

ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE

WEDNESDAY 4TH SEPTEMBER 2024

Minutes of the meeting of the **ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE** held in the Council Chamber, Council Offices, School Aycliffe Lane, Newton Aycliffe, on **WEDNESDAY, 4TH SEPTEMBER 2024 at 8.00pm**

PRESENT

Councillor Ian Gray (Chairman) and

Councillors: Eddy Adam, Martin Ashcroft, Lindsey Aston, Dorothy Bowman, Arun M Chandran, Neil Collinson, George Gray, Phillip Hawkins, Andy Hill, Jed Hillary, Joanne Jones, Neville Jones, Sandra Kirby, Brian McAnaney, John Moore, Peter Musa, Carl Robinson, Ken Robson, Michael Stead, Anne Woodward and John Woodward.

OFFICERS

Mr Dan Austin (Town Clerk)

Mr Lee Williams (Grounds Maintenance Services Co-ordinator)

Mrs Vikki Anderson (Corporate Assistant)

IN ATTENDANCE

Six members of the public.

26. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Tony Armstrong, Peter Bergg, John Clark, Sandra Haigh and Wendy Hillary.

27. MEMBERS' DISPENSATIONS

No applications for dispensations had been received.

28. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of interest had been received.

29. PUBLIC QUESTIONS

A member of the public advised that the pathways along many back alleys are overgrown. It was advised that this was a Durham County Council issue.

A member of the public made a statement in support of the request for additional seating in Council bus shelters which was to be discussed under Agenda Item 11. It was highlighted that there had been several instances of families being seen sitting on floors at bus stops, particularly those near Tesco, Horndale, and the train station (Linden Place). It is considered that the lack of seating in the bus shelters is an issue and also the lack of viewing windows in some of the bus shelters means that buses are being missed and this has an effect on bus usage statistics etc and could result in loss of services. Having more bus users brings local benefits, including being better for the environment.

It was agreed that the issues would be discussed at Agenda Item 11.

A member of the public was concerned that the rat situation at Clarence Chare allotment site is becoming worse and highlighted that a plot holder has had three warnings for the state of his poultry plot, which is not helping the rat issue. They also raised issue with the lack of notification and consultation regarding the removal of the cockerels in tenancy agreements. Finally, it was reported that at St Oswald's Allotments, the bee apiaries have lots of trees overhanging, resulting in no light and objects falling from trees and causing damage to bee hives.

The Grounds Maintenance Services Co-ordinator advised that he attends a regular forum with other allotment managers across County Durham, and all are reporting an increased number of rats on their sites. The only suggestion as to the cause is due to having such a mild winter, they may have bred more. Bait boxes are on sites, except Aycliffe Village and Byerley Park as they don't have as much of an issue. Rats do become immune to certain bait so there are three types used. He agreed it's a problem and Clarence Chare is worse due to having the poultry site. Residents nearby do also leave food out for the birds and the embankment of the old railway is a perfect nesting site for rats. He suggested speaking with the businesses on other side, but realistically the Council can only manage the situation on the allotment site and not in the wider area.

The poultry site tenant mentioned has had two maintenance letters and has since surrendered the plot, so repair works to the plot will now be done.

The member of the public further asked if the Town Council would pay for damage repairs to their coup, caused by the rats.

The Grounds Maintenance Services Co-ordinator advised that within tenancy agreements, sheds etc are required to be maintained and so timber could be supplied, or repairs can be made to sheds, if necessary.

The Grounds Maintenance Services Co-ordinator clarified that the issue regarding the cockerels was brought to Recreation Committee in the Spring, following a report from Durham County Council Environmental Health. The Town Council agreed to monitor the situation and seek advice from the National Allotment Society who advised that cockerels are not protected under Allotment Law. A Council decision was made to withdraw the decision to allow cockerels on the site. Existing tenants were then given six months' notice to remove cockerels from their plot. All tenants were also notified when the Council received the letter from Durham County Council and no tenants had made contact at this time.

Councillor Brian McAnaney mentioned that there had been reported cases of hedgehogs being poisoned from rat poison.

The Grounds Maintenance Services Co-ordinator reassured members that the stations used by the Town Council are humane, situated where hedgehogs cannot access, designed only to allow rats in and staff training and appropriate licenses are required to purchase and use the rat poison.

30. MINUTES

It was proposed by Councillor Andy Hill, seconded by Councillor Ken Robson and:

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the meeting of the Environment Committee, held on 10th July 2024, be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

31. ALLOTMENTS REPORT

Members considered a report from the Grounds Maintenance Services Co-ordinator providing an update on issues relating to the allotments for the eight weeks ended 24th August 2024.

The report also requested consideration of a request to extend a plot on St Oswald's Allotments.

