents regarding the size of the tree. However, once he had explained the sustainability reasons for planting the tree, this had appeased most people. Hopefully the tree will grow by 2-3 feet in the next year as suggested by the Works and Environment Manager.

The Works and Environment Manager advised he had been aware there was a need to manage expectations regarding the tree as highlighted by Councillor Carl Robinson. He had had various conversations with residents and once he explained the sustainability reasons people were reassured and the reactions on the social media post had been overwhelmingly positive.

Councillor Phil Hawkins referred the issue of the bus shelters. He felt that given the current financial situation, it would be inappropriate of the Council to spend over £6,000 on viewing windows. He suggested that the priority should be the repairs and maintenance of the bus shelters and proposed that this project be put on hold to be considered again in the future.

Councillor Ian Gray explained that his understanding was that the installation of the viewing windows was to be done on a phased basis over a number of years.

Councillor Jed Hillary advised that he was pleased with the officers update regarding the newly planted tree at Aycliffe Village and suggested that, given its success, a tree should also be planted at St Clares Church.

The Works and Environment Manager took on board the suggestion regarding a Christmas tree at St Clares Church but explained that it is not Council land and so officers would need to liaise with the Church. There is also a need to be aware of any potential problems with tree roots with the building being so close.

Councillor Jed Hillary further commented that he was pleased works operatives have managed to plant out the Town Council's winter flowerbeds, but was disappointed that Durham County Council have removed their autumn bedding but not replaced with winter flowers and that the beds on Central Avenue have been levelled off and seeded for grass. He requested that officers seek an update from Durham County Council regarding their intentions for the flowerbeds along the main routes as he would hate to see them be gradually removed.

The Works and Environment Manager advised that he had spoken with the area manager at Durham County Council regarding their flowerbeds who had advised he would come back with some explanation of the County Council's intentions.

Councillor Eddy Adam added that Members are aware that Durham County Council must save substantial amounts of money from its budgets and so this is possibly why they are looking at areas such as this.

Councillor Arun M Chandran stated that as a Town Council we have to bear in mind what residents value most and proposed that officers look to bring a report to a future meeting within a six-month timeframe, looking at which flowerbeds in the parish are owned by Durham County Council, and producing a costing for the Town Council to take them over and plant them up, if these were to be removed.

Councillor Lindsey Aston said that whilst she understood that the flowerbeds make the town attractive, could the Council seek out what demand there is for having so many, so if some are taken away, it can be established if there a community demand for them to be replaced.

Councillor Michael Stead advised that he had been working with Durham County Council Officers on a planting project which had not been planted with winter bedding plants as sustainable plants are being planted, similar to those at the new residential area of Elder Gardens, so it is possible that they are doing the same on Central Avenue.

The Town Clerk asked if Councillor Arun M Chandran's proposal regarding the flowerbeds could be placed in abeyance until clarification is received from Durham County Council, and this was agreed.

Regarding the bus shelters, Councillor Eddy Adam commented that whilst he accepts the financial challenges at the Town Council, a total of £6,000 for 36 bus shelters seems relatively good value for money, per shelter, particularly if the works are undertaken on a phased basis over a number of years.

Councillor Arun Chandran agreed that the cost of proposed works per bus shelter is low, but questioned the demand for the works. He said he would be sympathetic to putting a small amount aside each year on a rolling programme in the Medium-Term Financial Plan, which would be more affordable, increased or decreased depending on demand.

He proposed that provision for four windows be factored into the 2025/26 Capital Budget, to be prioritised at the discretion of the officers, based on public demand and once these have been completed, the Council can then decide whether more are required.

Councillor Andy Hill asked if the bus shelter viewing windows being installed would impact on the Council's insurance cover. The Works and Environment Manager confirmed that structurally it had been confirmed there are no issues, so there would be no insurance implications.

Councillor Jed Hillary commented that there may be complaints, if the works are completed, of the wind blowing through the windows, leading to requests to brick them back up again. He seconded Councillor Chandran's proposal that four windows be factored into the 2025/26 Capital Budget and if negative feedback received, no further work takes place.

The Works and Environment Manager confirmed that many of the bus shelters are not used on a regular basis. Woodham and Burnhill Way are used regularly, and so it would make sense to prioritise those.

Councillor Lindsey Aston agreed with the proposals made, and suggested that before any works are done, given the number of responses on social media regarding the Christmas tree, that officers ask for public opinion on the installation of bus shelter windows via social media.

Councillor Tony Armstrong raised concerns with the building works being carried out at the junction of Central Avenue with the A167 and the grass that has been damaged, asking if officers have been given any reassurances that the damage will be repaired.

