

ANNUAL ASSEMBLY OF THE TOWN MEETING

WEDNESDAY, 21st MAY 2025

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, 21st MAY 2025** at **7.00 p.m.**

PRESENT **Councillor Ken Robson (Chairman / Deputy Mayor)**
and there were 21 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.

1. NOTICE OF MEETING

The Notice convening the Meeting was taken as read.

2. MINUTES

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

RESOLVED – that the Minutes of the proceedings of the Annual Assembly of the Town Meeting, held on the 22nd May 2024, be confirmed as a correct record and record and signed by the Chairman.

3. PRESENTATION FROM LIFELINE COMMUNITY ACTION

A representative from Lifeline Community Action, talked about their work and the progress with the forthcoming developments at the Community Hub based in Aycliffe Town Centre.

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 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 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 and looking ahead at our plans for the forthcoming year.

During 2024/25 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 and facilities, 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 continuously review the services it currently offers in line with community priorities and needs, consider how they are delivered, and seek more efficient ways of running services to ensure that they are providing the best value for money.

I will now provide an overview of the many services that the Town Council has planned and committed to provide to the community of Great Aycliffe during this coming 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 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 also 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.

Environment and Green Open Space

The Town Council carry out the environmental management of a number of nature and conservation areas and other green open space in 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 and scouts and guides groups, work with community and voluntary groups such as Great Aycliffe Tidy Team, run 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 green arts programmes, activities and events from the building.

The Town Council has also declared a Climate Emergency and is working towards reducing its carbon footprint and becoming carbon zero by 2050, putting in place an ambitious Carbon Reduction Plan.

Planned projects for this coming year include the installation of solar panels on the Oak Leaf Sports Complex building, seeking funding for electric vehicle charging points at Council facilities and tree planting across the Parish, including a significant tree planting project on the Oak Leaf Golf Course.

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.

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 and other facilities and the safety and welfare of 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 darts facility, 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 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 several 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 2024 were once again very popular, with around 886 local residents visiting destinations including York, Whitby, Skipton, the Lake District and Whitley Bay. The trips are again taking place in 2025, with this year's venues York, Seahouses, Harrogate, Keswick, Hexham, Helmsley, and Ripon and Knaresborough. A total of 1,000 places are available and have all been taken up.

The Fun in the Parks for 2024 were extremely busy, with numbers of attendees exceeding expectations at all parks. For 2025 we have another full programme of Fun in the Parks scheduled for the summer holidays.

This year the Council will be commemorating VE Day with a community event on the Oak Leaf sports fields, and are also planning to hold a Fun in the Parks style event aimed at older children of 12 plus.

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

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

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

- Remembrance Day Parade
- Go Well Primary School Olympics
- Cyclocross Event
- Aycliffe Bus Preservation Society Vintage Bus Event

Other Services

Other services provided by the Town Council include:-

Pre-School Learning Centre

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 are 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 community assets such as play equipment, bus shelters, cemeteries etc.

Last year, capital expenditure totalled £135,000 and included essential investment to council buildings, extension of the pre-school outside play area, upgrade of the Oak Leaf Sports and Golf Complex leisure till and booking system, drainage improvements on the golf course and driving range, information technology improvements, CCTV cameras, play area safety surfacing, bus shelter repairs, footpath repairs and bridge repairs.

This year planned investment totals nearly £1 million and includes further essential investment to Council buildings including roofing works, heating systems and window and door replacement and a solar panel system for the Oak Leaf Sports Complex, works vehicles and machinery, replacement computer equipment, festive lighting, refurbishment of Aycliffe Village infant play area, play area safety surfacing replacement and footpath repairs, tree works, and bus shelter and bridge repairs.

Council Finances

Despite the challenges created by the ongoing economic difficulties over the last year, the Council ended the 2024/25 year in relatively strong financial health, having delivered a significant saving on its Revenue Budget and increased its balances and reserves to £2.2 million.

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

The positive financial position has also been helped by the prudent budget management of all service managers, overseen by the Council's Policy and Resources Committee, 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 2025/26 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.

Despite planning to limit the Town Council Tax increase to around the current rate of inflation (2%), unfortunately, in order to offset inflationary budget pressures on staff pay and running costs, additional budget pressures created by the Government decision to increase Employer's National Insurance Contributions and Durham County Council's decision to cut the Council Tax Support Grant, the Council was left with no choice but to implement a further increase.

This resulted in a total increase in the Town Council Tax of 4.95%, which increased the Band A Town Council Tax by £9 this year, taking the yearly bill to £200 per year or £17 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 is also due to make significant capital investment next year and over the medium to longer term and this will result in a significant 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 with a view to keeping any future increases in Council Tax to a minimum.

That concludes my Annual Report.

Thank you for listening.

5. 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 which was declined.

The Chairman thanked everyone for attending.

CHAIRMAN.