There was a lengthy debate around the issue of rats on the allotment sites.

Councillor Jed Hillary asked if it would be possible to site additional rat bait boxes on site, to counter the number of rats.

The Grounds Maintenance Services Co-ordinator confirmed that this could be implemented at a small cost of £15 to £20 per rat box.

Councillor Eddy Adam asked officers to be mindful that adding more boxes can attract more rats and be counterproductive.

Councillor Michael Stead suggested that as the land at Clarence Chare Allotments is next to Durham County Council land, the Town Clerk could write to Durham County Council to ask them to assess the situation, provide advice and offer assistance in addressing the problem, both at the allotments and in the wider area

Councillor Eddy Adam advised that County Councillors could also seek to raise the issue at Durham County Council in support of the Town Clerk's letter.

Councillor Arun M. Chandran added that as rats carry diseases, there is a duty as a public authority to reduce rat infestation within reasonable means.

Councillor Eddy Adam asked to clarify that the Town Council informed the poultry tenants with six months' notice regarding the cockerels and asked if the Council received any communications from tenants during that time.

The Grounds Maintenance Services Co-ordinator confirmed that this was the case and that no communications had been received.

It was proposed by Councillor Ian Gray, seconded by Councillor Andy Hill and:

RESOLVED – that it be recommended that

- i) The report be received.
- ii) The allotment extension request be agreed.

32. ENVIRONMENT REPORT

Members considered a report from the Works and Environment Manager to update Members with issues relating to the environment for the eight weeks ended 24th August 2024.

The Grounds Maintenance Services Co-ordinator verbally updated that two of the trees on Burn Lane have been removed, with the remaining one to be completed before the end of the week.

Councillor John Moore provided an update to the tree situation in Woodham, previously discussed at length regarding an overgrown tree and whose land it was. The tree has now been pruned and the damage to gutters repaired.

He wished to record his thanks in the minutes to all involved in resolving the issue, including the Council's Works and Environment Manager.

Councillor Martin Ashcroft formally requested that the issue regarding the possible removal of the flowerbed outside St Clare's Church, which was discussed in the Recreation Committee Meeting, is brought forward in the Environment Update Report at a future Environment Committee.

It was proposed by Councillor Martin Ashcroft, seconded by Councillor Carl Robinson and:

RESOLVED – that it be recommended that;

- i) The report be received.
- ii) The issue regarding the removal of the flower bed at St Clare's Church is brought forward in the Environment Update Report at a future Environment Committee.

33. CEMETERIES REPORT

Members considered a report from the Grounds Maintenance Services Co-ordinator updating Members on items relating to the cemeteries for the eight weeks ended 24th August 2024.

The Grounds Maintenance Services Co-ordinator verbally updated that the 'Letters to Heaven' post boxes had to date received 16 letters at West Cemetery and none yet at Stephenson Way, which doesn't receive the number of visitors that West Cemetery does. However, on special occasions it should be well used.

It was proposed by Councillor Martin Ashcroft, seconded by Councillor Carl Robinson and:

RESOLVED – that it be recommended that;

- i) The report be received.

34. AYCLIFFE NATURE PARK

Councillor Brian McAnaney provided an update on the reformation of the Friends of Aycliffe Nature Park Group and highlighted some of the comments from local residents about the state of the pond, anti-social behaviour, fencing, gates etc.

He advised that the Group is doing well with 63 followers on the Facebook page, and that discussions had been held with Gardeners Guild regarding their assistance.

He requested that the Town Council get behind the group and work with them to improve the Nature Park.

The Town Clerk advised that the Council welcomes working in partnership with community or voluntary groups to improve the local area and that this was a positive opportunity to work with the Friends Group.

It was advised that the Works and Environment Manager would make contact over the coming weeks to discuss how the Council can work with the group going forward.

RESOLVED – that it be recommended that:

- i) The update be received.
- ii) The Works and Environment Manager will make contact with the Friends of Aycliffe Nature Park Group to discuss how the Council and group can work together.

35. ANNUAL GARDEN AND ALLOTMENTS COMPETITION

The Works and Environment Manager had submitted a report for members providing details of the annual garden and allotments competition and advising of the winners.

The Grounds Maintenance Services Co-ordinator thanked Members who had taken the time to judge the competition.

It was proposed by Councillor Jed Hillary, seconded by Councillor Martin Ashcroft and;

RESOLVED – that it be recommended that:

- i) The report be received.

36. REQUEST FOR ADDITIONAL BUS SHELTER SEATING PROVISION

The Works and Environment Manager had submitted a report for members to consider a request from a member of the public for additional seating in Town Council managed bus shelters.

The Town Clerk summarised that a member of the public has requested additional bus shelter seating and at this meeting the lack of windows had also been raised.

