

ANNUAL ASSEMBLY OF THE TOWN MEETING

WEDNESDAY, 25TH MAY 2022

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, 25TH MAY 2022** at **7.15 p.m.**

PRESENT Councillor Ken Robson (Chairman / Mayor)
and there were 20 Electors present.

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

1. NOTICE OF MEETING

The Notice convening the Meeting was taken as read.

2. MINUTES

It was proposed by Arun Chandran, seconded by Bob Fleming and

RESOLVED – that the Minutes of the proceedings of the Annual Assembly of the Town Meeting, held on the 26th May 2021, be confirmed as a correct record and record and signed by the Chairman.

3. CHAIRMAN / MAYOR'S ANNUAL REPORT

The following copy of the Chairman / Mayor's Annual Report 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 Ken Robson 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.

Following the gradual lifting of the Coronavirus restrictions over the last year, the Town Council have been doing its best to reinstate all our services and events to their pre-pandemic standards.

We are very aware that our community events programme has been particularly missed and entertained the residents last year with a large Fun in the Park event in the Town Park in July and the return of the annual Fireworks Display.

This year it finally seems like life is almost getting back to normal with the return of the Senior Citizens' Trips, a full programme of Fun in the Parks scheduled for the summer holidays and an extra special new event lined up for the Platinum Jubilee Bank Holiday next week. We are also working with an external events company to bring a music festival to Newton Aycliffe later in the summer. Watch this space for further details soon.

The Town Council has strived to support the community throughout the difficult times during and after the pandemic, keeping the vast majority of our services, including cemeteries, allotments, pre-school, parks and golf course running as close to normal as possible under the restrictions, and re-opening our sports complex and driving range as soon as the regulations allowed this.

The Council also set up a COVID-19 Recovery Fund using some of the money saved as a result of the cancellation of the community events during 2020 and 2021.

The fund passed these savings back to local taxpayers via one-off investments during the 2021/22 financial year, to help compensate for the services that have not taken place this year. Beneficiaries of the Covid-19 Recovery Fund included:-

- Enhanced Senior Citizens' Trips and Fun in the Parks Events
- Funding of investigatory surveys in relation to the possible establishment of a woodland burials site adjacent to West Cemetery
- A COVID Recovery Grants Fund which has given many local community organisations and charities the opportunity to access funds to help them deal with the financial losses suffered as a result of the pandemic. More than £15,000 has been allocated from this fund to a total of seven local organisations.

The Town Council will face significant challenges over the coming years as its deals with likely funding cuts and budget pressures as a result of the ongoing cost of living crisis with inflationary pressures causing particular strain on the Council's Revenue Budget.

The Council will need to review the services it currently offers and how they are delivered to ensure that they are providing the best value for money possible and that they services, 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 2022/23 year.

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 200 allotment sites located at:

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

This includes facilities for keeping pigeons and poultry as well as beekeeping plots at specific allotments sites.

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 runs the Environment Centre at Moore Lane and runs a programme of environment events.

We also 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 and public events during school holidays, 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 also assist a number of community groups such as local scout, guides, and Friends groups.

The Town Council has also declared a Climate Emergency and is working towards reducing its carbon footprint and becoming carbon neutral.

Street Equipment

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

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 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.

The Park Patrol Service provides an out of hours service to monitor and safeguard the Council's assets and its users.

Oak Leaf Sports Complex

The Oak Leaf Sports Complex provides an indoor bowls green, a multi-use sports hall, four squash courts, 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, steam punk/sci/fi events, MMA events, dog shows and craft fairs.

Oak Leaf Golf Complex

The 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 and
- Moore Lane

Community Events

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

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

A number of new events which have been developed in recent years which we hope to run again this year including

- Skate Fest Competition and Demonstrations
- Big Brass Bash – in partnership with Durham County Council

We also provide financial support to events run by local organisations including the following planned events:-

- Remembrance Day Parade
- Junior Cross Country Race
- Cyclocross Event
- Tri-Golf Schools Event
- 10km Race organised by Aycliffe Running Club
- Food and Craft Fair
- Ayclive Music Festival

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-year-olds.

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.

Grants and Donations Fund

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

Youth Council

The Council operates a Youth Council offering local school children the opportunity to get involved in local politics.

Civic Events

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

Newsletter

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

Capital Investment

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 key projects completed included a replacement play area at Woodham Park, a building extension at St Oswald's pre-school to create additional space for the children and the installation of a footpath at Aycliffe Village play area.

Council Finances

Despite the challenges created by the Coronavirus pandemic over the last couple of years, the Council ended the 2021/22 year in relatively strong financial health, having delivered a substantial saving on its Revenue Budget and increased its balances and reserves to around £1.65 million.

Most of the savings last year were one-off savings achieved as a direct consequence of the pandemic, including the unfortunate cancellation of many community events, although the Council has continued to deliver efficiency savings across all services and deliver value for money to local taxpayers.

This healthy financial situation meant that the Council was able to set a 2022/23 Revenue and Capital Budget that will enable all current services, facilities, and events to be provided to the usual high standards this year, the COVID-19 Recovery Fund to be extended for a further year, and continued capital investment in community assets, whilst limiting the increase in the Town Council proportion of the Council Tax bill to 1.99% which is well below the current rate of inflation.

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 faces significant financial challenges, including likely 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 severe inflationary pressure on running costs including substantial increases in gas, electricity, fuel and insurance.

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.

4. QUESTIONS

There was no prior receipt of questions and the Mayor, Councillor Ken Robson asked the electors in attendance if they had any questions, that they would like addressed.

It was suggested that at the next town meeting, each person should bring along another resident to accompany them.

The Mayor was asked what his chosen charity is for this year, the mayor stated he had not decided as yet but was looking at charities that do not have access to the usual funding streams.

CHAIRMAN.