The Works and Environment Manager confirmed that as this is a long-term project there will likely be improvements made, but any issues or concerns could be raised closer to the end of the improvements.

It was proposed by Councillor Arun M Chandran, seconded by Councillor Jed Hillary and:

RESOLVED – that it be recommended that

- i) The report be received.
- ii) One-off financial provision be made in the 2025/26 Capital Budget for the installation of viewing panels in four bus shelters, to be prioritised at the discretion of the officers, based on public demand, and that once these have been completed, the Council can consider whether more are required.
- iii) Officers seek further information from Durham County Council with regard to their future plans for their flower beds and report back to the Council at a future meeting.

57. CEMETERIES REPORT

Members considered a report from the Grounds Maintenance Services Co-ordinator updating Members on items relating to the cemeteries for the six weeks ended 17th November 2024.

It was proposed by Councillor John Clark, seconded by Councillor Martin Ashcroft and:

RESOLVED – that it be recommended that;

- i) The report be received.

58. A167 STREET LIGHTS SERVICE LEVEL AGREEMENT

Members considered a report from the Town Clerk requesting consideration of the potential renewal of the Service Level Agreement with Durham County Council in 2025, for a further ten years, to secure the continued operation of the street lights on the Newton Aycliffe section of the A167 road.

This followed a request at a previous meeting that he approach Durham County Council to ask their intentions regarding the future of those lights.

The Town Clerk advised that a response had been received from Durham County Council indicating that it is their intention is to undertake revised assessments of all lighting covered by Service Level Agreements, and would need to procure a company to carry out the assessments which would take time. Once the assessments have been completed, the County Council would assess their standpoint and open discussions with the Town Council.

The Town Clerk advised it is therefore unlikely the Council would have a clear picture of the County Council's position until after it had set its 2025/26 Budget.

The options available to the Council were therefore to defer the decision until assessments are completed and retain the money set aside in the 2025/26 Capital Budget or to make a policy decision on the renewal of the agreement now.

Councillor Jed Hillary highlighted that it had been an emotive issue when agreed back in 2015 and proposed that the Council retains the money set aside in the 2025/26 Capital Budget until such a time as Durham County Council respond with the outcome of their assessments. Councillor Eddy Adam seconded this proposal.

Councillor Arun M Chandran proposed that a policy decision could be made now on the issue. He highlighted that the lighting of the A167 is a highways authority responsibility, which the Town Council are paying for. If Town Council Budget is set aside to undertake a County Council function it is being subsidised by residents of Newton Aycliffe which is creating double taxation. Any further information received would likely be in relation to the cost, which will likely be increased significantly. If Durham County Council decide to remove the lights, then that is their responsibility.

Councillor Tony Armstrong agreed with Councillor Arun M Chandran and raised concerns about how dangerous it is along that road without any lighting.

Councillor Eddy Adam left the meeting at this point.

Councillor Carl Robinson said that the Council would have great difficulty justifying why, if Durham County Council decide it meets safety regulations to have the lighting removed, the Town Council continue to fund it.

Councillor Arun M Chandran questioned that if the decision was deferred, would Durham County Council be asked if it would review its criteria, given the increase in traffic over the next 10 years as Copelaw is developed and how would this impinge on their assessments.

The Town Clerk clarified that this question had already been asked of Durham County Council.

Councillor John Clark asked the Town Clerk to clarify that the £60,000 set aside for the renewal of the agreement was included within the capital budget and if this would have an impact on the council tax if removed.

The Town Clerk confirmed that the money was set aside within the Capital Budget and that this would not impact on the Revenue Budget or council tax next year whether it is retained or removed.

Councillor Arun M Chandran reiterated his preference for a policy decision, as the Service Level Agreement is up in July, when a new Council will be elected.

Councillor Michael Stead agreed that the Council should inform Durham County Council that the Town Council will not pay for the lighting. He highlighted that previously lighting had been removed at Woodham and when queries raised and explored, the decision was reversed due to the assessment information being inaccurate.

Councillor Tony Armstrong agreed that the Town Council needs to be firm on this.

Councillor Arun M Chandran confirmed that he wished to move an amendment to the original proposal that the Town Council makes a policy decision that it does not wish to renew the service level agreement for the A167 lighting. This was seconded by Councillor Lindsey Aston.

A vote was held on the amendment with the following results:

For	15
Against	1
Abstention	0

The amendment was carried and became the substantive motion. A vote was carried out on the substantive motion and this was agreed unanimously.

RESOLVED – that it be recommended that:

- i) The report be received.
- ii) The Service Level Agreement with Durham County Council, for the A167 lighting provision is not renewed when it ends in July 2025.

Chairman