It was advised that Council has taken a pragmatic and prudent approach to bus shelters, considering any requests from the public on a case-by-case basis, in line with the limited budget resources available.

It was considered that a reasonable initial response to the request would be to use the two seats already held in stock to install seats in the two bus shelters in the Linden Place area specifically referenced in the request, but that the installation of seating at any other bus shelters is left in abeyance until such a time as a wider public demand can be demonstrated.

Options and costings for installing windows in bus shelters can be investigated and brought in a further report to Committee, if required.

Councillor Eddy Adam asked if there are any other seats held in stock e.g. the old perch seats and whether the bus shelters near Tesco had seats installed.

The Grounds Maintenance Services Co-ordinator confirmed that the bus shelters at Tesco had seats installed and advised that when the perch seats were removed, they had been cut off at ground level. Their design means that a significant amount of work would be required to change the perch seat into a flat seat and it would be more financially viable to buy new flat seats rather than adjust perch seats.

A debate followed about the need for windows in bus shelters.

The bus shelters on Central Avenue, Greenfield Way, Burn Hill Way and Linden Place were highlighted as priorities.

Councillor Arun M. Chandran proposed that the report be received and that the two seats currently held in stock are installed at the bus shelters at Linden Place.

He further proposed that a report is brought forward by officers in due course regarding the issue of seating and windows in bus shelters, considering the priority areas, the design of the seats, the feasibility of installing windows and costs, with a view to setting priorities and making financial provision.

This was seconded by Councillor Carl Robinson.

Councillor Ken Robson suggested that any investments could be funded by County Council Members using the funds for their areas.

Councillor Joanne Jones raised concerns about making bus shelters too comfortable and attracting teenagers, meaning residents may not use them, due to feeling intimidated. She highlighted the issue of lighting in and around some bus shelters, which has raised by residents as a concern. She suggested getting feedback from residents to look at the issues with each individual bus shelter. Councillor Lindsey Aston suggested a convex mirror could be used rather than a window.

Councillor Jed Hillary commented that there are a significant number of bus stops on the town with no shelter at all, such as the one between Aycliffe Village and McDonald's, with people sitting on the kerb, which is a safety concern.

It was proposed by Councillor Arun M. Chandran, seconded by Councillor Carl Robinson and:

RESOLVED – that it be recommended that:

- i) The report be received.
- ii) The two remaining 'back to wall' seats currently held in stock be installed at the Linden Place bus shelters.
- iii) A report is brought forward by officers in due course regarding the issue of seating and windows in bus shelters, considering the priority areas, the design of the seats, the feasibility of installing windows and costs, with a view to setting priorities and making financial provision.

37. EXEMPT BUSINESS

It was proposed by Councillor Jed Hillary, and seconded by Councillor Lindsey Aston and;

RESOLVED – that it was in the opinion of the meeting that due to the confidential nature of the following agenda items, it was advisable to exclude the press and public under the Public Bodies (Admission to Meetings) Act 1960.

38. TARGET HARDENING ON THE OAK LEAF PLAYING FIELDS

The Works and Environment Manager had submitted a report for members to consider 'Durham Constabulary Crime Prevention Unit's Environmental Visual Audit Report' regarding potential 'target hardening' opportunities that could be considered, in and around the Oak Leaf Sports Complex playing fields to reduce the risk of future trespassing and unauthorised access.

This audit followed on from the unauthorised encampment on the playing fields in June 2024.

The report also provided the officers' thoughts and feedback on the recommendations made in this report, highlighting that many of the recommendations have already been implemented using existing budgets and insurance claim monies.

The report specifically requested consideration as to whether a lockable boom gate should be installed to the sports complex access road for increased security on an evening and overnight.

The Town Clerk gave a verbal update, advising of the measures that had already been implemented or that were in the process of being implemented including the replacement of the access gate to fields, purchase and installation of moveable and retractable bollards, increased signage referencing the law regarding unauthorised access, and CCTV cameras.

In relation to the recommendation of installing a boom gate to the access road, officers felt this was not a necessary investment.

It was proposed by Councillor Arun M. Chandran and seconded by Councillor Jed Hillary that the report be received, the actions already taken or planned be agreed and that the proposed installation of an access gate be deferred until such a time as officers felt this was necessary.

RESOLVED – that it be recommended that:

- i) The report be received.
- ii) The actions already taken or proposed to improve security in and around the Oak Leaf playing fields as referenced in the report be agreed.
- iii) The installation of a barrier on the access road is not explored at this time, and officers bring costings and options forward only if deemed necessary at a later date.

39. RE-ADMISSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC

It was proposed by Councillor Arun Chandran, seconded by Councillor Martin Ashcroft, and

RESOLVED – that the press and public be re-admitted to the meeting.

Chairman